

Parts and Categories of Type

There are several technical terms you can use to describe and categorize fonts. Many of these terms stem from a time when type was hand-written using wedge-tipped pens. All of these terms describe parts of a font that give the eye visual clues to decoding the letters while reading.



- Serifs are the flares at the ends of the letters.
- The baseline is a line upon which the bottom of the main body of each letter rests.
- X-height refers to the height of the main body of the lowercase letters.
- Ascenders are the parts of letters that rise above the x-height.
- Descenders are the parts of the letters that drop below the baseline.
- Weight is the thickness of line in the font.
- The thick/thin transition is the change in curved portions of a letter from a thick line to a thin one.
- The stress is the angle of a line between the thinnest parts of the curved strokes.

Using these terms you can analyse and categorize fonts when you see them. Here we describe six categories into which most type can be placed; Oldstyle, Modern, Slab Serif, Sans Serif, Script, and Decorative.

Oldstyle	Modern
Slab Serif	Sans Serif
<i>Script</i>	DECORATIVE

Oldstyle

- based on the hand lettering of scribes
- always have serifs and the serifs of lower case letters are always at an angle
- all curved strokes have a transition from thick to thin
- if you draw a line through the thinnest parts of the curved strokes, the line is diagonal - this is called the "stress", oldstyle has a diagonal stress.
- make good body text
- easy to read and hard to distinguish from each other

Modern

- type becomes more mechanical due to more sophisticated printing techniques
- modern typefaces have serifs, but are horizontal serifs instead of slanted, and they are very thin
- severe structure, radical thick/thin transition
- no evidence of the slant of the pen, stress is perfectly vertical
- cold, elegant look
- good for headlines

Slab Serif

- advertisers took modern typefaces and made the thicks thicker
- little or no thick/thin transition
- serifs are thick and horizontal
- highly readable
- present an overall darker page
- often used in children's books because of their clean, straightforward look

Sans Serif

- “sans” means “without”, so sans serif typefaces are those without serifs on the ends of the strokes.
- almost “monoweight”, there is no visible thick/thin transition
- letterforms are the same thickness all the way around.

Script

- all typefaces that appear to have been handlettered with a calligraphy pen or brush, or sometimes with a pencil or technical pen
- scripts can connect or not connect, look like hand printing, emulate traditional calligraphic styles
- use scripts sparingly
- can be very dramatic when mixed with plain text

DECORATIVE

- fonts are ornamentals
- They are never used as body text.
- They often include symbols or flairs that convey specific information or emotions.
- Use them carefully
- can carry obvious emotion, carry connotation

Sans & Serifs Exercise

1. Match the category with the typeface:

Oldstyle
Modern
Slab serif
Sans serif
Script
Decorative

2. Do the following typeface have:
a. Moderate thick/thin transitions
b. Radical thick/thin transitions
c. No (or negligible) thick/thin transitions

Higgle
Wiggle
Diggle
Piggle
Jiggle
Giggle

3. Do the lowercase letters in the examples below have:
a. Thin, horizontal serifs
b. Thick, slabby horizontal serifs
c. No serifs
d. Slanted serifs

Higgle
Wiggle
Diggle
Piggle
Jiggle
Giggle

Oldstyle	Modern
Slab Serif	Sans Serif
<i>Script</i>	DECORATIVE