Taking Up Space

Taking Up Space is an occasional column written on graphic design issues by Brian Grebow, BG Communications.

Character analysis

Perplexed by the plethora of computer typefaces (or fonts) now readily available? You're not alone in your confusion. This month we tackle some font basics.

Type, like other elements of design, can affect your document's chances of being read or understood. Unattractive type may turn people off before they even start to read; type that lacks legibility, however attractive, may cause readers to give up before your message can sink in. Type can even reinforce an image you're trying to convey.

These three factors—type's attractiveness, readability, and "personality"—create a powerful but sometimes subtle synergy that can work for or against you. Here are a few readability-related do's and don'ts.

1. Use only one or two fonts per document.

Resist the temptation to flaunt every font your printer can produce. A page teeming with typefaces appears unpleasantly busy to readers. Adjusting elements like size, weight (boldness), case (caps or upper-and-lower), and slant (italics) can yield plenty of visual variety from even a single font.

2. Choose your font(s) prudently.

Most designers recommend a serif font, like the one you're reading now, for body text. The little feet on the letters guide the eye along and make characters easier to recognize. "Sans-serif" faces, though cleaner-looking, work best in smaller doses: save them for headings, captions, and the like. (You *can* get away with a sans-serif face in a newsletter or brochure laid out in narrow columns, but only by adding some extra space between lines.)
This is serif type
This is sans-serif type.

Print out a sample paragraph of each font you're considering at the size, line length, and line spacing (or leading) you plan to use. Even at the same size,

some fonts look significantly larger or airier than others: compare, for example, Bookman and Times Roman.
Bookman: Sometimes I feel that I'm
on the information service road.
Times Roman: Sometimes I feel that I'm
on the information service road.

3. Limit capitals, boldface, and italics.

Research shows that we read "all-caps" text at least 40% more slowly. Extensive passages in boldface or italics also give readers trouble. Reserve these styles for brief bursts (generally less than one line long): headings, or short items you want to emphasize in the text.

4. Use "display" fonts sparingly and carefully.

Fonts that look like handwriting, or are otherwise highly decorative or unusual, can grab readers' attention or evoke a mood, image, or tone. *Never* use these fonts for running text, however. Their readability is severely compromised at regular text sizes (between 9 and 12 points). Some consist only of capital letters, another block to readability, as we just learned. And all, by definition, call lots of attention to themselves. Readers, distracted by the flashy font, lose track of what you're saying.

Much depends, of course, on your document's goals (are you instructing people, as with a manual, or trying to influence them, as with a promotional piece?) and its intended audience (children and senior citizens, for example, may find larger type more accessible).