

What The Font? – Understanding Typefaces On The Web

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Do you operate a website, send out electronic newsletters or e-mail campaigns? Have you ever experimented with the different fonts (typefaces) available? If you have, you probably discovered there are numerous fonts available on your computer – in some cases 100-200 or more. How then do you decide which font to use?

This article will give you a brief overview of choosing fonts for the internet, so that the next electronic piece of information you send achieves the desired effect.

Where the Font Do We Start?

First, even though there are thousands of fonts available to us, each computer usually only has a hundred or so installed for use. Different operating systems, and various other files or programs you obtain can install various fonts on your computer and add to that number. Those fonts are usually compatible across programs, meaning you will be able to use all of your system fonts in any program. Let's say your computer came pre-installed with 150 fonts. Then you bought a common software program that added 50 more fonts to your computer. You now have 200 fonts you will be able to use in any program that is designed to allow font selection.

Isn't that great? You instantly have more fonts to choose from. If you're working in print materials or graphics, then you actually do have the freedom to choose whatever fonts you want. However, if you are not printing the final version but instead delivering your material via the internet, whether it be on a website, by email, or any other type of electronic media, you don't actually have as much freedom as you may think. There are several factors to take into consideration that could influence your choice, including perception, usability and availability.

Perception.

The typeface that you select needs to accurately reflect the mood of your message. Do you want the tone conveyed to your reader to be formal or informal, friendly or serious, professional or playful? If the message is of a professional and formal nature, then your font should accurately portray that. But if the message is to a group of friends inviting them to a party, you can have a little fun and take a more informal approach with your fonts. Always consider the audience for which the piece is intended, and then choose a font that achieves the perception you desire.

Usability.

After you have established the intended audience for your message, make sure they can actually read it! Many fonts are hard to read simply because they are so small in size (like 8 point or 10 point). Cursive and italic fonts can be hard on the eyes and are strongly discouraged for the purposes of main bodies of text. Italics should only be used for emphasis or as graphical elements. You also don't want your font too large, as this can make it difficult for the eyes to scan across a large body of text. There are many fonts available intended specifically for headings and logo text that would be inappropriate for the main body of a message. To maximize usability, make sure to choose a font that is legible and easy on the eyes.

Availability.

This is the most easily overlooked aspect of font selection and can result in completely unexpected results. To insure the recipient sees the same message style you created, the fonts you use must be available on their computer. When you create a website for example, the HTML code will "call" the font that is supposed to be displayed. This tells your browser program what font it should display on that particular page. Even though you may have 200 fonts installed on your computer and you see your fonts fine and dandy, that doesn't mean that the person on the other end viewing your website has the exact same fonts as you. In a case where he doesn't, his browser will substitute a different font of its own choosing, which could completely change their perception of your intended message. At the very least, they may think you were sloppy in putting your material together. Email programs, and electronic newsletters, all work the same way. So bottom line, you need to use fonts that you are positive your entire web audience will have available on their computer. We call these "Web-Safe" fonts.

With thousands of fonts out there, you're probably thinking, "No big deal, there are still plenty of choices". Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but there are only 9. Yes, you read that correctly, there are only NINE web-safe fonts that you can be assured are on every single computer out there! Those fonts are Arial, Arial Black, Courier New, Comic Sans, Georgia, Impact, Tahoma, Times New Roman, Trebuchet, and Verdana. Let's take a couple of minutes to understand the differences in these fonts.

There are two basic types of fonts; serif or sans serif. Serif by definition has a fine line finishing off the main strokes of a letter, or letters may end with a rounded tip. And "sans" is a French term meaning "without", so in the case of sans serif it would be without those fine lines. The most common serif font is Times New Roman and the most common sans serif font is Arial, both of which are web-safe fonts. Of the nine web-safe fonts there are only 3 serif fonts; Courier New, Georgia and Times New Roman. Serif fonts in very small text sizes can be hard to read, therefore caution should be used when selecting those for small print.

Arial

(properly pronounced "are-ree-al")

Arial was introduced as the default typeface for Windows 3.1 when it was released by Microsoft in the early 1990s. It is not difficult to read unless used in very small sizes, and it is the most popular sans serif font today. It is however quite plain, and people tend to get bored of Arial because they see it everywhere. But, since it's so widely available, easy to read, and the default for Microsoft products, it is a great font to use for main content areas of your marketing materials, newsletters, websites, etc.

Arial Black

Arial Black is one of many versions of Arial, released with Internet Explorer 3. It is a bolder font than Arial and is great for headings and short sections of text that require emphasis.

Courier New

Courier New, a serif font, was primarily a font used in old typewriters. Not normally used as main bodies of text, it is still used to display code in documents or when the writer wants the old-fashioned typewriter look in their document.

Comic Sans

Comic Sans started shipping with Windows 95 as a preinstalled font. Designed to look like comic book lettering, the font was created for informal copy. Regarded today as unprofessional, this sans serif font is not recommended for materials of a professional nature. Comic Sans became a more popular font when it started being used as the text inside the tags on Beanie Babies!

Georgia

Georgia, a serif font, was created for Microsoft in 1993 to provide a clean font for use on the web that would display well even in small sizes. Georgia font letters are taller than most other web-safe fonts, making them easier to read when used in smaller sizes. Georgia is a great alternative when you're tired of traditional Times New Roman, but still want a serif font.

Impact

Impact is a very bold sans serif font. By its name, it was designed to impact the reader, and is therefore recommended

only for headings, small blocks of text, areas on the page that you want to grab the readers eye. Because of it's thick block style, Impact looks best when there is plenty of space around it otherwise it looks cluttered.

Tahoma

Tahoma, a very close cousin of Verdana, was designed in 1999 for Microsoft. It is so similar to Verdana that many don't see the difference in the fonts. Mainly, Tahoma keeps its lettering tighter so that text does not spread out as far as Verdana does. Tahoma is a great font option for those needing a sans serif font but who are getting bored of Arial.

Times New Roman

Times New Roman is the most widely used serif font, developed in 1931 for use by *The Times* newspaper in London. It has remained a very popular font for setting type in books, magazines, newspapers, etc. The U.S. State Department has been using Times New Roman 14 point on all diplomatic documents since 1994, replacing their old font of choice Courier New 12 point.

Trebuchet

(properly pronounced "treb-u-shet")

Trebuchet was designed in 1996 for Microsoft and is a popular sans serif font for those bored with the plain appearance of Arial. Having a definite style all its own, Trebuchet is easy to read for large or small type and works well for main bodies of text. Due to its unique styling though, it can be seen as a feminine font and if your audience is all men they may not relate well to that font.

Verdana

Verdana, designed for Microsoft in 1996 is probably the most easy to read web-safe sans serif font available. With its taller lettering, and more evenly spaced letters it can be easily read in larger sizes as well as small sizes. It does extend the width of text on a page, so it's great for filling design that have a lot of space with a small amount of copy.

What Font do YOU Want?

Now that you understand the differences between the 9 web-safe fonts, which one will you choose for your internet communications? If you're looking for a serif font, then Georgia is our recommendation. It is the clearest serif font on the web, since it was designed for just that purpose. If you are looking for a sans serif font, Verdana is the clearest on screen font for readability and is our number one recommendation, with good old Arial pulling up a close second.

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