

# RESTORATION *By Jim Parkinson, Typedesign.com*

## Blackletter VS Roman

Blackletter is the typographic term for letter-styles commonly referred to as Gothic. From the mid-1700s onward, American newspaper nameplates have been set either in Blackletter or Roman in roughly equal parts. Roman, commonly perceived as the newer style is actually older by maybe 2,000 years. Whether Blackletter or Roman, newspapers rarely change from one style to the other. But, rather, they choose to evolve their existing style. Stan Nelson, the Curator of the Graphic Arts Collection at the Smithsonian attributes the survival of Blackletter to the fact that it connotes authority, dignity and tradition.

## Typographic fashion

Typographic style evolves just as fashion in clothing or automobile design. All fashion, in fact. When a typographic symbol begins to look old and stale, it needs to move forward to command attention. Not only newspapers, but most big companies do this.

## Timelessness

While a typographic symbol needs to appear current, it must not be in faddish styles. It needs to appear both fresh and new and at the same time appear as though it's always been there. A neat trick, involving subtle character changes. I have done a number of these kind of nameplate updates.

The image shows the original nameplate for the San Francisco Chronicle. The main title 'San Francisco Chronicle' is written in a highly decorative, blackletter Gothic font. Below it, the subtitle 'THE CITY'S ONLY HOME-OWNED NEWSPAPER' is written in a smaller, simpler, all-caps serif font.

**Chronicle logo:** This nameplate served the Chronicle for about a half a century, until the mid 1960s. It has a hand-lettered crudeness and many Victorian affectations:

The image shows a redesigned version of the San Francisco Chronicle nameplate. The main title 'San Francisco Chronicle' is now in a cleaner, more modern blackletter font with less decorative flourishes. The subtitle 'THE CITY'S ONLY HOME-OWNED NEWSPAPER' is still present in the same smaller serif font.

**This redesign, the current nameplate,** was introduced in the mid 1960s. It has been nearly another half century. Lots of things change in fifty years. Look out the window. To make matters worse, while introduced in the 60s, this version has a fifties typographic sensibility, so it was already old-looking on the day it debuted. Add a half century... time for a course correction.

The image shows the proposed restored nameplate for the San Francisco Chronicle. It features the main title 'San Francisco Chronicle' in a blackletter font that is a refined version of the original, with improved letter spacing and consistent character weights. The subtitle 'THE CITY'S ONLY HOME-OWNED NEWSPAPER' remains in the same smaller serif font.

**The current proposal restores dignity and authority to the nameplate.**

Two qualities any publication might wish to project. There are less angles and more curves. It carries more weight. It is uncomplicated. The letter spacing and the consistent character weights are an improvement over both the previous versions. While it is still Blackletter, the subtle changes throughout give it a more contemporary appeal. It should last for a couple decades. And it is connected to the history of the publication.