

# Good reading



# Against obscure typography

by Nick Shinn

Let's not confuse ethics and aesthetics; ugly can be good, beauty can be bad. Performance matters more than looks.

Ugly typography doesn't upset me. Quite the opposite, it intrigues me, because I know that while some ugliness is just plain ugly, there is another kind which is, if not *misunderstood*, then *not yet* understood. Anyway, what is ugly?—tastes differ. That's why a new aesthetic looks nasty, viewed from within the cocoon of one's preferences. As Rilke said,

Works of art are of an infinite solitariness, and nothing is less likely to bring us near to them than criticism. Only love can apprehend and hold them, and can be just toward them.

It's not enough to understand what's unfamiliar, you have to learn to love it. Ouch. (It is a mistake to settle for the cheap trick of designing something messy and trying to pass it off as hip. Sure, the New always looks anarchistic and scary at first, but that doesn't magically put everything ugly on the leading edge.)

What upsets me is type that is hard to read—it's professionally unethical. Writing deserves more respect. It doesn't matter what the copy is, you shouldn't dis the printed word, the *sine qua non* of the culture. There should be some kind of Hippocratic oath that designers take to not obscure the text.

The question is not whether type looks good, but what it does for the text. Good typography is not determined by aesthetics or style; you can just as easily find it on a flyer for a pizza chain as in a blue-chip annual report.

## ETHICAL TYPOGRAPHY

Worthy typography is good because it respects the text, making it inviting, easy, and a pleasure to read, and because it helps clarify and organize the copy, clearly revealing the substance of its meaning. This applies as equally to a product price "\$2.99" in a

(left) This headline stands out well against the interference of the background photo because the type is large, because it is sans serif, and because the image is blurred. The vogue for selective-focus photography with a shallow depth of field comes in very useful!

catalogue as it does to a paragraph in a prize-winning novel.

There are numerous ways to produce bad typography, and no one is immune. Getting all the elements in a design to work together can be fiendishly complex, and nobody can throw strikes all the time.

Good typography is legible, readable, correctly marked, and prominent. Here's why.

## LEGIBILITY

Is the signal clear? It wouldn't matter quite so much if everyone in the population was a fluent reader with perfect eyesight. But we're not; 22% of Canadians have serious difficulties with any type of printed material, and a further 26% struggle with all but the simplest reading and writing tasks (StatsCan, 1996).

Once people reach their mid-40s, most need reading glasses or bifocals, which are a real hassle. You find that your ability to focus varies. It's not simply a matter of type size—clarity is important too. On the following page are some examples of factors that adversely affect legibility, with some fixes.

## READABILITY

This is quite different from legibility. A piece of typography may be perfectly legible, with clear and distinct characters and words, but nonetheless be an inefficient chore to read. Result: the reader quickly loses interest and quits.

Again, there are examples over the page.

The two most practical books on readability that I have come across are *Ogilvy on Advertising*, by über-adman David Ogilvy (Wiley, 1983), and *Type and Layout* (Strathmoor Press, revised 1995) by Colin Wheildon, which has a particularly sobering message for designers. Wheildon scientifically tested readers' comprehension (i.e. how many of the copy points they recalled) of advertisements with varied typographic treatments. He found that many designers' choices of aesthetic options are poor at getting the message across. For instance, setting a headline entirely in capital letters cuts comprehension by as much as 20 per cent. He also found that body text which is set in a serif typeface is five

**Legibility.** Think of yourself as an information engineer. Maximize the signal-to-noise ratio, reduce interference, and fine-tune the amplitude of your message: make sure they get it.

Gutenberg's bibles are the archetype of the unmarked text, the text in which the words on the page "appear to speak for themselves" without the visible intervention of author or printer...the literary text is the single grey block of undisturbed text, seeming, in the graphic sense, to have appeared whole and complete.

Gutenberg's bibles are the archetype of the unmarked text, the text in which the words on the page "appear to speak for themselves" without the visible intervention of author or printer...the literary text is the single grey block of undisturbed text, seeming, in the graphic sense, to have appeared whole and complete.

**Background noise.** This type that surprints a busy background needs help. A good place to start is by choosing a background that has an even tone, is out of focus, and/or is either light or dark in tone — mid tones reduce tonal contrast with the type. This one isn't easy.

- a) Gutenberg's bibles are the archetype of the unmarked text...
- b) Gutenberg's bibles are the archetype of the unmarked text...**
- c) Gutenberg's bibles are the archetype of the unmarked text...

**Pump up the signal.** Plain text (a) is dull without tonal contrast—readers will soon quit. Using an extra bold weight (b) is counter-productive, because the letterforms are obscured by the thick strokes, and the longer it goes on, the more oppressive it becomes. A medium or bold weight (c) works best, with some added tracking. Best of all—lighten the background!

**Use white text,** it stands out best against a 4-color image. There is always some contrast between the lack of ink in the type and the image, whereas even the moderately dark areas of a scan may have ink coverage of over 200%, which is quite a hurdle.

**Use sans serif:** with knocked-out type even the slightest misregistration or over-inking can trash the fine details of serifed type.

**Apply a black drop shadow.** In Quark, select the text box then > Item > Step and Repeat, with an offset of around 0.25 pts.

In Illustrator, you can put a keyline all around the type: > Type > Create outlines, then > Filter > Objects > Offset path.

Gutenberg's bibles are the archetype of the unmarked text, the text in which the words on the page "appear to speak for themselves" without the visible intervention of author or printer...the literary text is the single grey block of undisturbed text, seeming, in the graphic sense, to have appeared whole and complete.

**Don't discriminate** against those with less than perfect vision, or poor literacy. They may want to read the copy.

times more likely to be thoroughly understood than text that is set in a sans serif typeface!

### MARKED AND UNMARKED TEXT

This concerns the question of manners, of typographic behaviour appropriate to context.

In *The Visible Word*, (University of Chicago, 1994) Johanna Drucker distinguishes between marked and unmarked text:

Gutenberg's bibles are the archetype of the unmarked text, the text in which the words on the page "appear to speak for themselves" without the visible intervention of author or printer...the literary text is the single grey block of undisturbed text, seeming, in the graphic sense, to have appeared whole and complete.

Any text assumes a reader and marks that assumption to some extent. [Unmarked texts] attempt to efface the traces of that assumption. The marked text by contrast aggressively situates the reader...with manipulative utilization of the strategies of graphic design.

While Drucker clearly associates the unmarked text with literature and the marked text with advertising, it's safe to say that the same distinction exists between editorial and advertising text. Going further, there are two kinds of advertising text, recognized as early as 1917 by Gilbert P. Farrar in *Typography of Advertising that Pays* (Appleton) as the Forceful Educational Style (marked) and the Passive Educational Style (unmarked), described thus:

When there are no headlines, the reader reads the entire advertisement or he does not read any part of it, and this very fact causes the copy to get a reading from the better class of readers.

Ultimately, the distinction between marked and unmarked is

between display type and body type. Display type warrants some special consideration, some mark of the typographer's discrimination in choosing an interesting typeface, custom set to please the reader's fancy. Body type should be unmarked, so as not to disturb readers once they settle into it—although in longer text lightly marked subheadings are useful to stop them from nodding off.

Pre-digital, these distinctions were institutionalized within trade typesetting companies; display type was carefully set from detailed masters—you paid more for it, by the word, and you wanted it to look smart. Text type was set by the galley. But in digital production, the same master is generally used for all sizes, with every size open to the same treatments, manipulations and potential abuses.

The error in headlines is to use types not specifically created for this purpose, with no special attention. But in truth, this is not quite such a crime as to overelaborate a text setting.

The trick with typography is to give it the appropriate amount of attention, or marking. If you don't give it enough, you may end up with great "creative", but the type will be mush. For instance, many of today's high concept ads feature big, spectacular imagery, with a small headline somewhere off-centre and the body copy all in one paragraph, running in a strip of sans serif type across the bottom of the page. It's one way to get the layout to work, and it hypes the image, but the unmarked appearance of the headline is unmemorable (when they're that small, all typefaces look pretty much the same) and the body text is uninteresting and hard to read with so many words per line. If these ads are

**Readability.** Face the facts: any text setting other than black, serifed type on a white background results in reduced readership. But if your clients don't mind you fooling around, this will help:

Gutenberg's bibles are the archetype of the unmarked text, the text in which the words on the page "appear to speak for themselves" without the visible intervention of author or printer...the literary text is the single grey block of undisturbed text, seeming, in the graphic sense, to have appeared whole and complete.

**Watch line length.** Reading is a physical activity, and 40 to 50 characters per line is most ergonomic. Anything else reduces readership (exceptions: letters and books, where all other variables such as leading and typeface are optimized). If you must use long lines, shine some light into the dull grey text blocks with plenty of leading: here, Trade Gothic Condensed is set 8/11.

Gutenberg's bibles are the archetype of the unmarked text, the text in which the words on the page "appear to speak for themselves" without the visible intervention of author or printer...the literary text is the single grey block of undisturbed text, seeming, in the graphic sense, to have appeared whole and complete.

**Vary typefaces.** Burgers every day—that's what it's like to be continually bludgeoned with utilitarian sans serif faces like Trade Gothic, Helvetica, Meta, Thesis, Interstate, Officina, Myriad, DIN and Verdana (all so serious, so corporate, so masculine). Give the reader a break! There are thousands of typefaces to choose from. Here is Sari, 7.5/10.

GUTENBERG'S BIBLES ARE THE ARCHETYPE OF THE UNMARKED TEXT, THE TEXT IN WHICH THE WORDS ON THE PAGE "APPEAR TO SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES" WITHOUT THE VISIBLE INTERVENTION OF AUTHOR OR PRINTER...THE LITERARY TEXT IS THE SIN-

**Avoid all-cap settings.** They are harder to read because the word forms are all rectangular. Never use them for text. Scripts are also something people won't read for very long.

(a) Gutenberg's bibles are the archetype of the unmarked text...  
(b) Gutenberg's bibles are the archetype of the unmarked text...

**Careful with color.** Saturated colors look fine on a CRT screen, but can be ghastly on a flat monitor or in print. Sample (a) was great in RGB, but the pure G translates to a muddy 77C/100Y. If you must use reversed, colored type (remember, both reduce readership), think CMYK values. In (b), figure and ground both have 10C/80Y values, the difference being a crisp 100M.

Gutenberg's bibles are the archetype of the unmarked text.

**Check printed samples.** Bauer Bodoni may look okay on screen and in proofs, but at small sizes its serifs are too fine for many to discern.

any indication of the status quo in ad agencies, there appears to be a systemic disrespect for copywriters.

The opposite way designers can screw up is by paying too much attention to the type, by putting too much marking where it doesn't belong—in text type. In fact, professionally overdesigned typography is the worst of graphic sins because it is vanity, a showing off that gets between the reader and the text. Or perhaps it is sloth; if the design as a whole isn't working, just tart up the text with some eye candy. But perhaps a certain amount of forgiveness may be in order if one's presentation is looking rather dull and the deadline is looming.

### TYPOGRAPHY GONE MISSING

"Brand" is the buzzword, and we are infatuated with the wizardry of our imagineering. So there are many ads these days that don't have much copy. And with the trend to tiny type, the copywriter's work frequently gets reduced to the status of a caption or footnote. Consumers respond intuitively to the brand imagery and buy on gut feeling, not because they are convinced by a reasoned, typeset argument.

Quite possibly the present recession has been brought about not by the termination of Napster and the resultant over-abundance of bandwidth, but by an epidemic of lapsed typography in advertisements, as art directors have lost interest in it and the prominence of headlines has shrunk. David Ogilvy noted:

Some headlines are 'blind.' They don't say what the product is or what it will do for you. They are about 20% below average in recall. Since head-

lines, more than anything else, decide the success or failure of an advertisement, the silliest thing of all is to run an ad without any headline at all — 'a headless wonder.'

Ogilvy was somewhat biased, his prodigious strength as a writer having powered his creation of one of the world's largest agencies, and he worked in an era when print advertising was aggressively literate.

But it makes one wonder (the human condition being what it is) whether we have so lost touch with the printed word that headlines have become insignificant to the success or failure of advertisements. Surely not, for ads still appear in publications with fully-equipped editorial typography which presumably the subscriber intends to read. I suspect the reason that "blind" ads have low recall is that there is a part of the brain that we have trained from an early age to remember the appearance of words; if high profile typography reinforces branding on supermarket shelves, why not in advertising?

The ad fad is that of non-font lettering, Photoshopped type, tiny type, and copy-reduced ads—in short, anti-typography. Anything that looks remotely like type on paper is shunned (unless it's a photo/rendering of deep-bite letterpress printing).

How long can such trickery survive in this new, post-ironic era? It must already be on the way out. Enter Bembo, big. ☹

*Nick Shinn, R.G.D. is an art director/graphic designer and the proprietor of Shinn Design. He also designs and publishes typefaces through ShinnType, tel. (416) 769-4198, e-mail nick@shinntype.com, Web www.shinntype.com.*