

Legibility: Legibility represents those qualities and attributes inherent in typography that make type readable. These attributes make it possible for a reader to comprehend typographic forms with the least amount of difficulty.

Legibility is the art of spatial synthesis.
As an art there is no absolute.

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“A written word is the choicest of relics.
It is something at once more intimate
with us and more universal than any
other work of art.”

- Henry David Thoreau

“A letter may not be considered apart from its kinsmen; it is a mere abstract and arbitrary form far remote from the original picture or symbol out of which it grew, and has no particular significance until it is employed to form part of a new word.”

- Frederic Goudy

The most legible typefaces embody those timeless characteristics upon which legibility is dependent:

Simplicity
Contrast
Proportion

These characteristics can be found within classic fonts such as Garamond, Bodoni and Baskerville for example.

Effective typography depends upon such factors as the communications context and the subtle adjustment of letterforms

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and their spatial relationships,

spatial relationships,
[relationships between and among letterforms]

each of which may have an effect upon how easily typography is read.

Characteristics of letterforms attribute greatly to legibility. Once an understanding is achieved of these differences, then legibility can begin to be controlled and directed.

vertical strokes

EFHILT

curved strokes

COQS

curved and vertical

BDGJPRU

oblique strokes

AKMNVWXYZ

Type that is similar in composition and shape tends to be visually confusing, leading to illegibility.

jail

sun

fail

gun

tail

bun

Legibility

The top portion of typography reveals greater variety of visual characteristics than the lower bottom portion.

l o n i b i l i t y

Typographic shape and internal pattern or counterform, are two extremely important considerations in dealing with issues of word recognition and legibility.

SHAPE

vs.

shape

Serif vs. Sans Serif

Serif vs sans serif type produces negligible results in a comparison of legibility.

Type that is set in all caps suffers a loss of legibility due to the significant number of vertical strokes. This is regarded as the most difficult legibility issue.

TEXT SET IN ALL CAPS USES AN EXTREMELY LARGE AMOUNT OF SPACE WHEN COMPARED TO LOWERCASE. AS MUCH AS 35 PERCENT MORE SPACE CAN BE CONSUMED WHEN USING ALL CAPITAL LETTERS.

Text set in lowercase forms words that are distinct, based upon their irregular word shape and internal patterns. A variety of letter shapes, ascenders and descenders provides rich contrasts that assures satisfactory perception and legibility.

Legibility: Type size, line length and interline spacing

Critical to spatial harmony and legibility is an understanding of the triadic relationship between type size, line length and interline spacing. When properly employed these variables can work together to improve legibility.

Type Size:

Type that is too small in general or too small for the application makes reading difficult. According to legibility research, the most legible point sizes (at normal reading distance) are between 9 and 12 point. X-heights and individual font characteristics always play a role also. When type is larger than 12 point, fixation pauses may occur. These are pauses where the eye is actually reading the word. At small sizes (smaller than 9 point) the internal patterns of a word tend to break down and become extremely active.

Line Length:

An appropriate line length is one that is suitable for reading. Overly short columns of text require the eye to change lines too often, not supplying enough horizontal cues, whereas overly long lines allow the reader's eye to become lost, making it difficult to find the next line.

Interline Spacing:

Proper interline spacing (leading) carries the eye from one line to the next. If lines are too widely spaced, the reader may have trouble locating the next line. Research has shown that for the optimum sizes of text (9-12 point), one to four points of leading can be added to increase legibility.

Big

small

For this point size the line length may be too long to guarantee best legibility and overall readability over time.
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Legibility: Weight, character width, italics

Type Weight:

A typeface that is too heavy or too light will have diminished legibility. Weight should be used to create contrast. This can be achieved when bold type is seen in relation to book. Extreme thick and thin strokes within letters also can make reading difficult. The effect of seeing the thicks and extreme thins together in a typeface is known as dazzle or sparkle. This is not a desirable effect!

Character Width:

Like weight, character width should be used in order to achieve contrast or work with a specific application. A narrow typeface may be used for small captions, to be used in narrow columns, etc. A narrow typeface becomes vertical in nature. The wider a typeface becomes, the less legible it is. The letters take on a horizontal quality that is not desirable.

Italics:

Italics can impede reading. Italics should be used to create contrast and should not be used to set an entire page of copy. Italics can be very effective as a means of providing visual emphasis.

Black type on a white background is always preferred.

White type on a black background is acceptable.

Gray type on a black background inhibits legibility.