



# Stop Stealing Sheep & Find Out How Type Works

Erik Spiekermann & E.M. Ginger



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Type On Screen

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# Chapter 1

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Picture yourself in a world without type. True, you could do without some of the ubiquitous advertising messages, but you wouldn't even know what the packages on your breakfast table contained. Sure enough, there are pictures on them – grazing cows on a paper carton suggest that milk is inside, and cereal packaging has appetizing images to make you hungry. But pick up salt or pepper, and what do you look for? S and P!

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world, so do the newspapers in different countries. What looks totally unacceptable to a North American reader will please the French reader at breakfast, while an Italian might find a German daily paper too monotonous.

Of course, it's not only type or layout that distinguishes newspapers, it is also the combination of words. Some languages have lots of accents, like French; some have very long words, like Dutch or Finnish; and some use extremely short words, as in a British tabloid. Not every typeface is suited for every language, which also explains why certain type styles are popular in certain countries, but not necessarily anywhere else.

This brings us back to type and newspapers. What might look quite obvious and normal to you when you read your daily paper is the result of careful planning and applied craft. Even newspapers with pages that look messy are laid out following complex grids and strict hierarchies...

The artistry comes in offering the information in such a way that the reader doesn't get sidetracked into thinking about the fact that someone had to carefully prepare every line, paragraph, and column into structured pages. Design – in this case, at least – has to be invisible. Typefaces used for these hardworking tasks are therefore, by definition “invisible.” They have to look so normal that you don't even notice you're reading them. And this is exactly why designing type is such an unknown profession; who thinks about people who produce invisible things? Nevertheless, every walk of life is defined by, expressed with, and indeed, dependent on type and typography.

If you think that the choice of a typeface is something of little importance because nobody would know the difference anyway, you'll be surprised to hear that experts spend an enormous amount of time and effort perfecting details that are invisible to the untrained eye.

It is a bit like having been to a concert, thoroughly enjoying it, then reading in the paper the next morning that the conductor had been incompetent, the orchestra out of tune, and the piece of music not worth

performing in the first place. While you had a great night out, some experts were unhappy with the performance because their standards and expectations were different than yours.

Food and design: how often do we buy the typographic promise without knowing much about the product? Stereotypes abound – some colors suggest certain foods, particular typefaces suggest different flavors and qualities. Without these unwritten rules we wouldn't know what to buy or order. The same thing happens when you have a glass of wine. While you might be perfectly happy with whatever you're drinking, someone at the table will make a face and go on at length about why this particular bottle is too warm, how that year was a lousy one anyway, and that he just happens to have a case full of some amazing stuff at home that the uncle of a friend imports directly from France.

Does that make you a fool or does it simply say that there are varying levels of quality and satisfaction in everything we do?

While it might be fun to look at wine labels, chocolate boxes, or candy bars in order to stimulate one's appetite for food or fonts (depending on your preference), most of us definitely do not enjoy an equally prevalent form of printed communication: forms.

If you think about it, you'll have to admit that business forms process a lot of information that would be terribly boring to have to write fresh every time. All you do is check a box, sign your name, and you get what you ask for. Unless, of course, you're filling out your tax return, when they get what they ask for; or unless the form is so poorly written, designed, or printed (or all of the above) that you have a hard time understanding it. Given the typographic choices available, there is no excuse for producing bad business forms, illegible invoices, awkward applications, one's ridiculous receipts, or bewildering ballots. Not a day goes by without one's having to cope with printed matter of this nature. It could so easily be a more pleasant experience.

While onscreen forms offer a very reduced palette of typographic choices,

they at least provide some automatic features to help with the drudgery of typing your credit card number.

Every PC user today knows what a font is, calls at least some of them by their first name (e.g. Helvetica, Verdana, and Times), and appreciates that typefaces convey different emotions. Although what we see on screen are actually little unconnected square dots that fool the naked eye into recognizing pleasant shapes, we now expect all type to look like “print.”

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Some of the most pervasive typographical messages have never really been designed, and neither have the typefaces they are set in. Some engineer, administrator, or accountant in some government department had to decide what the signs on our roads and freeways should look like. This person probably formed a committee made up of other engineers, administrators, and accountants who in turn went to a panel of experts that would have included manufacturers of signs, road safety experts, lobbyists from automobile associations plus more engineers, administrators, and accountants.

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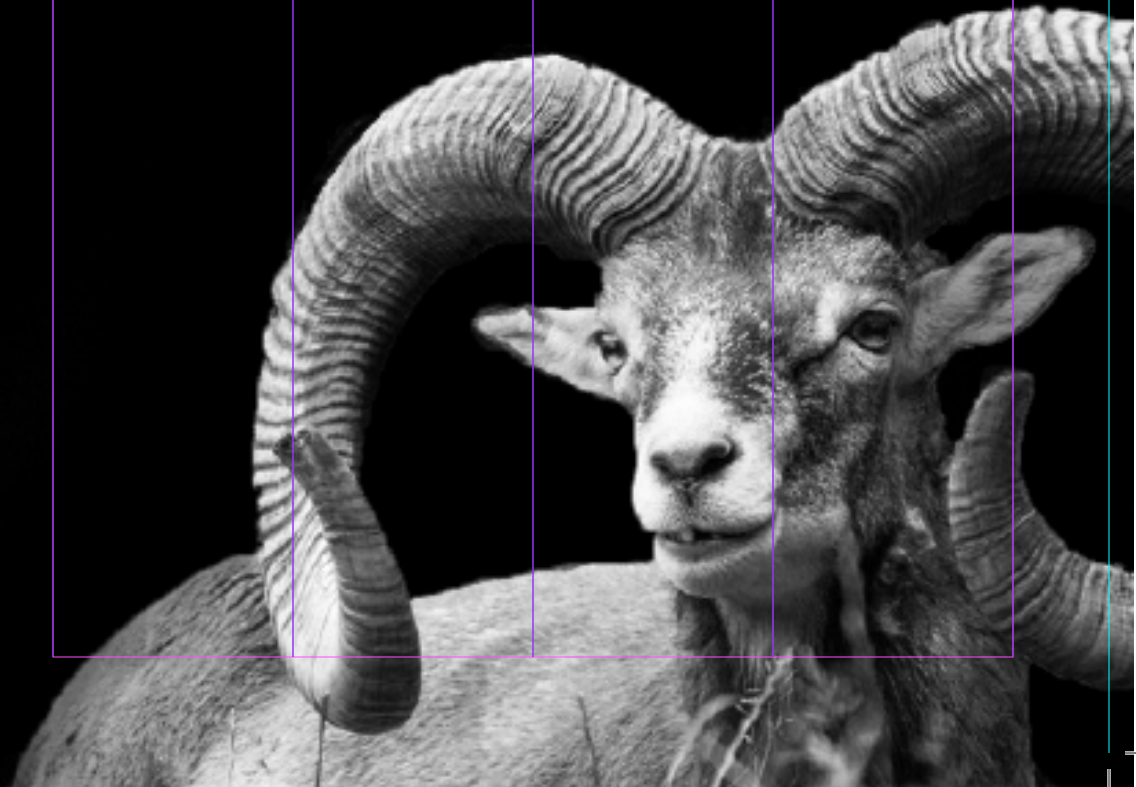
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