

The Essentials of Font Philosophy

Contributed by Jason Lee Miller | Courtesy of WebProNews
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The Essentials of Font Philosophy by Jason Lee Miller | Courtesy of WebProNews I'm prejudiced against certain fonts. Like others, I'm a product of my environment; I was raised to believe that fonts with tails were superior to fonts without. Serifs (the little tails) have personality (even chutzpa!) that draws the reader in, satisfying his need for connectivity and deeper comprehension. No tails, no soul. You've no doubt noticed the font of this article is lacking in the tail department (no junk in the trunk they say). That's because the general consensus on the Web is that sans-serif fonts are better for reading from computer screens. As it takes about 25 percent longer to read from a screen than it does from paper, sans-serif fonts, like Arial, Helvetica, and Verdana, reduce the drag. No tails make it faster and easier to read. The back lighted and pixilated monitor isn't so great at handling artsy little details. The government knows the wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am personality of the sans-serif font (which, in my opinion, makes it deserve the vulgar "font" label). Road signs use it for quick message delivery. Newspapers too, for eye-grabbing and quickly processed headlines. But notice that beneath the neatly efficient headline, the article itself has a healthy collection of happy little tails from Times New Roman or Georgia fontification (don't look that up, it's what we call a neologism). The philosophy behind this is that the serif fonts guide the reader into an understanding of the piece as a whole. Words are not to be objectified by breaking them down into soldiered rows of individual letters. They are meant to be digested holistically, and serifs are the connectors that slow the reader down just long enough for greater comprehension. Studies show that reading comprehension is greater when serif fonts are used. However, studies with children may be more indicative of the truth of the matter: children in the early reading stages showed no benefit either way. People are better at reading what they are used to reading. As a writer, I'm snooty about the subject. I want you to feel the words, the tone, the heart of it-and the tails provide that. As a Web designer, though, you may (and should) disagree. This is a matter of optimizing content for the pixilated universe. To reward you for making it this far, here's a few good rules for font use online and off. A Fonting Guide To Web Design Use sans-serif fonts for web pages. They are cleaner, faster, and less fatiguing. This is also important because of the very short amount of time you have to make an impression on new visitors. Think in terms of road signs to get them to STOP. Visitors only need one-twentieth of a second to form an impression. What applies to fonts doesn't apply to margins (white space). Though pages with smaller margins read faster than pages without, the disorder the lack of margins causes is stressful for the reader. In this situation, clean outweighs speed. Besides, speed takes away from comprehension. Not all sans-serif fonts are created equal. While one study shows that the font Impact can be viewed as assertive, rigid, rude, sad, unattractive, and coarse, another says that people generally prefer Verdana overall. Offline, It's Georgia On My Mind While Times New Roman is the standard, people seem to love Georgia. One study crowned the Georgia font as the most attractive, but Phil Renaud's informal review of essay grades shows that the font may have a greater impact than you think. Renaud believes the Georgia font earned better marks for him than TNR, and especially better marks than for papers printed in Trebuchet. The moral of his story is the same as the moral of ours: use san-serif online, serif for print. On his list of other untested hypotheses, Renaud believes "Myspace users are twice as likely to be arrested for embarrassing things than the general population."