

What is serif?

Serif Typefaces

Other Terms Used

History

Classification

Old Style

Old style or humanist typefaces date back to 1465, shortly after Johannes Gutenberg's adoption of the movable type printing press. Early printers in Italy created types that broke with Gutenberg's blackletter printing, creating upright and later italic styles inspired by Renaissance calligraphy. Old style serif fonts have remained popular for setting body text because of their excellent readability on book paper. The increasing interest in early printing during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a return to the designs of the earliest printers, many of whose names and designs are still used today.

Old style faces are sub-divided into Venetian (or humanist) and Garalde (or Aldine), a division made on the Vox-ATypI classification system.

Humanist

The style is characterized by:

- a lack of large differences between thick and thin lines (low line contrast)
- a diagonal stress (the thinnest parts of letters are at an angle rather than at the top and bottom). An old style font normally has a left-inclining curve axis with weight stress at about 8 and 2 o'clock;
- serifs are almost always bracketed (they have curves which connect the serif to the stroke);
- head serifs are often angled.
- an 'e' where the cross stroke is angled, not horizontal, a slightly more irregular design, following the work of Nicolas Jenson

Examples of Venetian old style typefaces are

Adobe Jenson

Arno

Centaur (not available in Typekit).

Garalde

Examples of Garalde old style typefaces are:

Garamond

Caslon

Minion

Palatino

Goudy Old Style

Also: Bembo, Ehrhardt, Galliard, Granjon, Janson, Renard, Sabon, Scala and VandenKeere.

Transitional

Transitional or baroque serif typefaces first appeared in the mid-18th century, although many of the most famous transitional designs are later creations in the same style. Fonts from this period include

Baskerville

Fournier, Bulmer

More recent fonts in the same style include

Times New Roman (1932)

Bookman

Century

Georgia

and Plantin.

They are in between modern and old style, thus the name "transitional."

- Differences between thick and thin lines are more pronounced than they are in old style, but they are still less dramatic than they are in modern serif fonts.
- Stress is more likely to be vertical.
- The ends of many strokes are marked not by blunt or angled serifs but by ball terminals.

Later 18th century transitional typefaces in Britain begin to show influences of Didone typefaces from Europe.

Modern or Didone

Didone or Modern serif typefaces, which first emerged in the late 18th century, are characterized by:

- extreme contrast between thick and thin lines.
- a vertical stress
- long and fine serifs, with minimal bracketing (constant width).
- Serifs tend to be very thin and vertical lines very heavy. Many Didone fonts are less readable than transitional or old style serif typefaces.

Period examples include

Bodoni

Didot

and Walbaum, while Computer Modern is a popular contemporary example.

Didone typefaces are among the earliest designed for 'display' use. The period of Didone types' greatest popularity coincided with the rapid spread of printed posters and commercial ephemera and the arrival of bold type. In print, Didone fonts are often used on high-gloss magazine paper for magazines such as Harper's Bazaar, where the paper retains the detail of their high contrast well, and for whose image a crisp, 'European' design of type may be considered appropriate.

Slab serif

Slab serif typefaces date to about 1800. Originally intended as attention-grabbing designs for posters, they have:

- very thick serifs, which tend to be as thick as the vertical lines themselves. Because of the clear, bold nature of the large serifs, slab serif designs are often used for posters and in small print. Many early slab serif types, being intended for posters, only come in bold styles with the key differentiation being width, and often have no lower-case letters at all.

Slab serif fonts vary considerably: some such as

- Rockwell have a geometric design with minimal variation in stroke width: they are sometimes described as sans-serif fonts with added serifs.
- the "**Clarendon**" model have a structure more like most other serif fonts, though with larger and more obvious serifs. These designs may have bracketed serifs which increase width along their length.

Many monospace fonts, on which all characters occupy the same amount of horizontal space as in a typewriter, are slab serif designs. While not always purely slab-serif designs, many fonts intended for newspaper use have large slab-like serifs for clearer reading on poor-quality paper.

Courier

Fira Mono from Mozilla

Anonymous Pro

are examples of newspaper and small print-orientated typefaces with some slab serif characteristics, often most visible in the bold weights.