Criteria for legibility of the body copy

Large counters

High x-height

Typography

Strong appearance

Distinguished serifs

Ten steps to better legibility for your body copy

By Reinhard Albers

Everybody knows, newspaper typefaces require a higher legibility then typefaces used for other printed products. They are printed on a paper of lesser quality under high speed and should still be strong enough to carry all the information. Check if your typeface will do this:

1. Ideal newspaper body copy typefaces

Of course serif typefaces are easier to read then sans serif fonts. The best ones are still to be found in the group of Transitional Style typefaces. Sans serif typefaces can be used in headlines and other titles, and of course in all secondary information where they create a much-welcomed contrast to the soft appearance of classic serif typefaces.

2. The right size

Don't go under 9 pt. As a basic rule this is not far off, but more important is the visual impact. A smaller type size can look much bigger, and bigger can leave a small impression. For example, the typeface "Gulliver" by Gerard Unger looks big, even when printed in small sizes.

3. The leading

The leading, or distance between the lines, depends on the characteristics of a specific typeface. Especially its x-height. Large ascender height and a small x-height calls for less leading, while a small ascender height,

combined with a high x-height, needs more space between the lines. Most layout software suggests 20% of the type size. This is a relative number and should be avoided, since it does not take into account the individual design of the typeface. And, of course, ascenders and descenders should not touch each other.

4. Column width

Since most body copy is set justified, the ideal column width is one that does not create unnecessary hyphenations and unwanted word spacing. A good number to look for is around 35 characters per line.

5. Hyphenation

Hyphenation is an important tool for a legible body copy. Words with less then six characters should not be separated. In many languages it is sensible to choose two letters to separate the first syllable. Also, the last word in a paragraph should not be hyphenated.

6. Individual change of typefaces

In addition to the setting for hyphenation routines and justification, the variations in the scaling of fonts, and consequently the kerning of text type, belong to the most serious dangers to the legibility of the text. Some sumptuously transitional typefaces can be kerned up to minus/plus 3%, but they are the exception.

7. Baseline grid

Working with the baseline grid means

more work for the editor, but an overall improvement for the legibility. All text lines that are set on one baseline give a clean look while text that is not set in such a way tends to give the impression of dancing lines. And this distracts the reader's eye.

8. Change of type styles

All you need is bold and italic to put a highlight in your text. Bold is visually strong, italic is visually silent. All other changes of the typeface that can be traced back to a so-called alteration in style by a computer are to be avoided. In such cases the original text is mathematically changed without taking into account the graphic consequences.

9. Color

The most legible contrast is provided by black on white printing on newspaper stock. Colored typefaces reduce this contrast and slow down the reading process, no matter how attractive they seem to be. This rule applies for all regular and italic typefaces. The only possible combination of body copy and color is with a bold font, which gives a nice contrast to the otherwise black-and-white typography.

10. Column alignment

Under the terms of legibility there are only two possible ways of body copy alignment: Justified and flush left alignment. Centered and flush right alignment should not be used in roman languages because of the different starting point of each line, which makes it difficult for the eye to jump from line to line.

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X-height – same size, different appearance

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