

Type Talk

Mastering the Art of Fonts

KEY IDEA

A typeface is a **voice**. Choosing one decides how the message **sounds** before anyone reads a word of it.

Aa



INSTRUCTOR
Chase Ayres

SESSION 2

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- 01** Identify the named parts of a letterform and use **shared type vocabulary**.
- 02** Sort a typeface into its correct **classification**: serif era, sans serif, script, or display.
- 03** Explain the **four reasons** a font choice succeeds or fails: contrast, spacing, purpose fit, and legibility.
- 04** **Evaluate** a real brand's font choice for fit, and apply **WCAG contrast standards** as a baseline requirement, not an afterthought.

01

PART ONE

Foundations

The Anatomy of a Letterform

Every letterform is built from named parts, the same way a building has a foundation and a roofline.

- **Baseline:** the invisible line most letters sit on.
- **Cap height:** the distance from the baseline to the top of a capital letter, like H or T.

X-HEIGHT

The height of a lowercase “x,” meaning the body height of lowercase letters without ascenders or descenders.

A large x-height, like Helvetica’s, reads well at small sizes. A small x-height, like Garamond’s, reads as refined.

CAP HEIGHT

X-HEIGHT

BASELINE



More Anatomy, and Typeface vs. Font

- **Ascender:** the stroke rising above the x-height, as in b, d, h, and k.
- **Descender:** the stroke falling below the baseline, as in g, j, p, q, and y.

Typeface versus font: a typeface is the design, like Helvetica. A font is one specific weight and size of that design, like Helvetica Bold at 10 point.

COUNTER

The enclosed negative space inside a letter, like the hole in “o.” Larger counters read better at small sizes and distances.

APERTURE

The opening of a partly enclosed letter, like the gap in “c” or “e.” Open apertures help legibility on screens.

ASCENDER

bg

DESCENDER

Kerning, Tracking, and Leading

Three controls for the space around type, two of them named after a lump of metal

KERNING

The space between one specific pair of letters, moved on its own.

modern → modern

Kerned Now it says modem

Bad kerning rarely looks untidy. It changes the word.

TRACKING

The same space added to or taken from every letter in a run.

CRAMPED
SPACIOUS

Same face, same size, opposite mood

Tight reads urgent and cheap, open reads calm and expensive. Fashion houses letterspace for a living.

LEADING

The distance from one baseline to the next. Said “ledding.”

Set solid, a paragraph closes up and the eye has to hunt for the line it wants next.
Set solid

Open it up and the same words give the eye a rail to land on every time.
Leaded

Around 1.4 times the type size is a safe default for body copy.

BOTH WORDS ARE LEFT OVER FROM METAL

Leading was thin strips of lead, slid between finished rows of type to open up the space. The metal went away; the spelling and the pronunciation stayed.

A **kern** was the piece of a cast letter that hung off its own slug and rested on its neighbor’s, from the French *carne*, a projecting angle.



Four lines in a composing stick, set solid: no lead between them

WHEN THE SPACING IS THE WHOLE PROBLEM



Warner Bros. Discovery’s first wordmark, 2021. The letters were pushed together until they overlapped, designers said so loudly enough that Variety wrote it up, and the company had replaced it before launch. The typeface was never the problem.

How We Sort Type: Serif Faces

Small finishing strokes at the ends of letters, across four historical eras

01 • OLD STYLE

15th–mid 18th c.

Aa

Low contrast, warm and calligraphic. Garamond, Caslon.

Still seen in: literary fiction and trade book interiors.

02 • TRANSITIONAL

Mid 18th c.

Aa

Higher contrast, sharper serifs. Baskerville, Times New Roman.

Still seen in: Microsoft Word's default for decades.

03 • MODERN

Late 18th–early 19th c.

Aa

Extreme contrast, thin hairline serifs. Bodoni, Didot.

Still seen in: Vogue and Harper's Bazaar mastheads.

04 • SLAB SERIF

Early 19th c.

Aa

Heavy, block-like serifs, almost no contrast. Rockwell, Courier.

Still seen in: editorial headlines, typewriter-era branding.

Sans Serif, Script, and Display

“Sans serif” means without serifs: modern, clean, and screen friendly

Grotesque

Og

Even strokes, low contrast. Helvetica, Univers.

In use: the NYC Subway, countless corporate wordmarks.

Geometric

Og

Built from circles and triangles. Futura.

In use: NASA, Wes Anderson title cards, Volkswagen.

Humanist

Og

Warmer, calligraphic roots. Gill Sans, Frutiger.

In use: the BBC, Penguin Books’ classic covers.

Script mimics handwriting and splits into formal and casual; it is rarely used for body text. **Display** and decorative faces are built for headlines and posters at large sizes, never for body copy.

Script SET IN ITSELF

DISPLAY BEBAS NEUE

QUICK QUESTION Which font family shows up most in your own social feed?

Think Like a Marketer

A local bakery is designing a new sign. The owner wants it to feel handmade and friendly, and it also has to be read by drivers going past at 30 miles per hour. What classification of typeface would you recommend, and why?



01:30

CLICK TO START

CLASSIFICATIONS:

- Aa

Grotesque
- Aa

Geometric
- Aa

Humanist
- Aa

Slab Serif
- Aa

Script
- AA

Display

Think Like a Marketer

There is no single right answer. A humanist sans like Gill Sans or Frutiger, or a slab serif like Rockwell, holds warmth and distance legibility at the same time. A delicate script fits the handmade feeling and fails the 30-mph test, and the sign only has one job.

Gill Sans SET IN ITSELF

Rockwell SET IN ITSELF

Why Fonts Work: A Simple Framework

Four reasons a font choice succeeds or fails

01

Contrast & Consistency

Give each typeface one clear job, and stick to it.

Example: headlines in one face, body copy in another, every time.

02

Spacing & Proportion

Kerning, tracking, and leading set the reading rhythm.

Example: a cramped logotype next to a breathing-room paragraph.

03

Purpose Fit

A typeface carries a voice that has to match the message.

Example: Comic Sans suits a birthday card, not a lab report.

04

Context Legibility

Some faces excel in print and degrade on a small screen.

Example: a serif that shines in print can vanish on a phone.

You will use all four today, on four real brand decisions.

Pairing Fonts That Work Together

Serif and sans, with clear contrast but shared DNA in era or proportion

Didot

+ Avenir Next

A Headline Like This

and calm body copy sitting underneath it.

Dramatic contrast at large sizes, calm readability in body text.

Best for: editorial, magazine-style layouts.

Baskerville

+ Gill Sans

A Headline Like This

and calm body copy sitting underneath it.

Two English faces two centuries apart, and they still agree.

Best for: heritage brands, long-form reading.

PT Serif

+ PT Sans

A Headline Like This

and calm body copy sitting underneath it.

One superfamily, so the two were designed as companions.

Best for: low-risk, guaranteed-to-agree defaults.

Avoid pairing two faces that look too similar, or two high-personality display faces that compete for attention. If neither rule helps, default to a superfamily: it cannot clash with itself.

Pair a Font

- 1 Pick one scenario below, or name your own brand.
- 2 Choose one font from Column A and one from Column B.
- 3 In one sentence, say why that pairing fits, and what you would avoid.

A boutique coffee roaster

A fintech app for Gen Z

A children’s museum

A law firm’s rebrand

COLUMN A

Futura

Didot

Bodoni

Baskerville

Caslon

Rockwell

Copperplate

Optima

Impact

Brush Script

COLUMN B

Georgia

Times New Roman

Palatino

Verdana

Tahoma

Trebuchet MS

Helvetica

Gill Sans

Avenir Next

Courier New

Every face here is either in Word’s font menu or one click away in any Adobe app. Windows Word lists a few under other names: **Century Gothic** for Futura, **Baskerville Old Face**, **Bodoni MT**, **Book Antiqua** for Palatino, **Copperplate Gothic** and **Gill Sans MT**.



06:00

CLICK TO START

CHECK YOUR PAIR

They differ in **structure**, not just in weight.

They share an era, a mood, or a skeleton.

One leads and one supports; they never compete.



OUTPUT: Your pairing, your scenario, and the one sentence that justifies it.

02

PART TWO

Case Studies

Helvetica



103rd Street station, IND Eighth Avenue Line

Photo: Adam Moss / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0

Success Story: Helvetica

Designed in 1957 by Max Miedinger, originally named Neue Haas Grotesk, renamed Helvetica in 1960.

Design philosophy: engineered neutrality. Even strokes, low contrast, a tall x-height, and no built-in meaning.

That neutrality drove massive corporate adoption: BMW, Lufthansa, Toyota, and the New York City Subway signage system, standardized system-wide by Massimo Vignelli and Bob Noorda in 1989.

It is not without critics. Some designers argue it reads poorly on small screens; others associate it with corporate ubiquity.

Next time you are underground in New York, look at the station signs. That black rectangle with white capitals is engineered neutrality at city scale.

Success Stories: Futura and Garamond

Futura, 1927

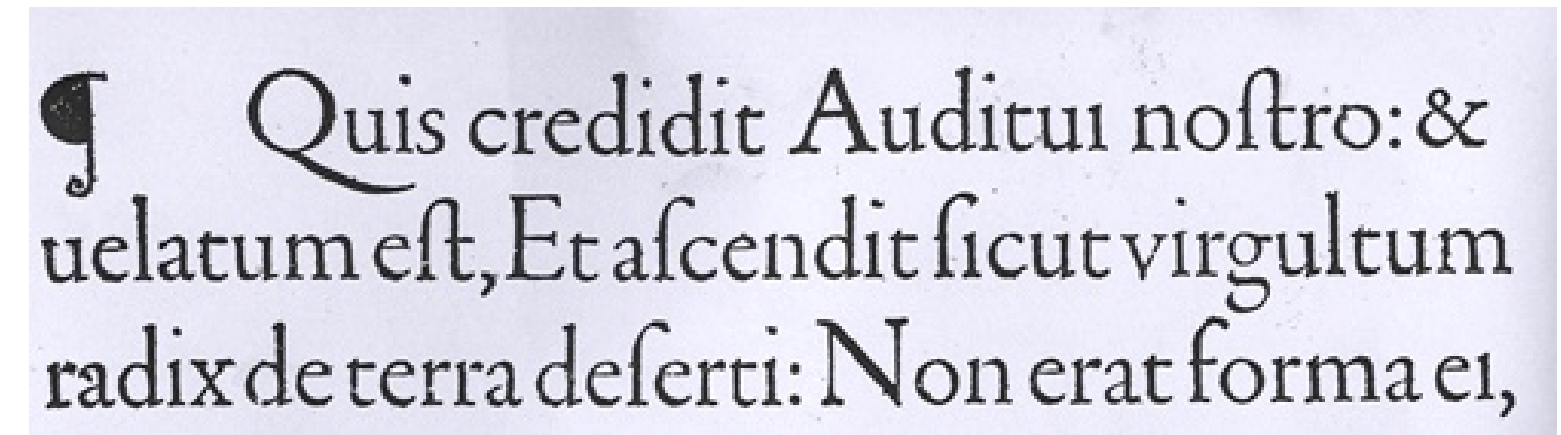


The Apollo 11 plaque, photographed on the Moon, July 1969

Photo: NASA (AS11-40-5899), public domain

The archetypal geometric sans, built from circles and triangles. Paul Renner's design was NASA's house face for the whole Apollo program, and it runs through nearly every Wes Anderson title card.

Garamond, 16th c.



A Garamond specimen printed by Conrad Berner, Frankfurt, 1592

Source: Wikimedia Commons, public domain (pre-1923)

Based on Claude Garamond's 16th-century type and still in continuous use roughly 500 years later. Its small x-height and gentle serifs make it a favorite for long-form reading, like novels.

Geometric precision and centuries-old craftsmanship can both succeed, when the choice fits the purpose.

Think Like a Marketer

A children's toy company wants to look trustworthy and premium for a new line aimed at parents. Their designer suggests a bold geometric sans similar to Futura. What questions would you ask before approving that choice?

Futura SET IN ITSELF



01:30

CLICK TO START

Think Like a Marketer

Ask what “trustworthy and premium” should feel like to a parent specifically, not just in the abstract. A geometric sans can read modern and clean, but premium often leans toward a refined serif or a warmer humanist sans. There is room to disagree, as long as the reasoning connects the font’s voice to the actual audience.

Failure Case: IKEA's Font Switch

2009 · fifty years on Futura, replaced overnight by Verdana

BEFORE · FUTURA



Ikea Catalogue 2009 · the last Futura cover

AFTER · VERDANA



Ikea Catalogue 2010 · the first Verdana cover

WHY IKEA SWITCHED

Verdana ships free with Windows and covers far more languages, letting one file serve every printed market at once, including ones Futura's licensed character set did not.

WHAT HAPPENED

An online petition, a Twitter trending topic, and coverage from Time and the AP. Verdana was designed for small screen text, not large-format print, and critics said it showed.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

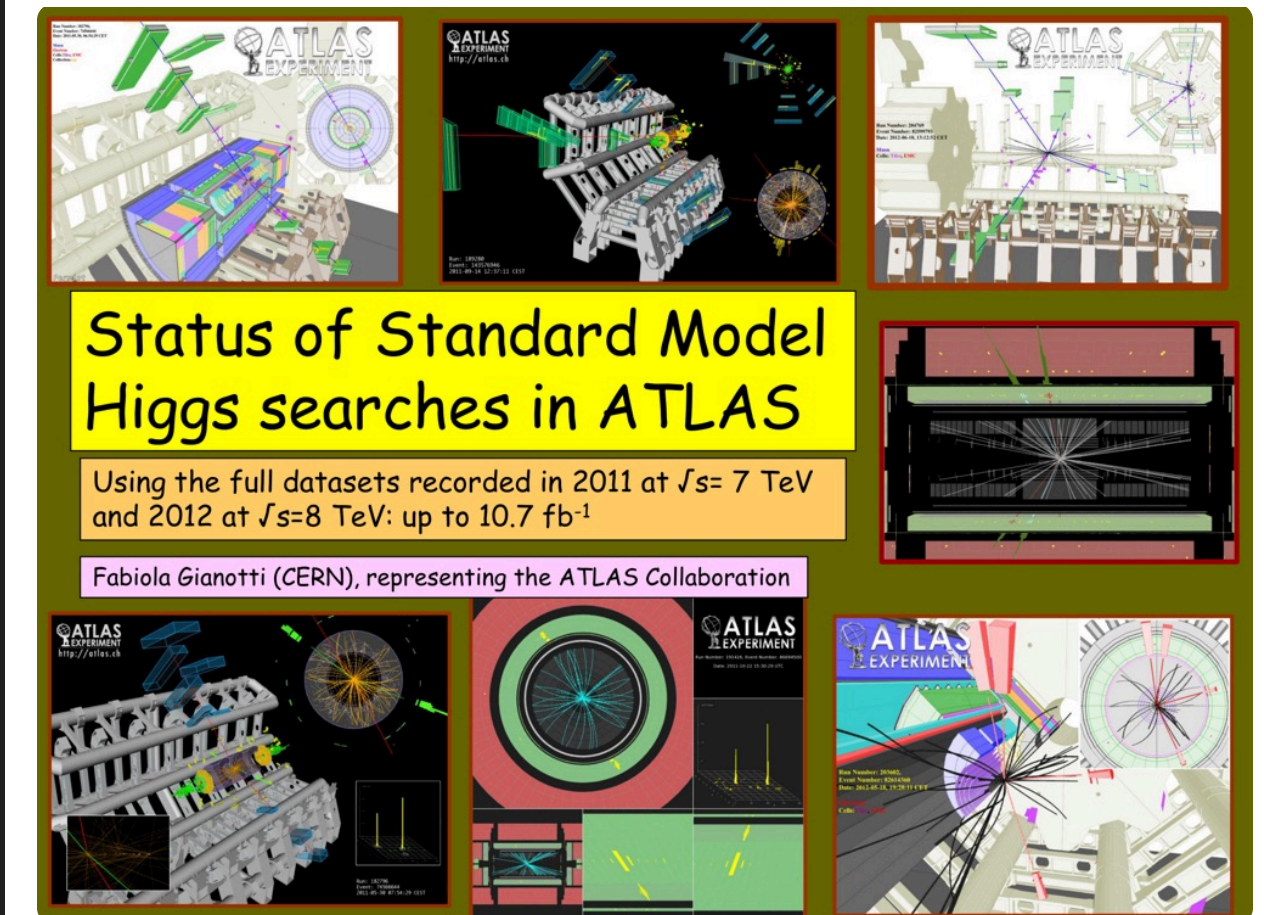
Futura draws its O as a circle and keeps the capitals tall and narrow. Verdana is wider, spaced looser, and was cut for a 96-dpi screen. Enlarged to a cover, that width is what critics kept pointing at.

QUICK QUESTION A cost-driven font swap saved money. Was it worth what it cost the brand?



In 2012, CERN announced the discovery of the Higgs boson on presentation slides set in Comic Sans, and the internet noticed before the physics did.

Designed in the mid-1990s for a casual, informal use case. The mismatch between a playful font and one of the biggest science announcements in decades caused a social media storm: purpose fit matters even when the content is serious.



The actual opening slide, Fabiola Gianotti's ATLAS seminar, 4 July 2012.
Source: CERN Indico (indico.cern.ch/event/197461), publicly posted

Typography as a Brand Voice Signal

A font change is one of the clearest signals a brand can send that it is repositioning

2015

Google

Google

CATULL, SERIF



Google

GEOMETRIC SANS

Dropped a serif logo for a custom sans, built for legibility on tiny screens.

2018

Mailchimp

Mailchimp

SCRIPT WORDMARK



Mailchimp

ROUNDED SERIF

Traded a script for a warm serif: “email tool” to “creative partner.”

2018 → 2023

Burberry

BURBERRY

2018, BOLD SANS



BURBERRY

2023, SERIF AGAIN

Sans signaled fashion-forward in 2018; five years later, back to serif.

BRAND VOICE

The personality and tone a brand consistently communicates through its visual and written choices.

Think Like a Marketer

A tech startup is rebranding from scrappy and casual to enterprise-ready as it starts selling to large companies. Their current logo uses a bouncy, rounded sans serif. What kind of font change would support that shift, and what should they avoid?



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Think Like a Marketer

A shift toward a more geometric or grotesque sans, or a refined serif, generally reads as more established and enterprise-ready. Avoid an overcorrection into something cold or generic: stripping out all personality can backfire just as badly as having too much of it.

PART THREE

Accessibility

Accessibility Is Not Optional

4.5:1

The WCAG minimum contrast ratio for normal text. Large text needs 3:1.

The standard exists to compensate for the contrast sensitivity loss common in older adults. All-caps text is discouraged for long passages, since it removes the word-shape cues that help people read quickly.



Aa 7.2:1

Charcoal on cream, this deck's own body text

79%

Of home pages in a 2025 study of one million sites had low-contrast text: the most common accessibility issue found.

WCAG

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines: the standard used to measure whether digital content is accessible to people with disabilities.



Aa 2.2:1

Light gray on white, a common real-world mistake

Fonts Built for Legibility



Atkinson Hyperlegible

Designed for low-vision readers, it maximizes the difference between similar letters like l, l, and 1. Free to use, and now found on more than 13,000 websites.

SAME STRING, TWO FONTS

l1go

a typical sans

l1go

Atkinson Hyperlegible



Clearview

Developed to improve highway sign legibility and reduce nighttime glare compared to the older standard highway font. Approved by the FHWA in 2004, adopted state by state, then rescinded in 2016 after further review.



The Cove Fort, Utah sign, used as a real control city in Clearview’s field tests.

Think Like a Marketer

You are handed a finished flyer for a campus event. The body text is a thin, light-weight font in light gray on a white background, and it looks stylish. What do you check before you approve it for print and posting?



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Think Like a Marketer

Measure the contrast ratio against the WCAG minimum of 4.5:1 for normal text. Light gray on white almost always misses it. Then check the weight: a thin face makes the same problem worse. Style is never worth someone not being able to read the flyer.

Recap: Type Talk



Named Parts, Named Eras

Every letterform has named parts, and every typeface has a historical classification.



The Four-Part Test

A font succeeds or fails based on contrast, spacing, purpose fit, and context legibility.



Real Brands, Real Stakes

IKEA, Burberry, Mailchimp, and Google all show these principles in action, for better or worse.



Accessibility Is a Requirement

WCAG contrast standards are a hard requirement for every project going forward, not a finishing touch.

Sources + Additional Reading

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TYPEFACES NAMED IN THIS SESSION

Helvetica (1957) · Futura (1927) · Garamond (16th c.) · Verdana

Gill Sans · Frutiger · Rockwell · Comic Sans · Bebas Neue

Didot + Avenir Next · Baskerville + Gill Sans

PT Serif + PT Sans · Atkinson Hyperlegible · Clearview

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Warner Bros. Discovery. Initial wordmark (2021). Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.