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embellished?: Universe 86

(by Adrian Frutiger)

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basic letter skeletons

(by Adrian Frutiger)

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embellished: Lucida Blackletter

(by Chuck Bigelow)

## What exactly is the difference between a text and a display typeface?

a 2016 discussion about terminology for text versus display typefaces among  
 Chuck Bigelow,  
 Mary Dyson,  
 Maria dos Santos Lonsdale,  
 and Kevin Larson.

What exactly is a display typeface?

What is it about a display typeface that makes it unsuitable for reading a lot of text?

These questions were stimulated by the paper in this issue, “Legibility Implications of Expressive Display Typefaces” by Sofie Beier, Katrine Sand, and Randi Starrfelt (see preceding article).

Reviewers of that paper found that various words describe display typefaces in the literature, none of them used consistently or defined precisely. In an effort to clarify, *Visible Language* Editor Mike Zender initiated a discussion among four typographic experts around the letterform features that contribute to or define the informal distinctions of “display” and “text” typeface. The aim was to better define these informal terms and choose more accurate and appropriate words than “display” and “text.”

The experts concluded that a display typeface departs more from the basic letterform skeleton, those most basic stroke distinctions that define an “a” from a “b” (see Sofie Beier’s figure 4). Because typographers intuitively understand that letterforms which embellish or distort the basic skeleton are less legible, they tend to use display typefaces at larger sizes. The discourse that led to these conclusions is summarized below. Note that some of the words discussed are no longer in Sofie Beier’s paper published in this journal, as the authors responded the discussion about terminology.

In this discourse summary, Z. is the voice of Mike Zender (*VL* Editor); B. is Chuck Bigelow, typeface designer; D. is Mary Dyson, typographic faculty and researcher; La. is Kevin Larson, typographic researcher at Microsoft; and Lo. is Maria dos Santos Lonsdale, typographic faculty and researcher.

Z.: 11.29.16

email to B, D, La and Lo

Please to read the manuscript “Legibility Implications of Expressive Display Typefaces” and propose terminology for key terms it uses throughout.

**complex, expressive, display** typefaces

versus

**conservative, text, reader** typefaces

\_\_\_\_\_ These and other available terms do not seem adequate. They're imprecise. They're not descriptive of the features that compromise the distinctions.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would like to you to propose better words for these concepts. Please suggest some words that are:

*more accurate* – somehow reflect the conceptual underpinnings behind these terms;

*more memorable* – memorable in a typographic sense, as related to typography;

*still natural* – still related to the natural, everyday meanings associated with words.

\_\_\_\_\_ I'm hoping to avoid jargon or academic language that combines five nouns for each concept. Please propose words and exchange them via email to discuss and select what seems best. I will then suggest to the author that they adopt the proposed language.

NOTE:

The author uses "letter skeleton" on p. 8

This seems to me to be a key concept in play here. Perhaps letter skeleton could be a starting point for your consideration.

.....  
B.: 11.30.16

The need for definitions raised by this paper are reminiscent of what R. L. Pyke wrote in 1926:

*"Four times as many writers have measured legibility as have defined it. ... Three out of every four writers have been attempting to measure something the exact nature of which they have not paused to examine."*

Various terms have been used to describe text and display typeface:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Complex
- \_\_\_\_\_ Expressive
- \_\_\_\_\_ Style
- \_\_\_\_\_ Text
- \_\_\_\_\_ Display
- \_\_\_\_\_ Body text
- \_\_\_\_\_ Conservative

"Complex" can be too subjective. More precise would be "perimetric complexity" in the referenced paper by Pelli et al. (2006), who define complexity

as "perimeter squared over ink area". I suggest a definition of "complex" with reference to Pelli.

\_\_\_\_\_ That said, we might expect the opposite of "complex" to be "simple". Are there "complex display" typefaces and "simple display" typefaces? Yes, a simple (in terms of perimetric complexity) display face would be Adrian Frutiger's Univers 85 Extra Black Oblique. A complex display face would be Roger Excoffon's Calypso.

\_\_\_\_\_ "Expressive" is difficult to define. One could argue that all typefaces are collections of abstract shapes that are potentially equally expressive, depending on literate culture and associated connotations, histories, and aesthetics. For example, Imperial Roman inscriptional capitals could be as expressive as Excoffon's "Calypso" typeface.

\_\_\_\_\_ "Conservative" is also hard to define in typefaces. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the prevailing text types were devolutions of the "Modern" style that had originated a century earlier in types of Bodoni and Didot. When Arts & Crafts printers revived Renaissance types of four centuries earlier, were those Jenson-based and Garamond-based revivals "conservative" because they were much older than the current types, or "radical" (= "progressive") because they sought to supplant the prevailing style?

\_\_\_\_\_ The old distinction between "display" and "text" functions fairly well and I daresay most typographers understand it.

\_\_\_\_\_ Concatenations of undefined terms like "complex expressive" or "expressive display" versus "conservative style" or "conservative body text" do not clarify the matter. Is a "complex expressive" typeface the same sort of thing as an "expressive display" typeface? Are they both in opposition to a "conservative style" typeface or to a "conservative body text" typeface?

\_\_\_\_\_ I am all in favor of finding the right words. As Mark Twain supposedly wrote:

*"The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter. 'tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."*

.....  
Z.: 11.30.16

Chuck, as you note, "display" and "text" are the words I have used too, and I/we "get it."

\_\_\_\_\_ But "display" and "text" are far from descriptive of what features lead a typeface to be used for those two purposes. Our familiar words are useful for application, to describe the result, but are no help at all for describing (or defining) what (aside from our superior expertise and good taste) led us to use Garamond for text and Shotgun for display.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am hoping for words that are relevant to features rather than to typical function/use.

La.: 11.30.16

I agree that it would be great if all papers could be either excised of jargon or for all jargon to be defined. Probably neither can happen completely, but we can always aspire to be better.

That said, I wasn't outraged by the jargon used in the paper. For the most part they are words that do resemble their common meaning. Pelli's *parametric complexity* is more rigorously defined, but it does match pretty well to the ordinary meaning of *complexity*. I feel like I know what is meant by expressive, conservative, or display type. Display type and body text type probably have the longest history as terms, though it is still probably difficult to provide an exact definition.

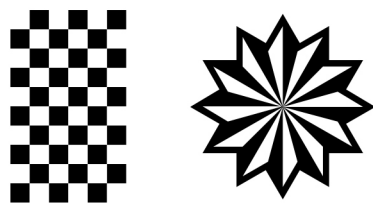
In Sofie Beier's dissertation, she tried to study why something was a body text face. The two hypotheses she looked at were familiarity based on frequency of exposure, and familiarity based on similarity to an idealized letter skeleton. The exposure theory argued that no typeface could start out as a body face, but rather because a body text face through multiple exposures as a body text face. While the skeleton theory argued that there is a Platonic ideal of a letterform and only faces that are very similar to the ideal can be a body text face. For purposes of that work, the ideal skeleton was defined as the eight fonts that Frutiger defined as ideal, and other fonts were measured for strength of correlation with those eight.

Unfortunately the research didn't conclusively show either hypothesis correct.

While I'd be hard pressed to define what makes a font a body text face, "I know it when I see it"

B.: 11.30.16

"I know it when I see it" was Justice Potter Stewart characterizing pornography, but he wasn't writing a research paper. If there were laws against type complexity like against pornography, then some characters might be in trouble, like these from Wingdings 2 and Lucida Console, respectively.



As the former foreman of a jury in a pornography trial, I am pretty sure I know it when I see it, too, but even then, the judge gave us a definition, something about how the work appeals predominantly to the prurient interest in sex, further defined as an itching or longing or unhealthy interest, and so on.

By the time the judge had gone through the whole legal definition and its sub-sections, the jury was pretty thoroughly confused.

That was the most important case I ever served on as a juror, since it involved First Amendment rights, but the most interesting case was a robbery-assault that involved apparent time travel.

A definition would have helped with that case, too.

Z.: 12.1.16

Thanks to you all for your discussion of this. It helps and illustrates why definitions are so desirable yet elusive.

One contrary thought to the "know it when I see it" approach and that comes from my reading today from *Visible Language 2.2* (a.k.a. *Journal of Typographic Research* vol. II no. 2, 1968) "Readership of Advertisements with all display type" where display type was defined as larger than 18 point, in other words,

**NOT**  
TYPEFACE CHARACTERISTICS

but

font size.

Just when Chuck and I thought we knew what we meant by "display" type.

B. 12.1.16

Size is implicit in "text vs. display", but not in "complex" or "conservative", etc..

Bigger size has always been a distinguishing characteristic of display type, even before it was called display type. The transition from text to display occurs around 18 to 20 point in the studies I have made from incunabula through the 18th century. "Great Primer" in English and Parangon in French are the names of the sizes that cross over from text into display, while the styles don't change. Evidence for this separation, and the reasons explaining it, are many, some from the psychophysicist's view.

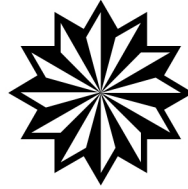
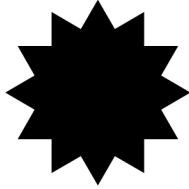
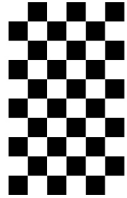
Legge, Gordon E., and Charles A. Bigelow. "Does print size matter for reading? A review of findings from vision science and typography"

*Journal of Vision* 11.5 (2011): 8-8.

<http://jov.arvojournals.org/article.aspx?articleid=2191906>

A solid rectangle versus a rectangular checkerboard of same size; a solid star versus a shaded star of same size and polygonality.

But, back to perimetric complexity. \_\_\_\_\_ Maybe there will be some future time in which graphemes are distinguished by degrees of complexity. Here are some geometric figures that are similar in their exterior but differ in perimetric complexity.



.....  
D.: 12.02.16

I can understand why you are looking for a description of features but the paper seeks to separate features (swash, shadow and contrast). Any term must therefore be sufficiently generic to cover all of these. We seem to have ruled out perimetric complexity and the paper appears to separate swash style and excessive added detail.

*'In this study we will investigate the effect of swash style and the effect of excessive added detail' (p3).*

I don't think I got very far with my adjectives, but here they are:

basic/plain/functional/unadorned  
vs  
decorative/ornamental/embellished/ornate

.....  
Lo.: 12.04.16

Inspired by Paul Luna and Alison Black's published work (and other authors), I would suggest: 'Formal Typefaces' versus 'Informal Typefaces'. It is short and neat, and therefore easy to remember. Moreover, since the author is testing legibility, it has the same play on words: legible vs illegible; formal vs informal.

\_\_\_\_\_ Beyond this, of all the terms used by the author "Expressive Typeface" is the only one I would consider keeping, but without the word 'display' in the middle. That is: "Expressive Typefaces" and not "Expressive Display Typefaces". It's also short and neat, and therefore easy to remember. As the opposite term for "Expressive Typefaces", perhaps Mary's suggestion: 'Functional Typefaces' or 'Plain Typefaces'.

\_\_\_\_\_ In both cases, what the author then should do at the beginning of

the paper, as already mentioned above, is to explain what is meant by the terms and what falls under their umbrella. That is, what is included: script, handwritten, ornamental, etc.. What are the features: complex letter features, excessive detail, etc.?

.....  
B.: 12.04.16

I agree with the goal of Section 2 Terms: the desirability of terms being "short, neat, and...easy." I agree in principle with the need for terms to be clear, defined, consistent, and, where needed, translatable into terminology in cited papers.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am reminded that in French, "lisible" encompasses the English terms "readable" and "legible". The late Ladislav Mandel once added, rhetorically, "decipherable", when he declared that Helvetica was not "lisible" but merely "déchiffable", while Univers was truly "lisible". Probably there is no perfect and translatable terminology, but if the terms are clear and defined, that should be as much as we can expect.

\_\_\_\_\_ I'm pretty much in agreement with the other comments as well, although I'm not always sure I know "text" fonts when I see them. Palatino, we are told, was intended to be a display face, not a book face, but it became most popular as a text face in text sizes. Whereas many of the ITC faces of the 1970s, Souvenir as an example, were marketed as "text and display", thus leading credulous designers to make serious books and documents look unserious by composing them in Souvenir.

.....  
Z.: 01.31.16

It seems we have some agreement in principles and on parameters and some good proposed terms.

\_\_\_\_\_ We agree in principle that the terms need definition generally and at the start of the manuscript in question.

\_\_\_\_\_ We seem to agree that embellishment on the basic letterform skeleton, as measured perhaps by perimetric complexity, is what distinguishes a display typeface. We have not defined a threshold, but the definition proposed could result in such a threshold.

\_\_\_\_\_ I read no objections to Mary's proposal to use the adjectives:

basic, plain, functional/, unadorned  
vs  
decorative, ornamental, embellished, ornate  
for text versus display typefaces.

\_\_\_\_\_ I suggest the adjectives that are most related to the definition above are:

unadorned typeface  
embellished typeface

In common use, one could just default to “embellished typeface” as the preferred term for “display typeface” and just call everything else a typeface.

Univers 85 Extra Black Oblique is unadorned and unembellished yet a display face.

PS

Z: 11.29.16 clarification

This attempt to clarify language in typography is a bit of an experiment. Typographic terms are defined better than most other areas of graphic / communication design (we don't even have a single universally accepted name for this discipline), so I'm thinking what we do here and how we do it might be used to clarify language in other areas.

## Visible Language calls for papers:

### Special Student Issue

This special issue of *Visible Language* seeks submissions for an issue to include student articles on research into typographic and graphic design involving usability testing (e.g. small scale testing of prototype iterations), observational studies, or experiments comparing alternative designs. The objective of the special issue is to allow students to experience the publication process.

The research might be on a smaller scale than would normally be published. Therefore studies may involve smaller numbers of participants, be a pilot or scoping study (with a reasonable number of participants), or usability studies with no need for statistical analysis. The research would need to meet the criteria for a rigorous study including:

- a clearly stated research question of relevance to design practitioners
- ethical approval for the study
- appropriate experiment design
- valid interpretation of results

In line with the aims of the journal, we wish to actively support young scholars and therefore encourage supervisors/tutors to be involved in the publication process with joint authorship where appropriate. Also following the practices of the journal, we are willing to liaise with supervisors and students to advise on what is suitable for submission, make suggestions, and provide feedback.

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