

# Sans Serif Typefaces

## Other Terms Used

**Egyptian:** The term was first used by Joseph Farington after seeing the sans serif inscription on John Flaxman's memorial to Isaac Hawkins Brown in 1805, though today the term is commonly used to refer to slab serif, not sans serif.

**Antique:** In about 1817, the Figgins foundry in London made a type with square or slab-serifs which it called 'Antique', and that name was adopted by most of the British and US type-founders.

**Grotesque:** It was originally coined by William Thorowgood of Fann Street Foundry in 1832. The name came from the Italian word 'grottesco', meaning 'belonging to the cave'. In Germany, the name became Grotesk.

**Doric:** It was the term first used by H. W. Caslon Foundry in Chiswell Street in 1870 to describe various stressed sans-serif fonts.

**Gothic:** Not to be confused with blackletter typeface, the term was used mainly by American type founders. The term probably derived from the architectural definition, which is neither Greek nor Roman, and from the extended adjective term of "Germany", which was the place where sans-serif typefaces became popular in 19th to 20th century.

## What is sans serif?

In typography, a sans-serif, sans serif, gothic, san serif or simply sans typeface is one that does not have the small projecting features called "serifs" at the end of strokes. The term comes from the French word sans, meaning "without" and "serif" from the Dutch word schreef meaning "line".

## Uses

Sans-serif fonts tend to have less line width variation than serif fonts.

In print, sans-serif fonts are often used for **headlines** rather than for body text.

Sans-serif fonts have become the most prevalent for display of text on **computer** screens. This is partly because interlaced screens have shown twittering on the fine details of the horizontal serifs. Additionally, on lower-resolution digital displays, fine details like serifs may disappear or appear too large.

## Recent terms

**Lineale, or linear:** The term was defined by typographic historian Maximilien Vox in the VOX-ATypI classification to describe sans-serif types. Later, in British Standards Classification of Typefaces (BS 2961:1967), lineale replaced sans-serif as classification name.

**Simplices:** In Jean Alessandrini's désignations préliminaires (preliminary designations), simplices (plain typefaces) is used to describe sans-serif on the basis that the name 'lineal' refers to lines, whereas, in reality, all typefaces are made of lines, including those that are not lineals.

**Swiss:** It is used as a synonym to sans-serif, as opposed to roman (serif) in The OpenDocument format (ISO/IEC 26300:2006) and Rich Text Format.

## History

The first sans-serif types were developed in the 18th century to **represent ancient inscriptions**. Thus, Thomas Dempster's *De Etruria regali libri VII* (1723), used special types intended for the representation of Etruscan epigraphy, and in c. 1745, Caslon foundry made Etruscan types for pamphlets written by Etruscan scholar John Swinton. Architects like John Soane used sans-serif letters on his drawings and architectural designs incorporating ancient Greek and Roman elements. By 1816, the Ordnance Survey began to use 'Egyptian' type, which was printed using copper plate engraving of monoline sans-serif capital letters, to name ancient Roman sites.

An interesting development was the 1786 rounded sans-serif font developed by Valentin Haüy in his book titled "Essai sur l'éducation des aveugles" (An Essay on the **Education of the Blind**). The purpose of this font was to be invisible and address accessibility. It was designed to emboss paper and allow the blind to read with their fingers. The design was eventually known as Haüy type.

Early-19th-century **commercial sign writers** and engravers modified the sans-serif styles of neoclassical designers to include the uneven stroke weights found in serif Roman fonts, producing sans-serif letters. In London, 'Egyptian' lettering was popular due to their clarity and legibility at distance in advertising and display use, when printed very large or very small. Much early sans-serif signage was not actually printed but hand-painted or lettered, since large

signs were difficult to print but could easily be painted by hand.

Sans-serif letters began to appear in **printed media** as early as 1805, in *European Magazine*. Because sans-serif type was often used for headings and commercial printing, many early sans-serif designs did not feature lower-case letters. The first Grotesque typeface complete with lower-case letters was probably cast by the Schelter & Giesecke Foundry as early as 1825. The term sans-serif was first employed in 1832 by Vincent Figgins. The first use of sans serif as a running text is believed to be the short booklet *Feste des Lebens und der Kunst: eine Betrachtung des Theaters als höchsten Kultursymbols* (Celebration of Life and Art: A Consideration of the Theater as the Highest Symbol of a Culture), by Peter Behrens, in 1900.

Through the early twentieth century, an increase in popularity of sans-serif fonts took place as **more artistic and complex designs** were created. By the mid-century, neo-grotesque fonts such as Univers and Helvetica had become popular through offering a more unified range of styles than on previous designs, allowing a wider range of text to be set artistically through setting headings and body text in a single font.

With digital media sans serifs have become increasingly important because of their higher onscreen legibility. Desire for both brand distinctiveness and brand consistency across both printed and web designs have led to increasing innovation and blurring of distinctions between serif and sans serif fonts.

## Classification

For the purposes of type classification, sans-serif designs are usually divided into three or four major groups:

### Grotesque

This group features the early (19th century to early 20th) sans-serif designs. Influenced by Didone serif fonts of the period and signpainting, these were often quite solid, bold designs suitable for headlines and advertisements. Because for this purpose they were not needed, many did not feature a lower case or italics. They were sometimes released by width, with a range of widths from extended to normal to condensed, with each style different, meaning to modern eyes they can look quite irregular and eccentric. Grotesque fonts have a vertical axis and limited variation of stroke width (often none perceptible in capitals). The terminals of curves are usually horizontal, and many have a spurred "G" and an "R" with a curled leg. The term realist has also been applied to grotesque designs due to their practicality and simplicity. Most avoid having a true italic in favour of a more restrained oblique or sloped design, although at least some did have true italics

Examples of grotesque fonts include Akzidenz Grotesk, **Franklin Gothic** and Monotype Grotesque, though some digital releases of these reduce their eccentricities in order to make them more suitable to modern tastes. Akzidenz Grotesk Old Face, Knockout by Hoefler & Frere-Jones and Monotype Grotesque are examples of digital fonts that retain the characteristics of early sans-serif types.

### Neo-grotesque

As the name implies, these modern designs consist of a direct evolution of grotesque types. They are relatively straightforward in appearance with limited width variation. Unlike earlier grotesque designs, many were issued in extremely large and versatile families from the time of release, making them easier to use for body text.

The story of neo-grotesque types began in the 1950s with the emergence of the International

Typographic Style, or Swiss style. Its members looked at the clear lines of Akzidenz Grotesk (1896) as an inspiration to create rational, almost neutral typefaces. In 1957 the release of Helvetica, Univers, and Folio, the first typefaces categorized as neo-grotesque, had a strong impact internationally:

**Helvetica** came to be the most used typeface for the following decades (available on Mac).

**Arial** produced as an alternative (copy?) of Helvetica by Microsoft to avoid license fees.

**BELL CENTENNIAL** produced for telephone books

Other examples no longer freely available include: Rail Alphabet, Highway Gothic, MS Sans Serif.

### Geometric

As their name suggests, Geometric sans-serif typefaces are based on geometric shapes, like near-perfect circle and square. Note the optically circular letter "O" and the simple construction of the lowercase letter "a". Of these four categories, geometric fonts tend to be the least useful for body text.

The geometric sans is strongly associated with the Bauhaus art school (1919-1933). Two early efforts in designing geometric types were made by Herbert Bayer and Jakob Erbar, who worked respectively on Universal Typeface (unreleased at the time but revived digitally as Architype Bayer) and Erbar (circa 1925).

In 1927 **Futura**, by Paul Renner, was released to great acclaim and popularity. This also inspired the later **Avenir** (designed by Frutiger in 1989 and available on Mac).

Geometric sans-serif fonts were popular from the 1920s and 30s due to their clean, modern design, and many new geometric designs and revivals have been created since. Other examples include:

### Century Gothic

Other examples no longer freely available include Kabel, Nobel, ITC Avant Garde, Gotham and Drogowskaz not available.

## Humanist

These are the most **calligraphic** of the sans-serif typefaces. Humanist sans serif designs expanded greatly during the 1980s and 1990s, partly as a reaction against the overwhelming popularity of Helvetica and Univers. Many take extensive inspiration from serif fonts, with true italic designs, ligatures and even swashes in italic.

Designs proliferated in 1970s and 1980s also due to the need for legible fonts on low-resolution computer displays. Humanist sans-serif designs are often particularly **legible on screen** or at distance due to their wide apertures or separation between strokes.

Humanist designs vary more than gothic or geometric designs.

Some are more **geometric**. One of the earliest humanist designs was Johnston (Edward Johnston, 1916), and, a decade later, **Gill Sans** (Eric Gill, 1928 and available on Mac). Edward Johnston, a calligrapher by profession, was inspired by classic letter forms. The capitals, like Roman capitals are often based on perfect squares, half-squares and circles. These somewhat architectural designs may feel too stiff for body text.

Some have **stroke modulation** (strokes that clearly vary in width along their line) or alternating thick and thin strokes. These include Lydian Stellar, Rotis SemiSans, and most pop-

ularly Hermann Zapf's **Optima** (1958 and available on Mac), a typeface expressly designed to be suitable for both display and body text. Others such as Syntax and Goudy Sans may more resemble handwriting or calligraphy.

Frutiger, designed in 1976 and the model for **Segoe**, has been particularly influential, as designs intended to be particularly legible above all other design considerations.

**Typefaces designed for print** from 1980s and 1990s include:

### Myriad

FF Meta, , Thesis, Charlotte Sans and Scala Sans

**Typefaces created for computer** use include Microsoft's

### Tahoma

### Trebuchet

### Verdana

### Calibri

### Corbel

as well as Lucida Grande, Fira Sans and Droid Sans.

## Other

Due to the diversity of sans-serif typefaces, many do not fit neatly into the above categories. For example, Neuzzeit S has both neo-grotesque and geometric influences, as does Herman Zapf's URW Grotesk, while Klavika blends humanist and geometric influences. A particular subgenre of sans-serifs is those with stroke contrast, which have been called 'modulated' sans-serifs and are often placed within the humanist genre. These may take inspiration from calligraphy, grotesque or humanist designs.