

Tips, tricks, and things to keep in mind when working with type and text.

We are all typesetters

Spacing

Only use one space after a sentence. Not two.

To indent a paragraph's first line, use InDesign's "first line indent" setting—not spaces or tabs.

Use tabs well and with care. Don't use two tabs to push a line further to the right; instead, set a tab to where you need it.

Line spacing

Line spacing, often called "leading," is the amount of vertical space between lines of text. (Leading is the space between lines, whereas line spacing is leading plus type size.) Line spacing is measured in points, just like type size. This text is 10pt Apollo, with 13pt line spacing, commonly expressed as 10/13 or "ten on thirteen."

InDesign will set the line spacing automatically for you, which is a good way to go at first. But keep in mind that it may automatically set it poorly or incorrectly. Always check that your line spacing looks good and is even from line to line.

Quotes

Always use quotation marks (" "), not "straight quotes" (" "), for demarcating speech and other quotes.

Straight quotes sneak into your designs in text copied from emails and word processing programs. They are not actually quotes at all. They are symbols used to designate feet and inches, e.g. 5' 2".

Underlining

Don't underline for emphasis. Underlining is a way for a typist to indicate that the typesetter should italicize a word. You're the typesetter, so *go ahead and italicize it.*

Dashes & hyphens

Use the correct dash or hyphen for the occasion. Don't use a hyphen, or a pair of them, in place of a proper dash.

Em dashes (shift-opt-hyphen) break clauses in sentences—like this. An em is a space equal to the width

of a lower case "m." An en is a space equal to the width of a lower case "n."

En dashes (opt-hyphen) are used to indicate ranges and compound hyphenations. For example, an en dash is used in the phrase "from 1945–1977." And in "rye flour–based baked goods," the en dash acts as a hyphen that connects the two-word "rye flour" to "based."

Use hyphens to hyphenate words and phrases.

Capitals and small caps

Setting words in ALL CAPS makes them hard to read in text. If you wish to emphasize words, use italics. If you need to set a proper noun or abbreviation in all caps, use small caps, if available. For example, RADAR or HTML.

Small caps can also be used to indicate other "all caps" uses in text, such as signage or shouting. The sign read NO DOGS ALLOWED. "Would you please SHUT UP!" he hollered.

Ligatures

Ligatures are special glyphs that connect pairs like fi, fl, and ff, which would otherwise be poorly fitted.

You can set InDesign to use ligatures in the character palette. In certain texts (usually with justified alignment) you may need to manually set ligatures in loose lines, or adjust letterspacing so that the ligatures look OK.

Kerning

Kerning is the adjustment of space between a pair of letters. Well-designed typefaces have well-kerned pairs already, but there are times when you want to do it manually (or when you need to rescue the kerning of a cheap or free font).

In particular, when setting headlines or large type, and especially all caps, you will need to spend some time kerning the type. Use your most careful visual judgment, and spend a lot of time backing out and looking at the word(s) from a distance.

Letterspacing

Letterspacing is the overall space among a group of characters, such as a word or paragraph. People often confuse letterspacing with kerning, probably because “kerning” is fun to say and it sounds like you know something important.

Sometimes you need to adjust letterspacing to fit a block of text into a space, or to make it appear more readable.

Here are a few rules of thumb for letterspacing:

Very rarely should you apply positive letterspacing to lowercase or sentence case letters. The way that letters fit together is a crucial part of how typefaces work, and spacing text loosely destroys this fitting.

Conversely, words set in small caps and all caps often benefit from a bit of open, loose letterspacing.

When setting white or light text on dark or black backgrounds, adjusting the letterspacing to loosen the type a little bit (yes, even with lowercase letters . . . just a little bit!) will increase readability.

When working with large pieces of type such as headlines, tightening the letterspacing (as well as some judicious kerning) will help make the type more readable and unified.

Hyphenation & line breaks

Don't ever assume that “automatic” hyphenation or line breaks should be left as is. You are the one who decides where a line ends, and how hyphenation works in your text.

You can control overall settings in InDesign's Hyphenation and Justification preferences, but you will still need to adjust lines and hyphenation manually when composing your text.

In general:

Avoid more than two hyphenations in a row at the end of a line.

Avoid confusing hyphenations or the hyphenation of a hyphenated phrase. If it looks odd, it probably is hard to read. Fix it.

Don't use hyphens in headlines.

When breaking your lines, seek an even “rag”—the uneven edge of a block of unjustified text.

Break text over columns in a way that makes sense with the content.

Choosing and combining typefaces

In this as in so many things, discretion is the better part of valor.

Choose classic, well-designed typefaces with robust fonts.

Use serified type for body text. Use sans-serif type for headlines, captions, etc.

Don't use more than two typefaces in one design.

Don't use two sans-serif or two serif typefaces in combination.

As in your designs, let your content lead the type choices, not the other way around.

Text alignment and line length

A rule of thumb for easily readable line length is 60 or 70 characters/spaces per line. This is a matter of some dispute, but to make your work look professional and traditional, it is an easy rule to follow.

Left-aligned text is the most common alignment you will use.

Justified text is good for longer documents, provided that the line length is sufficient to prevent gaps in your word spacing.

Right-aligned text should be used very rarely. It is sometimes useful in captions or sidenotes.