Taking Up Space

Big little letters

I am regularly asked, "How and when do I use small caps?"

To the novice, small caps are littler (usually about 70%) versions of real capital letters, the height of a lower case "x" for that typeface. They are used selectively to add emphasis and bring sophistication and elegance without interrupting or changing the text or the tone of your words. They offer an interesting alternative to bold or italicized text within the body of your text. Try using them for book titles, dates (for example A.D. 1066), educational degrees (for example, MA and BS), acronyms (for example, AIDS and NASA), honourary titles and the like. Small caps are also used for when all capital letters would just be too much. I have also used them recently after a larger initial capital to make a transition from the initial cap into the body copy.

Okay, so, the typeface I like using doesn't have small caps. What do I do now? Well, in my humble opinion, manufactured—making smaller versions of all capital letters—are unreal because they are often too thin and too light. These fakes lack the width that real small caps have.

Some other notes on using small caps.

- It is best to use actual small caps from the typeface you are using. If your typeface has real small caps, it might be included in the "Expert" collection and will appear as an option on the type menu.
- If you start to use small caps in a publication, make sure you use them all the way through. Consistency is very important to the reader.
- Since small caps lack any descenders—the parts of a letterform, like for the letter g or p, that go below the portion of the line that the text rests on—you can also use them for headlines.
- When you capitalize a small cap, it goes above the line a little bit. This emphasis should cue the reader that the word is a proper noun.
- Another good use for small caps is for table headings.
- Try using small caps as a teaser to introduce a paragraph. Put the first sentence in small caps and the rest of the story in regular upper and lower case.