

How To Use Fonts (And Why You Should Care)

Communication, both face-to-face and in writing, occurs on two levels: verbal and non-verbal. To achieve maximum impact, it is essential that this dual communication consistently corresponds. Think about it. Would you find a snickering salesperson persuasive? Would you find a monotone motivational speaker inspiring? No. Not any more than you find your state Congressperson sincere. Why? Because communication is more than just words. Because, quite simply, presentation matters. In writing, size does matter. And spacing. And color. And everything else.

Presentation is crucial to all forms of communication-most of all when dealing with written communication. Unlike information conveyed personally, a written message is static. It must speak for itself. Expert communicators know that superb content is not enough. They know that to achieve truly effective communication one must pay equal attention to how the content is presented. Contrarily, untrained communicators don't realize that style can, and often does, override substance-and corporate trash-cans nationwide brim with the ridiculed remains of their ransom-note-like resumes. So how can you enhance the quality of your presentation? Well, just like Coach used to tell you-put in your mouthpiece and start with the basics. And basically, the fundamental element of written communication is font.

But what exactly, you might ask, is font? Put technically, font is the interface between your ideas and your readers. Put simply, font is the style of your typeface. Is it big, bold, crisp, underlined, or colored? Is it spaced well? Is it even legible? These are all important questions-questions that any conscientious document creator must answer and act on. But why are font decisions so critical?

When utilized well, a font or font mix accomplishes four things: 1) focuses attention, 2) enhances readability, 3) sets a tone, and 4) projects an image. Font is your first line of defense against reader apathy-and your first chance to really capture an audience, create a positive and lasting impression, and encourage continued interest. Remember, though, while font can (and should) be used for good, it can also be used for bad impressions that is. Every day, writers discover that font choice is an excellent opportunity to make a mockery of their work. This in mind, effective font should be chosen both carefully and strategically. To assist, presented here is a brief digest of useful font guidelines.

1. WATCH YOUR CASE

As per tradition, for typical documents you should use upper and lower case text for the body of your work. Avoid using all upper or lower case text anywhere in your document, as both can be difficult to read. As for headings and titles, use upper case lettering whenever prescribed or necessary.

2. SIZE DOES MATTER

Generally accepted writing guidelines for typical documents prescribe the use of 10-12 point font for the body, 14-48 point font for primary headings, and one-half of the primary heading point size for secondary headings. A warning though: font on your computer screen may appear larger than it actually is. If you err, err on the large side. Remember, if your text is too small to read, it simply won't get read.

3. KEEP IT SIMPLE

Simplicity is a virtue in writing. Keep this in mind when choosing a font or font mix. Remember, your font is supposed to enhance your message, not sabotage it. Unless it is truly warranted, tend toward simple, inconspicuous fonts like Times New Roman or Arial. Also, these fonts, among others, are TrueType-this means that what you see on the screen is exactly what you will see on the page.

4. BE CONSISTENT...

Font is a privilege, not a right. So don't abuse it by using three or four different styles in the same document. As a rule, never use more than two fonts in the same piece. Like the saying goes: three fonts is a crowd-on your reader's attention. So once you choose a font, be committed and use it throughout. Your readers will thank you.

5. ...YET USE VARIETY WHEN NEEDED

Although, in general, font use should be consistent throughout a project, variety is sometimes needed to break the monotony. One good way to infuse diversity into a document is via the use of italicized, bold, or underlined text. These highlighting tools, as well as many others, are properly used to signal importance, emphasis, even inflection (see paragraph one). But remember, use them sparingly or don't use them at all.

6. ABOVE ALL ELSE: MATCH YOUR MEDIUM

The goal of every project is different; as is the intended audience, the resources available, and so on. Accordingly, there isn't one best font. Rather, it is the characteristics of your project that determine which font is superior. Remember, these are just guidelines, not gospel. If you need uppercase text, use it. A multicolored paragraph? Do it. Ultimately, the bottom line is: Does your presentation match your medium? If it does, bravo. If it doesn't, it better.