

Things your Typesetter Never Told You

by Mary Pretzer

To separate the design dabblers from the graphic artist gurus you need to read between the letters. Real polish and professionalism lies in thinking like a traditional, pre-desktop-publishing typesetter.

Typewriting vs. typesetting

Some habits die hard. Traditional typewriting habits like double spaces after periods, two hyphens for a dash and all capital letter headlines are three of the hardest to kill. Typewriting was based on fixed-space fonts. To communicate emphasis, you used ALL CAPS and underlining. This made sense in light of the technology available. Now, however, with proportionally spaced fonts and emphasis devices like **bold face**, *italics* and *size changes*, new standards based on digital typography have to be applied.

Will readers notice such small details?

The one-space rule

Traditional double spaces from the days of typewriters—after periods and colons, for example—have been replaced with one space. Typesetters never put two spaces after punctuation even in the pre-desktop-publishing age.

Typewriter letters were large and relied on mono-spaced or fixed-spaced fonts. In other words, when you typed a lower case “i,” the carriage shifted to the right the same amount of space as if you typed a capital “W.” Typewriters were not set up to take into consideration the unique qualities of each letter. The space between words was the same fixed spacing too. With type this big and spaces this large, it was necessary to have two spaces to distinguish easily where one sentence ended and another began.

Digital typography uses smaller letters and proportionally spaced fonts. Typeface designers actually take into consideration the nature of each letter. Specific default space is built into each character. The smaller letters together with the ability of the type designer to dedicate varying amounts of space to letters means we can get by with only one space after punctuation.

Note: This is a critical substitution in justified text. Page layout programs see each space as an opportunity to add

even more space to stretch out justified lines. Two spaces after punctuation create “lakes” between your sentences and “lakes” slow down the natural reading pattern.

Mind your ems and ens

The typewriter’s double-hyphen dash—like this—has been replaced. The em dash—a sleeker, more professional character—should be used.

The em is a unit of measure equal to the point size of the type you’ve specified. Traditionally we think of this as being the width of the capital M in the typeface and size you’re using. Rarely, however, is the em dash ever this wide. It depends on the type designer. But, the em dash is always the widest of the dash family.

Designers argue whether the em dash needs space on either side — like this—or this. It is really a matter of personal preference, but should be treated consistently throughout a document. Generally, a whole space on each side is too much. In page layout programs, designers like to add just a little extra space on either side of the em dash to keep it from touching its neighbors.

The en dash is typically half the width of the em dash, but wider than the hyphen. It is used to indicate range or duration, such as July 1-4 or Pages 10-32. An easy way to remember to use the en dash is that it usually substitutes for the words “to” and “through.”

Why bother?

The hints covered here are only the tip of the iceberg. Typographers have a whole list of even more detailed recommendations from ligatures to hanging punctuation to fixing the gaps in justified text. But some people wonder why go to all this trouble for something the readers will not even notice?

But they do. Subconsciously, readers see more than we realize. They may not consciously see your double spaces and two-hyphen dashes, but they get the feeling that this is not a professional publication. The way you treat your type says a lot about the organization represented by the document. ❖

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