

Font usage

You never studied fonts in school—and your Smith Corona, Royal, or IBM Selectric didn't give you many choices anyway. Even if you're still in school you aren't likely to learn anything about fonts. Now you've got a dozen or more on your Mac. What are they all for and does it make any difference which one you use?

Font usage can make a huge difference in the effectiveness of your communications—by as much as 5-10 times! The information summarized here comes from a book entitled *Type and Layout* by Colin Wheildon (Strathmore Press, Berkeley, 1995). It is based on a quantitative study reader comprehension with 224 readers—111 men and 113 women.

If you as the writer/publisher do everything right, about a third of the readers still won't comprehend it anyway. You can hope for a more select audience on a good day, but already this author may have written you off.

Here's the answer—use Times or Time Roman and you'll be OK. Use white paper and black ink. Keep your lines less than 60 characters wide. Before you read on for the details do a check on what the pros use. Grab any book or almost any magazine and see what the font looks like and how many characters are in a line. Did I get lucky—did you check that second book?

Critical communications should use the best practice—

- Writing assignments
- Reports
- School communications
- User group announcements
- Web site information
- Suggested ideas for holiday presents

Font styles

Fonts come in two basic styles

- serif
- sans serif or nonserif

Serifs are the little “feet” on letters.

↑ letters ←

Serif fonts have these little feet and sans serif fonts don't. Examples of serif fonts are:

- Times or Times New Roman
- New Century Schoolbook
- Palatino

Examples of sans serif fonts include:

- Helvetica or Arial
- Geneva

The examples are all 12 point size, but you can see the type faces are slightly different in real size.

Font usage

Here are two paragraphs to read, one in Times and the other in Helvetica—

Serif type faces were developed over a period of hundreds of years, beginning before the printing press. They help the eye recognize words, resulting in faster reading and higher reader comprehension. All body text should be set in a good serif font in order to communicate most effectively with the reader. The text should be in lower case, justified, and plain rather than bold.

Sans serif type faces were developed in recent times to give a modern look to text. They don't help the eye recognize words, resulting in slower reading and 5X poorer comprehension. With few exceptions, sans serif fonts should be reserved for headlines. Occasionally you see them in short sidebars (a short article subordinated within a long article) —although minimal use of a poor choice is better than maximum use, a good choice is preferred by the reader at all times. Unjustified body text impairs comprehension by 40%.

Reader comprehension scores

	<u>Good</u>	<u>Fair</u>	<u>Poor</u>
Serif font—	67%	19	14
Sans serif font—	12%	23	65

Sans serif fonts make it difficult to hold your concentration when reading. You'll find yourself having to go back and start over more often with sans serif font text.

Text should be justified. Not left ragged right or left. How big a difference can this make? According to Wheildon's measurements of the impact

of type justification on reader comprehension was surprisingly large—

	<u>Good</u>	<u>Fair</u>	<u>Poor</u>
Justified—	67%	19	14
Ragged right—	38	22	40
Ragged left—	10	18	72

“Justified” text has uniform margins on both left and right hand sides of the text column.

“Ragged right” text has uniform left hand margins and ragged right hand margins.

“Ragged left” text has uniform right hand margins and ragged left hand margins.

Body text width

A body of 12 point text 6 to 7 inches wide across standard letter paper is a little too wide. The line width should be no more than 60 characters and no less than 20. Look at how the pros do it in magazines, newspapers and books.

The worst offense

People are frequently more sensitive about writing in all capitals since the advent of email where it is considered “shouting”. It’s actually worse than that in comprehension terms! Body text in all capitals rates about 7% comprehension whether you use serif—

BODY TEXT IN ALL CAPITALS PREVENTS THE EYE FROM EASILY RECOGNIZING WORDS AND SLOWS READING DOWN TO A CRAWL. READERS LOSE THEIR PLACE AND HAVE TO REREAD SECTIONS OVER AND OVER. COMPREHENSION IS ALMOST ELIMINATED WITH THIS PRESENTATION STYLE.

or sans serif fonts—

BODY TEXT IN ALL CAPITALS VIRTUALLY PREVENTS THE EYE FROM EASILY RECOGNIZING WORDS AND SLOWS READING DOWN TO A CRAWL, WHETHER IT IS DONE IN SERIF OR SANS SERIF FONTS. READERS LOSE THEIR PLACE AND HAVE TO REREAD SECTIONS OVER AND OVER. COMPREHENSION IS ALMOST ELIMINATED WITH THIS STYLE OF PRESENTATION.

Attempting to emphasize importance by using all capitals is defeated because comprehension is low—look at those software license agreements.

The IRS likes to use all capitals when they write you. They haven’t told me how they like to read replies in all capitals.

What can you do with sans serif fonts?

Headlines are not fussy about the type face. Here’s the reader comprehension summary for reading headlines—

	<u>Lower case</u>	<u>Capitals</u>
Times	92%	69
Helvetica	90	57
<i>Times italic</i>	86	62
Helvetica italic	85	59

Notice the insignificant difference between serif (Times) and sans serif (Helvetica)—all high scores for lower case headlines. The penalty for all capitals is 25-30% even in headlines!

Headlines in all capitals were standard until the 1950s. 75% of western newspaper headlines are now set in lower case

You can use sans serif fonts for headlines if you like, but it isn’t an improvement. Just a bit of variety that is OK.

What you should have learned

Use a serif font for body text. Column width is important—20 to 60 characters per line—about 3.5 inch lines with 12 point type is good.

Don’t print in bold. Bold print reduces comprehension by a factor of two! Italic sections are OK though, not much of a penalty.

Extra credit

Text should be black on white or light tint—light tint (10% at most) is OK and attractive to readers. Use only one space between sentences.

Put the headline at top—flow content from top left to bottom right. Brightly colored headlines attract readers—but hurt comprehension—67% comprehension score using a serif font drops to 27% with spot color

Headline kerning—adjusting the letter spacing—can undermine legibility. Slightly condensing headline spacing (70-90%) is good

No periods at the end of headlines.