

# *The Importance of Rhythm*

## Return to Basics

by Roger C. Parker

**R**hythm is essential to the creation of easy to read books. Such books encourage immersion reading, the one-to-one communion between author and reader that results when time is forgotten and the reader's entire attention is focused on the book at hand.

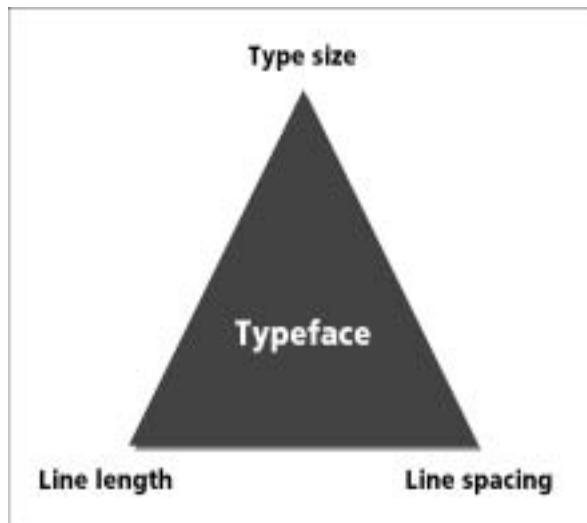
Rhythmic reading is neglected in the design of an increasing number of books, particularly non-fiction books. Too often, books are cluttered with visual distractions that make rhythmic reading impossible. These distractions take many forms: oversize subheads, gratuitous use of quotations, numerous pull-quotes, frequent sidebars and the decorative—as opposed to functional—use of colored background panels.

Though these tools may have played an important role in the original success of several high-profile popular computer book series, the techniques have spread to other areas, especially business books. The result is that the techniques are becoming so over-used that publishers are taking a chance on alienating their readers.

### *How people read*

Reading is an unconscious but incredibly complex event. A reader does not “sound out” each word. Rather, his or her eyes scan the patterns, or shapes, of the words on each line. Simultaneously, the reader's brain translates the word shapes into an understandable message.

When line length, type size and line spacing are both consistent and correct, and the right typeface has been used, this “translation” occurs instantaneously without conscious effort on the reader's part.



*Keep the three basic elements of typefaces in mind in selecting design options.*

Reading is easy when there are few, if any, interruptions to the rhythmic scanning process. Reading is hard when there are frequent changes in type size, line length or line spacing. Rhythmic reading, also known as serial pattern recognition, is impossible in the presence of frequent text wraps, which occur when text or graphic elements extend into an adjacent column, thus interrupting line length.

To publish books that offer long-lasting pleasure and value, designers must create easy to read books—books that help readers establish and maintain an even reading pace. This pace, or rhythm, is based on repeated eye movements of equal length.

### *The starting point*

Rhythmic reading begins when designers correctly make basic formatting decisions:

- Type size: designers must choose a type size that permits readers to scan several words at a time.
- Line length: line length must remain consistent.
- Line spacing: leading, or white space between lines, helps words stand out and guides the reader's eyes across each line.

Type size, line length and line spacing must be in harmony with each other for rhythmic reading to take place. Long lines of small type are hard to read; so are short lines of large type. Likewise, too much or too little line spacing can seriously interfere with rhythmic reading.

Designers have long recognized that it is impossible to consider type size without simultaneously considering line length and line spacing. However, in many books today, one can find columns “bloated” with

