What is the Best Way to Choose or Mix and Match Fonts?

By Jacci Howard Bear, About.com

What is the Best Way to Choose or Mix and Match Fonts?

There are no absolutely right or wrong ways to choose fonts or mix different fonts in a design project. However, there are a few accepted standards that can speed up the font selection process and generally result in typographically attractive and readable compositions.

These guidelines won't always work for you, but nine times out of ten they'll give you the results you want with the least amount of trial and error. Use them when you're in a hurry or when you've hit a mental roadblock and need to jumpstart a design project.

Use Serif Text with Sans Serif Headline

When in doubt, pair a serif font for body text and a sans serif font for headlines.

This is not a rule. This is simply a good starting point for when you're stuck for ideas or can't seem to find the right mix. In most cases a serif plus a sans serif provides good contrast and doesn't overwhelm with too many fonts.

Use Contrasting Styles

Avoid mixing two very similar typefaces, such as two scripts or two sans serifs. There is not enough contrast and the small differences will cause a visual clash.

This is one reason that pairing a serif with a sans serif font works so well. There's generally good contrast.

Use Fewer Fonts

Limit the number of different typefaces used in a single document to no more than three or four.

With too many different fonts you run into problems with not having enough contrast between similar font styles plus a lack of consistency and even a feeling of choppiness because there are too many distractions. Using just one typeface can be better than two or three or four or more.

Use Proportional Fonts

Avoid monospaced typefaces for body copy. They draw too much attention to the individual letters distracting the reader from the message. The best body copy fonts are the least distinctive. They generally have less extreme parts or unusual character shapes. This is one place where boring can be better. Use fonts with more distinctive characters in headlines and pull-quotes and other places where you want to grab attention and pull the reader into the story.

How To Choose Body Text Fonts

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Body copy requires legible, easy to read body text fonts.
The bulk of what we read is body copy. It's the novels, magazine articles, newspaper stories, contracts, and Web pages we read day after day. Body type or body text fonts are the typefaces used for body copy. Body copy requires legible, easy to read body text fonts.

Choose a typeface that is readable at body text font sizes of 14 points or less. In some cases, body text fonts may be larger, such as for beginning readers or an audience with vision impairments. When browsing a font book or specimen pages, be sure to look at how the font looks at smaller sizes, not just at the larger samples.

Consider serif fonts for body text fonts.
In the US at least, serif faces are the norm for most books and newspapers making them familiar and comfortable as body text fonts.

Avoid extremes for body text fonts.
Choose a body text font that blends in and doesn't distract the reader with oddly shaped letters, or extremes in x-height, descenders, or ascenders.

Consider serifs for serious text.
In general (with many exceptions) consider serif faces for a subdued, formal, or serious look.

Consider sans serif for informal text.
In general (with exceptions) consider a sans serif body text fonts for a crisper, bolder, or more informal tone.

Use proportionally-spaced body text fonts.
Avoid monospaced typefaces for body copy. They draw too much attention to the individual letters distracting the reader from the message. Stick with basic serif or sans serif faces.

Avoid script or handwriting typefaces as body text fonts. Some exceptions: cards and invitations where the text is set in short lines with extra line spacing.

Use plain, basic fonts for body text fonts. Save your fancy or unusual typefaces for use in headlines, logos, and graphics. As a body text font they are almost impossible to read comfortably, if at all.

Consider how other text will look with your body text fonts.
The perfect body text fonts lose their effectiveness if paired with headline fonts and fonts used for captions, subheads, pull-quotes and other elements that are incompatible. Mix and match your body text fonts and headline fonts carefully.

Top 10 Serif Body Text Fonts

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1. Garamond
Typefaces bearing the Garamond name are not always based on the designs of Claude Garamond; however, these serif fonts share certain characteristics of timeless beauty and readability.

2. Caslon
Benjamin Franklin chose Caslon for the first printing of the American Declaration of Independence. Fonts based on the typefaces of William Caslon are good, readable choices f or text.

3. Baskerville
A classic dating from the 1750s, the many variations of Baskerville and New Baskerville serif fonts work quite well for both text and display use.

4. Bodoni
A classic text face styled after the work of Giambattista Bodini. Some font versions are, perhaps, too heavy or carry too much contrast in thick and thin strokes for body text but work very well as a display face.

5. Goudy
This popular serif typeface from Frederic W. Goudy has evolved over the years to include many weights and variations.

6. Times
Possibly overused but a good basic serif font nonetheless. Originally designed for newspaper use, Times, Times New Roman, and other variations are designed to be easily readable and legible as body text — a neutral font.

7. Century
The best known of this family is probably New Century Schoolbook. All the Century faces are considered highly legible serif fonts, suitable not only for children's textbooks but for magazines and other publications as well.

8. Palatino
A widely-used serif font for both body text and display type, it was designed originally by Hermann Zapf. Part of its widespread use may stem from its inclusion — along with Helvetica and Times — with the Mac OS.

9. Sabon
Designed in the 1960s by Jan Tschichold, this serif font is based on Garamond types. Those commissioning the font design specified that it should be "suitable for all printing purposes" — and it is.

10. Stone Serif
A relatively "young" design from the late 1980s, the whole family with its coordinated serif, sans serif, and informal families work well for mixing and matching styles.

Top 10 Sans Serif Body Text Fonts

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1. Helvetica

One of the most popular and confusing typefaces, this san serif font was originally designed by Max Miedinger in 1957. The introduction of Helvetica Neue brought some order to the chaos with more design consistency among the various weights that had developed throughout the 60s and 70s. Helvetica works well for many applications from body text to billboards.

2. Univers

Similiar to the ever-popular Helvetica, there are 21 typefaces in Adrian Frutiger's Univers family. The full range of consistently developed weights makes it a versatile sans serif font choice that mixes and matches well for text and display.

3. Frutiger

This clean, legible sans serif font from Adrian Frutiger was originally designed for signage but works quite well for text and display. It was drawn with a certain subtle unevenness that produced a font that is warmer, friendlier than Helvetica and other early sans serifs.

4. Futura

Longer ascenders and descenders than many similiar text sans serif faces plus its geometric consistency help give Futura its elegant and practical appearance. It comes in many weights and makes a handsome font choice for text and display use.

5. Franklin Gothic

A popular choice for newspaper work, the various weights give this sans serif font great versatility and the condensed versions maintain high legibility in tight spaces.

6. Optima

Hermann Zapf created Optima with tapered strokes that are almost like serif faces, but without the serifs. A classy choice for text and display use.

7. Gill Sans

Eric Gill's popular and highly legible sans serif font comes in several weights for both text and display use.

8. Akzidenz-Grotesk

Despite the "grotesque" name, this predecessor of Helvetica and Univers is a crisp, clean sans serif font that's a favorite among many designers.

9. Avant Garde

Drawn with geometric precision, it's a crisp, clean headline and body text font. The condensed weights are quite legible for text work as well.

10. Myriad

You'lll find a myriad of uses for this 1990s era Adobe Originals typeface. Robert Slimbach, Carol Twombly, and other Adobe staff had a hand in the design of this modern sans serif font.

How To Choose Fonts For Headlines

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Headlines should stand out, grab attention.
Headlines and other short phrases or blocks of text are often set in display type sizes of 14 points and larger. While readability is still important, there is more leeway for using fun or decorative typefaces in headlines. Beyond what the headline says, it needs contrast — of size or font choice or color — to make it stand out.

Match headline fonts to tone of document. Choose a font for headlines that is appropriate to the tone and purpose of your publication. Does the font say fun or serious to you?

Use contrasting font styles for headlines.
Serif body copy and sans serif headlines provide good contrast. Avoid using headline and body copy fonts that are too similiar in style, such as two different serif or sans serif fonts.

Use bold headline fonts to add contrast.
If using the same font for body copy and headlines, create contrast by setting headlines bolder and much larger than body text.

Make headlines a different color than other text.
Use color in the headline to create contrast but make sure there is enough contrast not only between the headline and the body text but also between the headline color and the background.

Make headlines larger than body copy.
Display and headline fonts are more readable at larger sizes than body copy fonts. For extremely decorative or elaborate fonts use even larger display sizes of 32 points or more in headlines. Create a headline hierarchy with headline fonts that look good in multiple sizes.

Limit use of decorative headline fonts.
Extremely decorative or elaborate display fonts, even at headline font sizes, are harder to read. Use decorative headline fonts in moderation and for shorter headlines.

Set all caps headlines in sans serif fonts.
Serif, scripts, and elaborate decorative fonts are much harder to read set in all caps. For headlines set in all caps, stick with sans serif fonts.

Kern your headlines.
Adjust the spacing of type set at display sizes to eliminate distracting gaps between certain pairs of letters. Gaps in headlines stand out like sore thumbs.