

Columns pt. 2: Line Lengths and Column Width

(Nikola)

This is the second post about columns. In the first one we talked about columns and how can you arrange them and how to position content inside them. This post will talk about the width of the column, line length and optimal character count inside them.

Line length is basically the number of characters you can place in the column so that the text can be easily readable and visually appealing. Column width, also referred as a measure, is the result of line length and character count in it.

I would like to point out one thing though and that is, knowledge learned here is applied to body text. Other text elements like picture captions, pull-out quotes and small news style bits of text are something different and you do not have to bother to set up these text elements in the measurements provided in this article.

Importance of line length and column width

The width of your columns and the number of words and characters it contains affects the readability of the text.

Too wide columns will be harder for the eye to follow and the reader will get lost in them more easily. Too narrow columns can cause the structure of the text to break up and annoy the reader because he will have to constantly skip from one row to another. Both of these problems reduce readability.

Your goal is to set up the text in a way that the reader doesn't have any disturbances while reading the text. To achieve this you can follow few simple steps.

**Caslon 10/12;
column 10 pica;
characters 25–30;
too narrow**

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**Caslon 10/12;
column 15 pica;
characters 38–45;
optimal width**

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**Caslon 10/12;
column 25 pica;
characters 70–80;
too wide**

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^^column width/line length and character count (these column widths are for magazine design—not book design—which often uses wider columns: ~ 70–90 character for a single column)^^

Same font, same size but different column widths produces different results.

Equation for getting proper line length

There is a general rule that one line of unjustified text should have around 9–12 words. For justified text these numbers are around 10–15 words. Since some words are longer and some shorter this is not a perfect measurement.

To precisely determine good length it is better to count the characters.

Around 30 characters in a row is a minimum line width. You can use this count for multi column layouts. Four columns or more. Generally a lower count than 30 characters is used in newspapers.

Optimal line length is 40–50 characters. These line lengths will be mostly seen in 2 and 3 column layout that are spreading across the whole page width. For example, 10pt type laid out in 3 columns across the width of an A4 or similarly sized magazine will have 35–45 characters per column line. Two column layout can have around 50–60 characters per column line.

Optimal column width for 2 column layout with type set at 10pt has between 50–60 characters.

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Absolute maximum would be around 70–75 characters. Bigger count can be seen in books but then the leading has to be bigger than the standard 120% of a character point size. You must ask yourself how to easily achieve these numbers? Don't worry it is easy, you won't have to count the characters one by one.

Before your eye is trained to see and recognize the proper column width and density of the text, there are some tools that will help you in this process. In this case we will do some math.

To get the proper column width multiply your type point size by 1.5 to 2.5 times and the result is your column width measured in pica. But in my experience multiplying by 2 gives the best results.

For example your type size is 10pt. Multiply it by 2 and you will get 20. This result is your ideal line length in pica, because pica is a standard measure for column width. Now you have a 20 pica wide column that consists of a type with the optimal character count. 20 pica wide column can have from 50–60 characters set in 10pt size, optimal for 2 column layouts. If you multiply it by 1.5 you will get 15 pica wide column which will have around 35–45 characters per column line, optimal for 3 column layouts.

Optimal column width for 3 column layout with type set in 10pt has between 35–45 characters.

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Line length above 30 pica is too wide and under 10 is too narrow. If you play around a little bit with these numbers and different column widths and you will get a hang of it pretty easily. Of course most of us in Europe use millimeters so you will have to convert 20 pica to mm or inches, whatever you use. But you can input the result in the width field in your layout software followed by word pica and the software will automatically convert pica to your default measurements.

Perception of type sizes

Some designers like to measure the column width first and then divide the numbers and get the point size for their body copy. I do it in the way I explained above.

The reason I do it like that is because first I like to determine appropriate type size for my readership. For example your readers are mostly seniors. It would be much harder for them to read 9pt size type than 11 or 12pt type. It's mandatory to have at least 10pt type for demographics over 60 years old. Don't go over 12pt for body text.

Mrs. Eaves 10/12

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Type set in the same size can look very different on the page. Mr. Eaves on the left looks has smaller x height than others, while Andrade Pro on the right looks darkest. Caslon and Minion look just right. While first three fonts retain same character count per line, Andrade Pro set in the same size as other three, reduces character count per line. This font is bigger than the rest of the three even at the same size.

It is important to point out that some fonts look very different on same point sizes. One font can look really dense and heavy on the page if it is set in 12pt size while the other one can look too bright and spacious.

To determine the right feel and look of type on the page fill several pages with different fonts that you plan to test for your layout and set it in the same size. Print these pages, look at them and try to see which one looks just right.

Pages must not be too dark or too bright. Always print your body copy and visually inspect these pages. This is a must. In this way you will get a better feel how will body copy look in your magazine. Try to use live text instead of “lorem ipsum” and read it. If you can read it clearly and with nice flow than the column width and type size are OK.

So, choose your type size first, measure the column widths, lay out some text in those columns, print it out, read it and inspect the pages. If all looks nice and you are able to read the text clearly, bingo, you have achieved good body text layout. Test out a few types sizes and few column widths and see which is better. Play around a bit.