A Glossary of Typographic Terms

The following is a small glossary of terms frequently used in the type world.

alignment
> The positioning of text within the page margins. Alignment can be flush left, flush right, justified or centered. Flush left and flush right are sometimes referred to as left justified and right justified.

ascender
> The part of lowercase letters (such as k, b, and d) that ascends above the x-height of the other lowercase letters in a face.

baseline
> The imaginary line on which the majority of the characters in a typeface rest.

body text
> The paragraphs in a document that make up the bulk of its content. The body text should be set in an appropriate and easy to read face, typically at 10 or 12 point size.

boldface
> A typeface which has been enhanced by rendering it in darker, thicker strokes so that it will stand out on the page. Headlines that need emphasis should be boldface. Italics are preferable for emphasis in body text.

bullet
> A dot or other special character placed at the left of items in a list to show that they are individual, but related points.

cap height
> The height from the baseline to the top of the uppercase letters in a font. This may or may not be the same as the height of ascenders. Cap height is used in some systems to measure the type size.

centered
> Text placed at an equal distance from the left and right margins. Headlines are often centered. It is generally not good to mix centered text with flush left or flush right text.

character mapping
> See character encoding.

character encoding
> Character encoding is a table in a font or a computer operating system which maps character codes to glyphs in a font. Most operating systems today represent character codes with an 8-bit unit of data known as a byte. Thus, character encoding tables today are restricted to at most 256 character codes.
>
> Not all operating system manufacturers use the same character encoding. For example, the Macintosh(R) platform uses the standard Macintosh character set as defined by Apple Computer, Inc., while the Windows(TM) operating system uses another encoding entirely, as defined by Microsoft. Fortunately, standard Type 1 fonts contain all the glyphs needed for both these encodings, so they work correctly not only with these two systems, but others as well.
>
> Also see character, glyph, keyboard layout.

condensed
    A narrower version of a font, used to get a maximum of characters into a given space.

contrast
    A subjective feeling that graphic elements (such as fonts) are different but work together well. This gives a feeling of variety without losing harmony. Within a particular font, contrast also refers to the variety of stroke thicknesses that make up the characters. Helvetica has low contrast and Bodoni has high contrast.

copyfitting
    The process of adjusting the size and spacing of type to make it fit within a defined area of the page.

descender
    The part of lowercase letters (such as y, p, and q) that descends below the baseline of the other lowercase letters in a font face. In some typefaces, the uppercase J and Q also descend below the baseline.

dingbats
    Typefaces that consist of symbol characters such as decorations, arrows and bullets.

dpi
    An abbreviation for dots per inch. Refers to the resolution at which a device, such as a monitor or printer, can display text and graphics. Monitors are usually 100 dpi or less, and laser printers are 300 dpi or higher. An image printed on a laser printer looks sharper than the same image on a monitor.

drop cap
    A design style in which the first capital letter of a paragraph is set in a larger point size and aligned with the top of the first line. This method is used to indicate the start of a new section of text, such as a chapter.

ellipsis
    A punctuation character consisting of three dots, or periods, in a row. It indicates that a word or phrase has been omitted. To access the ellipsis character in standard typefaces, type option + semicolon.

em, em space, em quad
    A common unit of measurement in typography. Em is traditionally defined as the width of the uppercase M in the current face and point size. It is more properly defined as simply the current point size. For example, in 12 point type, em is a distance of 12 points.

em dash
    A dash the length of an em is used to indicate a break in a sentence.

en, en space, en quad
    A common unit of measurement in typography. En is traditionally defined as the width of the uppercase N in the current face and the current point size. It is more properly defined as half the width of an em.

en dash
    A dash the length of an en is used to indicate a range of values.

encoding
    See character encoding.

face
    One of the styles of a family of faces. For example, the italic style of the Garamond family is a face.

family

Also known as a font family. A collection of faces that were designed and intended to be used together. For example, the Garamond family consists of roman and italic styles, as well as regular, semi-bold and bold weights. Each of the style and weight combinations is called a face.

flush left

Text which is aligned on the left margin is said to be set flush left. If the same text is not aligned on the right margin, it is said to be set flush left, ragged right. The term ragged right is sometimes used alone to mean the same thing.

flush right

Text which is aligned on the right margin is said to be set flush right. If the same text is not aligned on the left margin, it is said to be set flush right, ragged left. The term ragged left is sometimes used alone to mean the same thing.

font

One weight, width and style of a typeface. Before scalable type, there was little distinction between the terms font, face and family. Font and face still tend to be used interchangeably, although the term face is usually more correct.

font family

Also known as family. The collection of faces that were designed together and intended to be used together. For example the Garamond font family consists of roman and italic styles, as well as regular, semi-bold and bold weights. Each of the style and weight combinations is called a face.

glyph

The word glyph is used differently in different contexts. In the context of modern computer operating systems, it is often defined as a shape in a font that is used to represent a character code on screen or paper. The most common example of a glyph is a letter, but the symbols and shapes in a font like ITC Zapf Dingbats are also glyphs.

Also see character, character encoding, keyboard layout.

hanging indent

A document style in which the first line of a paragraph is aligned with the left margin, and the remaining lines are all indented an equal amount. This is sometimes referred to as outdenting. This is an effective style for displaying lists of information.

headline

The short lines of emphasized text that introduce detail information in the body text that follows. Also the category of faces that are designed to work best in headline text.

headline font

A font that has been designed to look good at large point sizes for use in headlines. Headline fonts generally do not contain a complete set of characters since they do not require a full set of special symbols and punctuation.

italic

A slanting or script-like version of a face. The upright faces are often referred to as roman.

justified

A block of text that has been spaced so that the text aligns on both the left and right margins. Justified text has a more formal appearance, but may be harder to read.

kerning

The adjustment of horizontal space between individual characters in a line of text. Adjustments in kerning are especially important in large display and headline text lines. Without kerning adjustments, many letter combinations can look awkward. The objective of kerning is to create visually equal spaces between all letters so that the eye can move smoothly along the text.

Kerning may be applied automatically by the desktop publishing program based on tables of values. Some programs also allow manual kerning to make fine adjustments.

keyboard layout, keyboard mapping

Sometimes known as a character mapping, a keyboard layout or mapping is a table used by a computer operating system to govern which character code is generated when a key or key combination is pressed.

Also see character, character encoding, glyph.

leading (pronounced: ledding)

The amount of space added between lines of text to make the document legible. The term originally referred to the thin lead spacers that printers used to physically increase space between lines of metal type. Most applications automatically apply standard leading based on the point size of the font. Closer leading fits more text on the page, but decreases legibility. Looser leading spreads text out to fill a page and makes the document easier to read.

Leading can also be negative, in which case the lines of text are so close that they overlap or touch.

letter spacing

Adjusting the average distance between letters in a block of text to fit more or less text into the given space or to improve legibility. Kerning allows adjustments between individual letters, letterspacing is applied to a block of text as a whole. Letter-spacing is sometimes referred to as tracking or track kerning.

margin

The white spaces around text blocks. Margins typically need to be created on the edges of a page, since most printers can't print to the very edge. White space also makes a document look better and easier to read.

oblique

A slanting version of a face. Oblique is similar to italic, but without the script quality of a true italic. The upright faces are usually referred to as roman.

paragraph rules

Graphic lines associated with a paragraph that separate blocks of text. Rules are commonly used to separate columns and isolate graphics on a page. Some desktop publishing programs allow paragraph styles to be created that include paragraph rules above and/or below the paragraph.

pica

A unit of measure that is approximately 1/6th of an inch. A pica is equal to 12 points. The traditional British and American pica is 0.166 inches. In PostScript printers, a pica is exactly 1/6th of an inch.

point

A unit of measure in typography. There are approximately 72 points to the inch. A pica is 12 points.

point size

The common method of measuring type. The distance from the top of the highest ascender to the bottom of the lowest descender in points. In Europe, type is often measured by the cap-height in millimeters.

raised cap
     A design style in which the first capital letter of a paragraph is set in a large point size and aligned with the baseline of the first line of text. Compare to a drop cap.

reverse
     The technique of printing white or light-colored text on a black or dark background for emphasis. This technique greatly reduces legibility, especially with small type.

roman
     Commonly refers to the upright version of a face within a font family, as compared to the italic version.

rule
     A solid or dashed graphic line in documents used to separate the elements of a page. Rules and other graphic devices should be used sparingly, and only for clarifying the function of other elements on the page.

sans serif
     A type face that does not have serifs. Generally a low-contrast design. Sans serif faces lend a clean, simple appearance to documents.

serif
     Small decorative strokes that are added to the end of a letter's main strokes. Serifs improve readability by leading the eye along the line of type.

style
     One of the variations in appearance, such as italic and bold, that make up the faces in a type family.

symbol
     A category of type in which the characters are special symbols rather than alpha numeric characters.

tabular figures
     Numerals which all have the same width. This makes it easier to set tabular matter.

tracking
     The average space between characters in a block of text. Sometimes also referred to as letter spacing.

TrueType
     A scalable type technology built into Windows 3.1 and Apple's System 7.

Type 1
     The international type standard for digital type, available on almost every computer platform. Originally invented by Adobe Systems, Type 1 is now the most commonly available digital type format and is used by professional digital graphic designers. More than 30,000 fonts are available in the Type 1 format.

typeface
     The letters, numbers, and symbols that make up a design of type. A typeface is often part of a type family of coordinated designs. The individual typefaces are named after the family and are also specified with a designation, such as italic, bold or condensed.

typeface family
     Also known as family. The collection of faces that were designed together and intended to be used together. For

example the Garamond font family consists of roman and italic styles, as well as regular, semibold and bold weights. Each of the style and weight combinations is called a face.

typographic color

The apparent blackness of a block of text. Color is a function of the relative thickness of the strokes that make up the characters in a font, as well as the width, point size and leading used for setting the text block.

unjustified

Depending on alignment, this term refers to text which is set flush left, flush right, or centered.

weight

The relative darkness of the characters in the various typefaces within a type family. Weight is indicated by relative terms such as thin, light, bold, extra-bold and black.

white space

The blank areas on a page where text and illustrations are not printed. White space should be considered an important graphic element in page design.

width

One of the possible variations of a typeface within a type family, such as condensed or extended.

word spacing

Adjusting the average distance between words to improve legibility or to fit a block of text into a given amount of space.

WYSIWYG

An acronym for what *you see is what you get*. The Macintosh provides a WYSIWYG screen display. What you see on the screen is what you will get on printed output, as accurately as the screen can render it.

x-height

Traditionally, x-height is the height of the lowercase letter x. It is also the height of the body of lowercase letters in a font, excluding the ascenders and descenders. Some lower-case letters that do not have ascenders or descenders still extend a little bit above or below the x-height as part of their design. The x-height can vary greatly from typeface to typeface at the same point size.