



# ENGINE HOUSE BOOKS

## BOOK BITS #6

### ***TYPOGRAPHY***

Q: What exactly is “typography”?

A: Typography covers many of the visual aspects of book production, in particular those that are related to actual text of the book. So it covers, for example, obvious things such as the selection of a typeface and the size and spacing that are used. It also covers less-obvious aspects of the text, such as which ligatures are employed, whether text is set flush-right and/or ragged-bottom, how words are split across lines, whether widows and orphans are allowed. and other technical matters.

Q: Aren't all those items more-or-less standardized throughout the industry these days?

A: No, most of them are not, although it is certainly true that it is rare to come across a modern book with ragged right margins, and almost as rare to find one with ragged bottoms (except in the self-publishing world, where word processors are often coerced to perform as typesetters, with results that are either laughable or horrific, depending on one's point of view). But most other items are not standardized, even though, for at least some of them, there is little debate among professionals about which is the preferred layout.

Q: Let's go through some of the issues then, starting with typefaces. Are there some typefaces that are in some sense “better” for setting text?

A: Assuming that we are talking about novels (typesetting technical non-fiction, for example, is a different matter), it is generally agreed that the main text should use a serif typeface that is not too condensed. One can find occasional novels set in sans serif typefaces, but these are noticeably more work for the reader, especially for someone who reads quickly; large swaths of sans serif text are also prone to induce some rather odd optical illusions in the reader's mind. Probably the “best” typeface for novels is Garamond or one of its close relatives. It reads quickly and easily. Really, its only fault (if it can be called that) is that historically it has been used so frequently that a publisher wishing to pursue a distinctive “house look” would be forced to avoid its use simply because it is (or was) so common. We use a Garamond variant for our Engine House Classics precisely because it combines a classic look with easy readability.

Q: You mentioned that one should avoid typefaces that are “too condensed”. What do you mean by that?

A: The width of characters in a typeface is not standardized. Typefaces are typically designed for a particular purpose, and many of the more common ones were *not* designed for typesetting novels. In particular, typefaces such as Times New Roman and its ilk were designed to be used in newspapers (Times New Roman is based on Times Roman, which was a typeface used for many years by *The Times*). Because of the narrowness of newspapers columns, these typefaces have narrow characters, and do not



read easily when typeset in the widths used for the pages of books.

Q: You use a Garamond variant for Engine House Classics; what about your other books?

A: For those we use a family called Latin Modern. This is somewhat lighter than Garamond, and we think it has a feel that works well for typesetting modern novels, which tend to have more white space than older books. It also has a number of technical advantages: it was specifically designed for use on digital typesetting systems; it is available in a wide range of sizes; it has a reasonable number of ligatures; and it contains a large number of glyphs, so that we almost never have to switch to another typeface for the occasional rare character.

Q: Aren't all digital typefaces available “in a wide range of sizes”?

A: No. Simply scaling a font does not produce the same look as a typeface that is available in a number of sizes. Generally speaking, strokes are proportionately wider on smaller sizes, and serifs also tend to be larger. Some “font formats” (the files used to store font information) allow for changes in shape as a typeface changes size, but many do not. Even rarer is the capability to adjust kerning as a function of size. A typeface that is specifically created at multiple sizes is almost always noticeably more pleasant-looking than one that follows algorithmic rules to allow it to be rendered at different sizes.

Q: What, in your opinion, constitutes “good” typography?

A: Simply put, the absence of distractions. It's easier to define “bad” typography: if you notice the typography, it's probably bad. Typography should help the reader to read the text; if something about the typography distracts from that goal, then it is bad typography.

Q: What kinds of things can distract the reader?

A: To some extent, obviously that depends on the reader: some people are more easily distracted than others. Apart from an inappropriate typeface, probably the distractions that are most common are: bad hyphenation; poor kerning and unnecessary widows and orphans. There are plenty of others, but those seem to be the common ones.

Q: Surely these days books are typeset by computer, and the programs should eliminate these and other problems?

A: To some extent, yes. Kerning information is usually included as part of the digital font, so if the kerning is distracting, most of the blame can be placed on the creator of the font (although some remains with the publisher, who should not have used that font, or should have overwritten the kerning information). Other than that, though, it is correct that software is used to determine how the text is laid out on a page. Good software can eliminate the vast majority of issues, but even the best software will leave a few residual problems that must be resolved by hand. Unfortunately, many publishers use software that is not particularly good, leading to pages that are noticeably sub-optimal. Also, few publishers nowadays keep professional typographers on staff, so the few errors that appear in the output of even the best typesetting software almost always go uncorrected.

*To be continued in a later Book Bits*

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