

SMALL CAPS

My first question is about the interaction between rules for capitalization and small caps. In §3.2.2 of your book it states that “for abbreviations and acronyms in the midst of normal text, use small caps”. However, there is no discussion of what should be done for abbreviations or acronyms that are not in the “midst”, but perhaps at the beginning of a sentence. And indeed, my colleagues have asked me about is whether it is appropriate to start a sentence with a word in small caps. For example, a colleague asked me whether it should be “NATO’s Counter-Insurgency Operations are ...” or “NATO’s Counter-Insurgency Operations are ...” or even “NATO’s Counter-Insurgency Operations are ...”? It is perhaps a less than ideal example because it may be reasonable at this time to treat NATO as a proper noun. Regardless, my suggestion to colleagues has been that the abbreviation or acronym could be expanded when used as the first word of a sentence, but it is not clear whether that is always desirable.

USING TYPEFACES SEMANTICALLY

There seems to be some disagreement among my colleagues on whether it makes sense to use distinct typefaces to introduce semantics distinctions. I know you recommend not using more typefaces than is necessary, but in this case it seems that perhaps understanding of typeset material can be enhanced by making it easier to distinguish between elements that appear in prose. Especially when color printing, for example, is not an option.

A common example of this is arises when using the \LaTeX typesetting system. The system itself makes a distinction between text that is prose and text that is mathematics. By default, it uses the same numbers in prose as in mathematics. But many people like to use Zapf’s AMS Euler typeface. Zapf designed a very beautiful set of numbers for this typeface, attempting to evoke a handwritten mathematical feel. However, a common objection I hear is whether in a sentence like “Figure 1 shows a proof that $1 + 1 = 2$ ” it is really appropriate to introduce a visual distinction between numbers in prose and numbers in mathematics. Furthermore, there is also the complication that Euler does not provide text figures, or whether it is appropriate to use text figures in mathematical statements.

Another instance of this problem is that in computer science we often face the problem of typesetting program fragments. A typical solution is to use a monospaced font for program text in an attempt to emulate the feel of how the program would look on a terminals and calls out when a word or phrase is being used semantically as a bit of a computer program. Fewer computer scientists tend to object to this practice. It can get even more complicated, however, as sometimes it is necessary to make even more refined semantic distinctions in a program fragment. One solution I have used in such a case is to revert to a proportional typeface and use a boldfaced serif font and a sans serif font to distinguish between two semantically distinct portions of a program fragment.

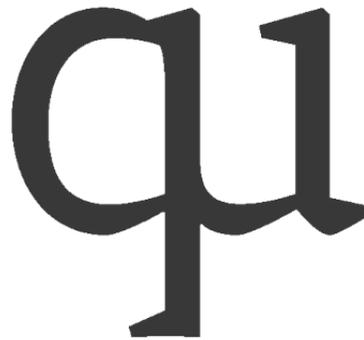
Do you have an opinion on these practices?

ADOPTING FOREIGN PUNCTUATION

A somewhat more unusual idea that I have experimented with is the use of guillemets for quotation in English prose, or more generally the use of alternate delimiting punctuation. I first considered this after encountering Zapf's use of guillemets in some of his English language texts. I may be the exception, but I found his use of German Guillemets more visually appealing and less distracting than English Quotation marks. Assuming one does not take a prescriptivist view, it seems fair to allow some typographic experimentation. At least I am not aware of any research that quotation marks are definitively more legible than any other choice of punctuation. Most people have told me that Zapf can get away with it being German, and that it would be too eccentric for me in my works. Is there any merit to this idea, other than perhaps artistic preference?

THE INTRODUCTION OF NEW LIGATURES

Your discussion of ligatures (§3.3.1) seems to suggest that ligatures should generally be restricted to those necessary for the typeface, and any others should be considered discretionary for artistic purposes. Do you have any opinions on developing new ligatures when they seem sensible? For example, 'qu' in English seems like an obvious choice. In nearly every English word, excepting those derived from another language or as part of an abbreviation or acronym, 'qu' are grouped together. A relative of mine that speaks Norwegian, where double vowels are collapsed with a diacritical, suggested going even further and using 'q̄' with a diacritical because 'qu' is also almost always followed by a vowel.



I am certainly not the first person to think about this. I found the above example after a few minutes of searching. It is from the typeface Andralis, designed by Rubén Fontana of Argentina.

TYPOGRAPHY FOR OTHER MEDIA (BY CHRISTOPHER LEAGUE)

In magazines and other contexts, sometimes sidebars and pull quotes are set with colors reversed: white (or light) text on a dark background. Some typographers recommend that extra leading and possibly letterspacing be used to improve legibility in this case. This is presumably because the ‘natural order’ is for the letter forms to be produced with dark ink on light paper.

In the section of your book on pixels (§9.5.1), you point out that computer screens work differently; they “bombard the eye with light,” rather than rely on reflected light. Just as blank paper is nearly white, an unplugged monitor is nearly black. Thus, I suspect that the ‘natural order’ for computer screens is precisely the reverse: light text on a dark background. Indeed, this is the way the first ‘glass teletypes’ worked, though I suspect it was more for economic reasons than aesthetic ones.

When designing visual aids for a presentation – to be displayed on a monitor or with a projector – would you recommend bright text on a dark background? It seems to make sense, but my perception is that it is still easier to read dark text on a light background. I am not sure why. Perhaps with projectors, the overriding concern is to throw as much light onto the screen as possible, to make the entire slide brighter. The best way to do that is a white background.

More generally, I am interested in how to adapt the principles of fine typography to media other than ink and paper. It is tempting to give up and insist that anything worth reading at length must be printed onto paper. But I find it more productive to explore the various ways that these formats differ, and how each might influence typographic decisions. Eventually, digital displays will become more paper-like, but for now I see two dimensions of difference: the resolution, and the use of projected vs. reflected light.

Perhaps it is all thought experiment for now, but we can imagine a 300 DPI computer monitor. This approaches the resolution of low-end laser printers, and would improve tremendously the appearance of serifs, thin strokes, and subtle curves. It still, however, uses projected light, like today’s monitors. What typographic limitations would this device still have? Or imagine the opposite: a low-resolution digital device with just 100 DPI, but it uses reflected light and approaches the contrast and luminance of paper.