

Some “Handy” Tips about Logo Typography

In many ways the advent of computer technology has been a boon to graphic designers. Almost instantaneous transmission of ideas in full color with accurate type was only a dream in the late 1970’s when I began my career. However a few areas have suffered – most notably typography. They plethora of fonts instantly and inexpensively available has certainly in some ways freed graphic designers to be creative, but in some subtle ways it has hindered them as well.

The introduction of WYSIWYG font menus in the 1990’s has meant that designers no longer have to keep image profiles of typefaces in their heads. Before such menus and listings became commonplace a good logo designer had to have a working knowledge of at least 20 or 30 fonts – the strengths and weaknesses of different characters and combinations in their heads. A working designer had to have an idea of whether to use Times Roman, Goudy, Palatino or Garamond for a text layout or why Stymie was slightly different than Lubalin Graph. The really good ones had over 50 in their mental inventory.

TIMES ROMAN: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
GOUDY: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
PALATINO: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
ITC GARAMOND: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

STYMIE: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
LUBALIN GRAPH: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

The additional drawback to having over 1000 fonts at your fingertips is the temptation to use fonts right out of the machine or to modify them by scaling either vertically or horizontally. A well designed text font shouldn’t be scaled in either direction more than 15% or stroked to try to make a weight that doesn’t exist. (in a copy fitting pinch one can scale a single line only from between 97 to 103% horizontally without the distortion becoming noticeable to the untrained eye.

97%: The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog. We hold these truths to be self evident etcetera.
100%: The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog. We hold these truths to be self evident etcetera.
103%: The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog. We hold these truths to be self evident etcetera.

Nowhere do these typographic shortcuts become more noticeable than in the *signature* or type portion of a logo-type – some logos consist solely of a *signature* without any *glyph* (the symbol component) at all. Pre computer age logos were often by necessity examples of the pinnacle of hand lettering. Every letter was tailored to work in perfect visual harmony with it’s neighbors. Even the best designed fonts have inherent weaknesses when used in certain word combinations.

A text font is designed so that every character works well with every other character to give an overall even *color* to a section of type. Unfortunately, this means there will be some unfortunate character combinations (the capital “L-A” is an historically famous example.) Display fonts are designed to be quirky and decorative, often leading to even more disparities and visually unattractive combos.

The solution to this is to be aware that type right out of the box is seldom perfect for your specific logo. The characters should be optimized so that they work well in your specific solution. Often this requires outlining the fonts in a program like Adobe Illustrator and altering individual characters. Special attention should be paid to crossbar heights, serif interactions when letters touch, and individual letter spacing. Try to be aware of traditionally wide letters like the “W” or narrow ones like the cap “E” or “S”.

GLASS GLASS

The word GLASS with its disastrous “L-A” combination has long given sign painters nightmares. One solution to make the best of a bad situation is to shorten the “L” the serifs on the “A” and the bottom of the first “S”.

BATTALION BATTALION

One could probably march a battalion between the “T’s” in this word. Shortening the inside tops of both “T’s” limits the damage to maybe just a few soldiers.

I began my hand lettering career primarily out of economic necessity. In college in 1977 a sheet of Letraset© or Presstype© cost \$12.00. This was often the only production quality type available to art students on tight budgets. I was limited by the fonts available in the local art stores and the number of characters on each sheet. As the letters were put on the sheets according to frequency of usage, at 48 or 60 point (preferred sizes for hand rendered logo work) it meant there were 2 or 3 “A’s” or “E’s” but only “&” “X” or “Z”. I was designing a logo for a local band called PIZZAZZ. I was being paid \$50.00 for the job but would have had to buy \$48.00 worth of Presstype© to get the 4 “Z’s” – even without a calculator I quickly realized that this would have resulted in a rather miniscule profit margin.)

I bought one sheet and carefully copied the “Z” 3 more times. Once I realized I could draw my own type I began to become more sensitive to letter forms. I would notice that an “E” was too narrow or the “S” was unbalanced. The descenders and ascenders were often a different height than I needed. I realized how hampered I had been by what was simply drawn by others.

It can be a little intimidating at first to begin altering type drawn by “experts” to suit your own needs, but keep in mind that not everyone who draws or even sells a font is necessarily better than you are. Some – I won’t say many – aren’t particularly good if you look closely. With a little practice and observation you can begin to free yourself from the constraints of predrawn type. Not only will you save a lot of time searching for specific fonts – even with the 7000 carefully catalogued and organized fonts at my behest I rarely find the perfect one – but you’ll begin to develop a deep understanding of character design which will make your typography stronger and your clients happier.

SEARS
SEARS

The Sears logo began life as Helvetica Black Italic and was hand modified with this tricky inline. Originally 8 weights of line were lettered for use at different sizes – the heaviest being 3 times heavier than the lightest.

THE
METROPOLITAN
OPERA
THE METROPOLITAN

Here Adobe Garamond Pro was altered on a Mac Power PC to resemble roman columns by removing serifs in the middle line. The bottom line was pulled apart vertically (not simply scaled) to follow the red curve.



THE HISTORY CHANNEL
THE HISTORY CHANNEL

The History Channel was adapted from Birch and modified on an old Mac 2CI to my idea of better logo type. In addition to the small caps also note the smoother “S” the wider base on the “R” and the bottom serif on the “C”. The “O” is also wider as is the “A”.



WARNER AUDIO
WARNER AUDIO

This was a simple modification of Friz Quadrata but it gave Warner Audio a unique signature with a slight resemblance to musical notes.