Letter space

Thirteen telltale signs

By Robin Williams

Helvetica. Can you dig it?

Don't use Helvetica.

"Back in '68, Lester wasn't more than 5'10' or so."

Wrong.

"Back in '68, Lester wasn't more than 5'10" or so."

Right.

DESKTOP PUBLISHING HAS MATURED FROM the classic ransom notes we were inundated with in the mid-1980s. People have become much more visually aware and informed about the professional way to set their own type and design their own pages. But even among the most professional work, telltale signs of do-it-yourself desktop publishing creep in. Some of these signs are a result of not knowing the software well enough to control certain features, and some are simply a sign of using convenient features that really shouldn't even be options—or, in some cases, defaults—on the computer. Some are a sign of just not knowing any better.

Give yourself three penalty points for each of these telltale signs that you perpetrate. If you score three or above, you lose.

1. Helvetica

Type has trends, just like hairstyles and clothes and eyeglasses and architecture. Helvetica was the most popular typeface in the world in the '60s, and in the '70s it was a way of life. By the '80s, Helvetica was becoming as passé as beehive hairdos—and then it appeared in the Macintosh and PC font menus. Just as a beehive hairdo creates a certain look, Helvetica creates a certain look. A dated look. A '70s look. Just because it's on your computer doesn't mean you have to use it. The greatest single thing you could do for your publications is to invest in another sans serif face, one with a strong, bold black version in its family. As with all trends, Helvetica will someday be back in style—in about two hundred years.

2. Straight quotes

It is amazing that in 1995 people are still typing straight quotes. Learn the keystrokes to type real quotes, and in every program that you use, take advantage of the feature that types them for you automatically. (In PageMaker, choose "Preferences" from the File menu, click the "Options…" button, and check "Use typographer's quotes.") But don't type curly quotes when you need inch and foot marks—and don't type an opening quote at the beginning of a word that really needs an apostrophe! (While I'm on the subject of apostrophes—put them in the right place! *It's* with an apostrophe always means *it is* or *it has*. Always!)

3. Double returns

Hitting the Return or Enter key twice between paragraphs (or after headlines) separates the text with big, awkward gaps. It also makes it possible to end up with a blank line at the top of a column. Learn to use the "Paragraph space after" and "Paragraph space before" feature—it's in every program that uses lots of text. (In PageMaker, it's under "Paragraph specs…" on the Type menu.) You can determine exactly the amount of space you want between paragraphs, after headlines, above subheads—an elegant space that tells the reader a new paragraph has begun without physically separating them so much.

4. Two spaces after punctuation

I know, I know—if you are still typing two spaces after periods it's probably not because you don't know any better, but because you firmly believe it looks better that way. If all the work you create is for yourself only, go ahead and continue to type two spaces. But you would be doing your clients a disservice to set *their* type that way, because by now most people have become visually astute enough to

notice the unsightly gaps created by the double space. Standard professional typographic practice is one space; standard typewriter practice is two spaces. Publications typed with two spaces have an unprofessional appearance, whether you agree with it or not, and will cause your work to be ridiculed (open any book on your shelf—the only books you'll see double spaces in were desktop published). The high-quality type you're using, with its proportional widths and kerning pairs that tuck the letters so close together, does not need two spaces to separate sentences.

5. Gray boxes behind text

Just because you *can* make gray boxes doesn't mean you have to. Beginners often use gray boxes to make important parts of the text stand out because they don't have a lot of other ideas about how to make type a focal point, or at least make it a little more important than average. Besides screaming "amateur," type on that dotted, gray background is difficult to read. (Even worse is gray boxes with rounded corners. Earlier versions of PageMaker had a round-cornered-box tool right there in the Toolbox, which gave rise to huge overuse of that shape.)

Next time you want to focus on some piece of type, try something else: a dramatic headline font, reverse bold heads, heavy rules (lines) above and below the article, extra space around the type. Keep your eyes open and see what others do—copy those ideas!

6. Centered layouts

Centered type creates a stable, sedate, formal look because it is so symmetrical and balanced. It can also look deadly dull. Beginners center type because it is a very safe thing to do. If you center the page because you *want* a more formal look, that's one thing. But if you center because you simply haven't thought about it, or because you are afraid of uncentering it, that's another. As you flip through this magazine, stop at the layouts that interest you. Most of the pages that have a strong, dynamic feeling are not centered. An invisible line connects the elements in a flush left or flush right alignment, and the strength of that line gives strength to the page.

If you are going to center, then do it with gusto. Don't try to make all the lines similar lengths—show off the fact that it's centered. And if you're going to center, center *everything*—don't stick something in the right corner just to fill the corner.

7. Borders around everything

One border around a page often indicates a beginner who feels unsafe with type that is uncontained. The more boxes of type with borders around them, the more insecure the designer. I know, it feels safer to box it in; it gives the type a place to *be,* without just floating in the space. But you know what? It's okay to let it be. Really. That white space (the "empty" space) is itself a border—it encloses the type, yet lets it breathe; it defines the edges, yet maintains a freedom.

8. Half-inch indents

Yes, I know your typing teacher taught you to indent five spaces or one-half inch, but that was for a typewriter. Typically on a typewriter you were typing all the way across the page, and the type was relatively large.

A standard typographic indent is one em space, which is a space as wide as the point size of the type. In 10-point type, an em space is 10 points wide; in 36-point type, an em space is 36 points wide. This is roughly equivalent to *two* spaces, not five. Especially when your type is in columns, a half-inch indent is way out of proportion. Unfortunately, the PageMaker default indent for "Body text" is one-third of an inch, still much too large a gap. I hope they fix that.

9. Hyphens for bullets

Using hyphens instead of bullets is a typewriter habit. The round-dot bullet (•) is a little better (Ctrl + Shift + 8 in PC PageMaker, Option + 8 on the Mac), but experiment with more interesting bullets. You can get strong little squares or triangles out of Zapf Dingbats, or play with other picture fonts. Make them smaller and use the baseline shift feature (in the "Type options" dialog box, or at the right-hand end of the Control palette) to raise them off the baseline. It's amazing how this little touch can add more sophistication to a piece.

10. Outlined shadowed type

This still shows up, and in the most surprising places (like book covers and billboards and ads). Don't do it. I know the

The Lamb

Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow.
Everywhere that Mary went,
The lamb was sure to go.

This is just . . . there. It's rather weak.

The Lamb

Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow.
Everywhere that Mary went,
The lamb was sure to go.

The strength of the alignment adds impact.

The Lamb

Mary
had a little lamb,
Its fleece
was white as snow.
Everywhere
that Mary went,
The lamb was sure to go.

If you're going to center, make it obvious!

**Help me!
Please,
somebody
help!**

temptation is great if you're a beginner on the Mac, because with the click of a button you can make your type fancy. And that's the impression it gives—someone trying to make their type look fancy because they don't know what else to do with it. When you let the computer add a shadow with the click of a button, you have no control over where the shadow goes or how thick it is, and most often it just looks cluttered and junky because of all the different parts of the letters in various layers.

Again—look around, and try to put into words what other people have done to make their type stand out without using an outline and shadow.

11. Twelve-point type and auto leading

Just because PageMaker's default is 12-point type with auto leading doesn't mean you have to use it. For most typefaces, 12-point is a tiny bit too large for body copy. Copy a paragraph of 12-point text and set it in 10, 11, or perhaps 10.5 point. Compare the two printed pieces; notice which one gives you a more professional, sophisticated impression. Try adding an extra 1 or 1.5 points of linespace (leading). Compare them again.

12. Underline

This is a law: *never use the underline feature.* An underline means one thing: "Italicize this word." I know you were taught to underline titles of books, but that's because the typewriter couldn't set italics. And underlining italic text is one of the most redundant things you can do in life. I know you sometimes underlined to emphasize a headline or a word, but that's because you didn't know how to make the type bolder, or bigger, or a different face. Now you know. Now you have no excuse for underlining. Drawing a rule ("rule" means line) under text is very different from hitting the underline keystroke. When you draw a rule you have control over how thick it is, how long it is, and how far below the type it sits. When you tell your computer to underline, the line

bumps into the letters, obscures the descenders, is a clunky thickness, and makes it look like you don't know any better.

13. All caps

All caps are more difficult to read. That's just a fact. We recognize words not only by their letters, but by the shapes of the words. When text is in all caps, every word has the same shape so we have to go back to reading letter by letter.

All caps are fine sometimes, when you *consciously* choose to accept their lower readability because you need the look of all caps. But whether you're setting headlines, subheads, lists in a parts directory, catalog entries, or anything else, it will be read more easily and quickly in lowercase.

Beginning desktop publishers often use all caps because that was one of the few options we had on a typewriter to make type more important. If you use all caps because you want the words to stand out, or because it makes them appear larger and you think it's therefore easier to read, think again. Find an alternate solution, such as bold lowercase, a different typeface, more space surrounding the text, or a rule beneath, behind, or above the text.

And of course no one who is reading this magazine would ever put a font like Zapf Chancery in all caps. (And outlined and shadowed. Score fifty-one points if you do.) The capital letters in script faces are always more elaborate, and when you set these froufrou letters in all caps, they bump into each other, overlap where they're not supposed to, fit poorly together, and generally look stupid. Add the outline and shadow and you have the worst possible typography on earth.

•

If you scored above three points, don't worry. Creating professional-level type is simply a matter of becoming more aware of details. It doesn't take any more time to do it "right," and these details are certainly not difficult to gain control over. If you scored less than three, then congratulations, and consider it your obligation to gently teach others the things you know. ◗

Robin Williams speaks and writes extensively about typography and graphic design. Her recent books include the award-winning Non-Designer's Design Book *and* A Blip in the Continuum, *a celebration of fringe typography. Both are from Peachpit Press.*

Myths and Legends
Myths and Legends

Don't underline text that should be italicized. And if you want to call attention to a head or subhead, find a way to emphasize it other than underlining.

spoon knife
SPOON KNIFE

We recognize words partly by their shape; all caps make every word the same shape.

"HAVE A NICE DAY"

"HAVE A NICE DAY"

And never use all caps in a script face—they're not designed for it. Add an outline and shadow and you have something truly horrible.

©