

# Understanding Type

There are tens of thousands of digital typefaces available—many are digital versions of typefaces developed when type was set in metal, others developed as purely digital constructions. Whatever their derivation, all typefaces share some basic concepts.

## Classifying type

While there have been numerous attempts to classify typefaces, only two categories have gained wide acceptance: *serif* and *sans-serif*. A serif is the small “foot” at the end of a stroke in a character of type. Typefaces with these ornaments are called serif typefaces, those without sans-serif.

Typefaces vary enormously in style. Some don't fit easily in either category, and some defy categorization completely.



**Serif**  
**Sans-serif**

How would you categorize this typeface? ▶



When describing typefaces, each feature has a name. One of the most critical ones is the *baseline*, the invisible line on which the type sits. Portions of the letters which hang below the baseline are called *descenders*.

A typeface's x-height is the height of a letter x. Some typefaces have very large x-height, such as the one in the example below. Rising above the x-height is the ascender.



## Measuring type

The size of type is usually measured in *points*. There are 72 points to the inch. When we measure the width of a block of type, we often use the pica. One pica is 12 points; there are 6 picas in an inch.

When we set type, we need to specify the amount of space between one baseline and the next. This called *leading*. For example, the type in this paragraph is 10.5 point type with 14 points of leading. This is written as 10.5/14pt, or “10.5 on 14.”

Another unit you may encounter is the *em*. Originally defined as the width of a letter “m”, it is generally a width equivalent

to the type's height in points. Spacing of type, kerning and tracking, is often expressed in terms of fractions of an em.

Choices we make about type size, leading and other settings make a great difference to the appearance of type. Developing good judgement about the use and spacing of type is a slow process, but the more examples you study, the better you will become at it.

## Examples

### Helvetica, 10/12

Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressinggown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air.

### Goudy, 10/12

Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressinggown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air.

### Helvetica, 10/14

Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressinggown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air.

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Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressinggown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air.

### Helvetica, 12/12

Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressinggown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air.

### Helvetica, 12/14

Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressinggown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air.