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Fonts: How to Choose Between Them

By Tim North

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Choosing a font is something that most of us give little thought to. After all, most fonts are more or less the same, right? Let's face it, most writing is presented in a stock-standard font like Times New Roman or Arial.

Why is the choice of font important?

There are many differences between fonts: some obvious, some subtle. As well as setting the mood of what we write, these differences can have significant effects on legibility.

In this article, we'll classify fonts in several different ways and compare the effects that these have on legibility. Let's start by comparing serif and sans-serif fonts.

Serif versus sans-serif fonts

Start up a word processor and type a letter "h". Change it to a large size (say 72 points) and use Times New Roman as your font. Notice the three small cross strokes at the ends of the strokes. These are called serif. Fonts that provide these are said to be serif fonts. Fonts that do not are sans-serif fonts. ("Sans" is the French word for without.)

Now change the font to Arial, Helvetica or Verdana. These are all sans-serif fonts. Notice that the three small cross strokes have disappeared.

Serif fonts, all things being equal, are easier to read.

This is because the serif makes the individual letters more distinctive and thus easier for our brains to recognise quickly. Without the serif, the brain has to spend longer identifying a letter because its shape is less distinct.

An important proviso must be made, however. On the low resolution of a computer screen, very small serif text (say 10 points or less) might actually be harder to read than corresponding sans serif because the more complex shapes of serif characters cannot be accurately drawn in sizes this small.

Deciding whether to use a serif or sans serif font is still a personal choice, however, and no hard-and-fast rules apply. Even though serif fonts are usually easier to read, you might prefer a sans-serif font for a particular document if you feel that it sets an appropriate mood. Sans-serif fonts are often thought to look more modern.

A commonly followed convention, though, is to use a serif font for the body text of your document and a sans-serif font for the headings. My recommended fonts for general work are Georgia (a very lovely serif font) and Verdana, a very legible sans-serif. Verdana is probably already installed on your computer.

Both of these fonts (together with a number of others) are freely available from Microsoft's Web site:

<http://www.microsoft.com typography/fontpack/default.htm>

Fixed-width and variable-width fonts

In some fonts, every character is the same width; in others, the characters are of different widths. Not surprisingly, these fonts are termed fixed width and variable width respectively.

Start up your word processor. Type half a dozen lower-case "l"s and then on the next line type half a dozen lower-case "w"s. In most fonts the "w"s will be much wider. (Such fonts are variable width.)

Now select the two lines of characters and set the font to Courier or Courier New. Notice that both lines are now the same length. Courier is a fixed-width font.

It should be no surprise that variable-width fonts look more

natural and are thus easier to read. Fixed-width fonts such as Courier have quite limited application:

* Computer programmers use fixed-width fonts in order to neatly align their code.

* The other main use of fixed-width fonts is to produce tables that need to be neatly tabulated into fixed-width columns.

Conclusion

As an exercise go through the fonts on your computer and find five variable-width, serif fonts that you like the look of. Choose among these for the body copy of your documents.

Now find five variable-width, sans-serif fonts. Use these for your headings, captions, headers and footers.

Armed with these simple ways of classifying fonts, you should now have an easy time of choosing suitable fonts for all occasions.

You'll find over 200 tips like this in Tim North's much applauded book **BETTER WRITING SKILLS**. It's just \$19.95 and comes with a 90-day, money-back guarantee. Download a sample chapter here: <http://www.betterwritingskills.com>

Which fonts can I use on my website? What if I want to use others?

By Dianne Reuby

Which fonts can I use on my website? What if I want to use others? by Dianne Reuby

If you've done any word processing or desk-top publishing, you'll be used to using all sorts of fancy fonts – for headlines, logos, and banners. For your web pages, you'll have to do things differently.

What if I put a "fancy" font on my web page?

If you haven't got the same fonts on your PC that I have on mine, your browser will just show a font that's as close as it can find. If you're not using a PC, or the Windows operating system, then again your computer will display a font as close to the one specified as it can.

If you want to use fancy or non-standard fonts on your web

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site, for example on a banner, you'll have to create a graphic file with the text in it. The banners that you see as headers and ads on web sites are all graphics – even when they look as though they are all text.

Which fonts can I use without using a graphics program?

Windows usually includes Arial, Helvetica, Times Roman, and Verdana, as well as Comic Sans MS, Trebuchet, and Impact!, unless the user has removed them from their PC.

Mac users should have Arial on their machines.

The problem is that in many parts of the world, people don't have a PC or Mac at home. They use college or university workstations, and these are usually using the Unix operating system instead of Windows. If they do have a home PC, they use the free Linux operating system and software. Both show Verdana and Arial very badly.

So if you want as many visitors as possible to view your pages as you intended them to, you should choose a range of fonts, like this:

In this example, Arial and Helvetica are two common sans-serif fonts – browsers will look for your first choice (Arial), then the second (Helvetica). If they can't find

those two, they'll look for any font that's the right type (sans-serif).

Happy site building!

Dianne Reuby is co-author of the e-book "First WebsiteBuilder". Dianne created and runs the First Web Buildersite, dedicated to providing ebooks and tips for newwebmasters. Visit FWB at <http://firstwebbuilder.co.uk/>



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