The Perfect Set: 22 Typefaces

Trash the junk and get up-to-date with your typeface library

by Nick Shinn

I've been working with Marie-José Crete, Co-ordinator of New Media at The Centre for Creative Communications at Centennial College, in Toronto, to improve its font collection.

Readers not involved with educational institutions may want to consider this project as "Top Twenty Typefaces", on a budget.

THE PRINCIPLES

1. The Ideal Type Library will be a collection of exceptional, stylish typeface families that complement one another.

2. There will be no loose ends. Typefaces that are boring, out-of-date, poorly designed, badly constructed, rarely applicable, or lacking important family members will not be included.

3. Each typeface family will occupy a distinct niche within the overall spectrum of type, and be the exemplar of its genre: there will not be typefaces that are similar in appearance.

4. While it's important to have sufficient members of each family, only one serif typeface (Adobe Garamond) and one sans (Myriad) will have really large families, because it's rare that a design project requires such range, and it's better to invest in a variety of faces.

With the Type Library so constructed, students will be subtly directed towards good typography, using a matched selection of the best typefaces. Don't allow them to work with typefaces not in this scheme, merely because the college has the fonts, so:

5. Many fonts already licensed should be dropped. It's no great loss, as such fonts came free, bundled with software applications or operating systems, or acquired ad hoc.

Several typefaces will be retained. This is the situation at Centennial, where the basic Adobe Garamond family is being expanded to include the Expert fonts.

6. A selection of Microsoft Core TrueType Web Fonts should be installed. All other fonts (with the exception of system fonts) should be PostScript Type 1. The font management software (Suitcase/Super ATM/Reunion) will be set up to discourage the use of the MS Web Fonts in print work, for which they are not intended.

THE REASONING

The goal is typographic literacy, to which there are two common impediments in graphic education.

The first occurs when students, although they are working with up-to-date software applications, are using out-of-date typefaces discovered in the fonts folder. These fonts are there because they came bundled with applications and operating systems.

Isn't that great, free software that doesn't need an upgrade?

Well, excuse me while I change into this sweater my mother gave me for Christmas, 1982. The fact is, fonts are applications that set type, and like all software their usefulness wanes with age. New typefaces are constantly being invented to fulfill (and provoke) new needs. Base, for instance is designed to look good on a monitor—and has become a real eye-opener in print.

But, one may ask, what about classic typefaces—surely they don't require upgrades?

Sorry, but they are only classics *because* they have been adapted to each successive wave of technology. Baskerville, for instance, created in 1757, was revamped for the hot metal era in 1923. It was reworked for phototype as ITC New Baskerville in 1978. This version was subsequently digitized and bundled with *Adobe Illustrator*, so it's sitting in the fonts folder of a huge number of CPUs. But why would anyone in their right mind use such an old sweater when there's Zuzana Licko's brilliant 1998 digital riff on the classic, Mrs Eaves!? Just because it's free?

We can't afford Mrs Eaves, but we won't settle for ITC Baskerville. Sure, we need a traditional, serifed typeface, so we'll choose one created in the digital era—Adobe Garamond.

The second faux pas a college can make is to acquire its fonts from a single publisher.

In one sense, it's a deal to buy a gazillion fonts on one CD for a special price, from the likes of Adobe. But this is not going to give students a well-rounded exposure to contemporary fonts. They need to experiment with the state of the art, and that means typefaces from mainstream, progressive, and left-field sources. Consider Base, Adobe Garamond, and House Gothic—extreme

serif

Cartier Book

BASIC LICENCE: $199
UP TO 50: $597

Regular, *Italic,* Small Caps, **Bold**

New version by Rod McDonald of the first Canadian typeface, Carl Dair's *Cartier* of 1967, is an excellent book face. The original had an italic that was too narrow, and no bold. The new, improved Cartier is well on the way to becoming a Canadian standard.

Egiziano

BASIC LICENCE: $39
UP TO 50: $215

In the present age, the subtle distinctions between historic serif types have become relatively unimportant, and the formal inventiveness of the more extreme variants, such as this Victorian Leviathan of vernacular commercial showmanship, has become of great typographic interest.

Adobe Garamond

BASIC: $199
UP TO 50: $1095

Regular, *Italic,* Semibold, *Semibold Italic,*
Bold, *Bold Italic,* Small Caps, Expert,
Semibold Small Caps, Semibold Expert,
Alternate, *Swash Alternates,* TITLING

You need one typeface with all the goodies—fraction fonts, alternate figures, swash characters, etc.,—and one dignified oldstyle book face with a small x-height. This digital revival of Garamond is both. It restores to the evergreen face the nobility lost in the quirky revivals of the early 20th Century, and the Pop Art sensibility of ITC Garamond.

Matrix

BASIC LICENCE: $258
UP TO 50: $799

Book, *Script Book,* Regular, *Script,* **Bold, *Script Bold***

By the seminal type designer of the digital era, Emigre's Zuzana Licko. Matrix (1985) bludgeoned open the Pandora's Box of new typography by demonstrating that the unprecedented precision of PostScript could be used to create a new aesthetic of letterform.

Scala

BASIC LICENCE: $179
UP TO 50: $537

Regular, *Italic,* Small Caps, **Bold**

The best new, traditional-style text face of the digital era was designed to overcome the weak impression made by older serifed designs in the new, high res print environment. It looks sharp in both text settings and in display. Released early on in the transition (1990), Scala has become established as a new standard. With the small caps font in the basic font bundle, it's an excellent value.

Times Roman

BASIC LICENCE: $129
UP TO 50: $709

Regular, *Italic,* **Bold, *Bold Italic***

The most widely-used serif typeface on the planet, the peerless Times is a dramatic fusion of old style and modern that conveys the soul of European culture—both its roots in Antiquity and its tradition of progress. Times Roman is an indestructible cultural artefact that flourishes in media as diverse as shop signage, scientific treatises, fashion magazines, and the Internet. The Monotype PostScript cut, shown here, the "New" Roman, is the most robust in serif detail, and most stylish in proportion.

Worldwide

BASIC LICENCE: $219
UP TO 50: $657

Regular, *Italic,* Small Caps, **Bold, Black,**
Headline Regular, Headline Bold, **Headline Black,**
Headline Bold Condensed

Nick Shinn's compact, elegant revival of *Century* equips the classic for the new millennium. The Worldwide family includes both text and display fonts. Initially designed for newspaper work.

sans

Base-9

BASIC LICENCE: $129
UP TO 50: $399

Regular, *Italic,* **Bold, *Bold Italic,***
Regular Small Caps, *Italic Small Caps,*
Bold Small Caps, *Bold Italic Small Caps*

Designed for use in print and multimedia environments, with mutually compatible screen and printer fonts. As with all Licko designs, a type of inestimable virtue.

Chalet

BASIC LICENCE: $199
UP TO 50: $617

Paris, London, **New York, Tokyo**

House Industry's hoax-couture pastiche of the 1960s/1970s sans serif genre takes off Avant Garde, Helvetica Light, Pump etc. Spanning the spectrum from kitsch to dry understatement, Chalet nails the paradox of the International Style, its ideal of functionalism married to the slick cool look. No italics, but several alternates fonts, and a large collection of silhouette icons.

Franklin Gothic

BASIC LICENCE: $109
UP TO 50: $599

Regular, Condensed, Extra Condensed

A bold, sans serif contrast face of suitable vintage (1904) to be used in harmony with the classic serif types. It's all about the vigor of the line (less self-consciously elegant than the Swiss or Geometric genres) and the two-part lowercase "g". In effect, the lighter part of this family is Trade Gothic (see below).

products of foundries with, respectively, new media, traditional, and retro sensibilities. You can't get that range from one source.

COST

Unfortunately, price puts many of the best typefaces out of reach. The cost of a basic license (1–5 CPUs) varies from publisher to publisher, as does the formula for multiple-CPU site licenses.

For instance, when the basic license costs $100, the 50 CPU license will cost $300 from FontFont, Red Rooster, ShinnType and Type-Ø-Tones, $450 from Adobe, Agfa, and Monotype, and $900 from Bitstream and Elsner + Flake.

Large families cost more. The full Neue Helvetica (the numbered version) has 9 font packages. With this kind of typeface it's all or nothing—picking and choosing defeats the logic of having such a smoothly comprehensive distribution of weights and scaling. And yet, it *is* important that there be one large sans family in your collection, so the choice is Myriad Multiple Master.

By the same token, a full-family serif typeface is necessary, one with all the special sorts including alternate figures, small caps, swash characters, fraction fonts, and display fonts. That face is Adobe Garamond.

There is no education discount. In fact, many foundries are reluctant to deal with colleges, for fear of student pirating.

THE RIGHT TYPEFACE FOR THE COURSE

While there are a few typefaces that are geared to particular media—such as Base for new media, Worldwide for Newspapers, or Cartier for book work—the principle of providing students general typographic literacy means that they should get a well-rounded exposure to all kinds of typefaces.

Also give some thought to font formats. You may require some CE (Central European accents) coded fonts. Consider OpenType fonts; however, this new font format is not widely supported, and is barely used professionally. Remember GX?

THE HARD LINE

There is an alternative to proliferation. With a minimalist strategy, all you need are a handful of typefaces. Times and Helvetica for print, Georgia and Verdana for the Web. And Courier. Get rid of everything else and teach pure principle. You'll be in good company—there's a school of designers who consider typeface selection a meaningless frill. But such a dry approach will leave many students cold. And if you choose the Way of the Hair Shirt, you had better follow it assiduously, or your soul will soon be lost.

CANADIAN FONTS

Aside from patriotic duty, there are good reasons to include Canadian-designed typefaces in the college collection. It's a demonstration of empowerment to students that yes, real people make the culture, and local talent can cut it. Canadian type designers are usually delighted to talk to students about their work, livening up

House Gothic

BASIC LICENCE: **$149**
UP TO 50: **$562**

Light with alternates, **Bold with alternates, Black, 3-D**

A tight-packing, condensed typeface with many font styles and alternates, House Gothic presents lots of opportunity for custom wordmarks. It integrates well with a certain kind of page layout that involves shaped coloured rules, bars, and solid boxes as design elements. Very retro.

Microgramma

BASIC: **$99**
50: **$999**

Medium Extended, **Bold Extended**

Aldo Novarese's extended TV shaped 1951 sans serif has the cyber-square look of 2001.

Myriad

BASIC LICENCE: **$129**
UP TO 50: **$709**

Condensed

Light, Regular, **SemiBold, Bold, Black**

*Light, Regular, **SemiBold, Bold, Black***

Normal

Light, Regular, **SemiBold, Bold, Black**

*Light, Regular, **SemiBold, Bold, Black***

Semi Extended

Light, Regular, **SemiBold, Bold, Black**

*Light, Regular, **SemiBold, Bold, Black***

You need one sans face that has an extended family, but it can be an expensive proposition. Using this Multiple Master typeface is the answer. Myriad's exquisitely bland neutrality takes up where Helvetica and Frutiger left off, making it the perfect agent of functionalist modernism.

Officina Sans

BASIC LICENCE: **$129**
UP TO 50: **$709**

Book, *Italic,* **Bold,** ***Bold Italic***

"Technical" faces have moved to the mainstream in the present, high-tech era, none more so than Officina. Note the signature forms of I, i, and l.

Scala Sans

BASIC LICENCE: **$249**
UP TO 50: **$747**

Regular, *Italic*, Caps, *Caps Italic*,
Bold, ***Bold Italic***

Following in the footsteps of the original serifed Scala, this humanist sans has become a contemporary standard. There are not many sans fonts that have small caps and alternate figures, so Scala Sans is a must-have. In fact, it's the better figures (especially the "1"), which make it preferable to Gill Sans.

Trade Gothic Cond.

BASIC LICENCE: $129
UP TO 50: $709

Condensed, *Condensed Oblique*

Condensed Bold, *Condensed Bold Oblique*

The pragmatic quality of this typeface results from the squareness of the round letters, stretched in the corners to open up the counters and push the sides towards the upright. Consequently the even spacing, within and between characters, of all these vertical strokes, produces a powerful rhythm.

miscellaneous

Universal

BASIC LICENCE: $99
UP TO 50: $307

Eight, NineTeen

An old school pixel-face from Emigre, based on the original 1984 Apple Imagewriter pixel grid.

DISTRESSED

SHAREWARE FONT RESOURCE:
GRUNGEFONTS.8M.COM

Attic, DEVICE, Typewriter, Washout

A selection of shareware grunge fonts published on floppy with Robin William's book A Blip in the Continuum.

DISTURBANCE

BASIC LICENCE: $149
UP TO 50: $447

REGULAR, *ITALIC*, BOLD

SERIFED POST-MODERN UNICASE DESIGN PLAYS INTELLECTUAL HAVOC WITH TRADITION.

Mambo

BASIC LICENCE: $179
UP TO 50: $537

Light, Medium, Bold

Casually drawn, sunny design by Canadian Val Fullard. The definitive happy face of the '90s, Mambo expresses the revitalization typography underwent, reaffirming its artistic connection with hand lettering.

Neuropol

UP TO 50: $19
WWW.LARABIEFONTS.COM

Condensed, Normal, Extended, + Outline

from LIGHT to HEAVY, with obliques

Cyber/rave/SUV typeface by Canadian Ray Larabie has high-tech look and functionality: it's a suitable subject for Photoshop filtering (dimensionalization).

Snell Roundhand

BASIC : $109
UP TO 50: $599

*Regular, **Bold**, **Black***

The best example of an 'engraved' script. The capitals of Matthew Carter's impeccable design make ideal initials.

what is for many the least interesting subject on the syllabus.

A HISTORY UPGRADE

Typography is a living tradition with a history that's always professionally relevant. As recent events get added to the story, the old explanations are rewritten, the icons distilled—to shine more brightly, perhaps, as they recede deeper into the shadows of the past. Where once distinctions between classes of serifed typeface such as Old Style, Transitional and Modern were highly relevant, now there are new, and seriously enlarged, categories to add to the canon (pixel, distress, postmodern, industrial, monospace, web). Realistically, traditional serifed faces are now a single category of far less importance than before. Egyptian (slab serif) types may be a neat typological category, but they are rarely used now, and can be omitted from a basic library.

The upshot is, a compact, comprehensive type library can't accommodate too many classics. And this applies (what sacrilege!) to the recent past. Helvetica, Univers, Futura, Avant Garde—there's no need to have all these in your library when you have Chalet. With this typeface House Industries, the foundry that specializes in making retro-vernacular lettering styles into fonts, has done the unthinkable—turned the modernist genre into a fashion item, complete with a hoax couture marketing promotion! Chalet is cool, smart, and a perfect segueway into historical perspective.

FASHION

Much as one would like to set education above trendy ephemera, the reality of our business is consumer culture. In the "real" world, if your work looks old-fashioned, it sucks. Students, short on dollars, have a hard time keeping pace with trends. They need new fonts to work with. House Gothic appears regularly (and with great typographic panache) on the CD covers of Black Eyed Peas—it's the kind of font that's fun to play with, and making the connection between fun, fashion, creativity and type will power a career for a long time.

Furthermore, the issue is not about fashion for fashion's sake, but keeping abreast of technology. For instance, pixel fonts on hand-held devices are icons of modern culture, charged with meaning. If they're not part of an education, it's not complete.

DIGITAL TYPE

The bottom line is, the mainstays of 20th century typography are history. The classics of the digital era are not Times and Helvetica (although they persist). The new classics are typefaces like Matrix, Base, Scala, Myriad, and Officina, and these are the types that should form the core of the Perfect Set.

Nick Shinn, R.G.D. is an art director/graphic designer and the proprietor of Shinn Design. He also designs and publishes typefaces through ShinnType, on the Web at www.shinntype.com, email nick@shinntype.com, telephone (416) 769-4198. Fonts shown are mostly available from FontShop Canada.