

# Foreword from The Elements of Typographic Style

ROBERT BRINGHURST

*“The principles of typography as I understand them are not a set of dead conventions but the tribal customs of the magic forest, where ancient voices speak from all directions and new ones move to unremembered forms”*

There are many books about typography, and some of them are models of the art they teach. But when I set myself to compile a simple list of working principles, one of the benchmarks I first thought of was William Strunk and E.B. White’s small masterpiece, *The Elements of Style*. Brevity, however, is the essence of Strunk and White’s manual of literary technique. This book is longer than theirs, and for that there is a cause.

Typography makes at least two kinds of sense, if it makes any sense at all. It makes visual sense and historical sense. The visual side of typography is always on display, and materials for the study of its visual form are many and widespread. The history of letterforms and their usage is visible too, to those with access to manuscripts, inscriptions and old books, but from others it is largely hidden. This book has therefore grown into something more than a short manual of typographic etiquette. It is the fruit of a lot of long walks in the wilderness of letters: in part a pocket field guide to the living wonders that are found there, and in part a meditation on the ecological principles, survival techniques, and ethics that apply. The principles of typography as I understand them are not a set of dead conventions but the tribal customs of the magic forest, where ancient voices speak from all directions and new ones move

to unremembered forms.

One question, nevertheless, has been often in my mind. When all right-thinking human beings are struggling to remember that other men and women are free to be different, and free to become more different still, how can one honestly write a rulebook? What reason and authority exist for these commandments, suggestions, and instructions? Surely typographers, like others, ought to be at liberty to follow or to blaze the trails they choose.

Typography thrives as a shared concern – and there are no paths at all where there are no shared desires and directions. A typographer determined to forge new routes must move, like other solitary travellers, through uninhabited country and against the grain of the land, crossing common thoroughfares in the silence before dawn. The subject of this book is not typographic solitude, but the old, well-travelled roads at the core of the tradition: paths that each of us is free to follow or not, and to enter and leave when we choose – if only we know the paths are there and have a sense of where they lead. That freedom is denied us if the tradition is concealed or left for dead. Originality is everywhere, but much originality is blocked if the way back to earlier discoveries is cut or overgrown.

If you use this book as a guide, by all means leave the road when

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you wish. That is precisely the use of a road: to reach individually chosen points of departure. By all means break the rules, and break them beautifully, deliberately, and well. That is one of the ends for which they exist.

Letterforms change constantly, yet differ very little, because they are alive. The principles of typographic clarity have also scarcely altered since the second half of the fifteenth century, when the first books were printed in roman type. Indeed, most of the principles of legibility and design explored in this book were known and used by Egyptian scribes writing hieratic script with reed pens on papyrus in 1000 B.C. Samples of their work sit now in museums in Cairo, London and New York, still lively, subtle, and perfectly legible thirty centuries after they were made.

Writing systems vary, but a good page is not hard to learn to recognize, whether it comes from Tang Dynasty China, The Egyptian New Kingdom or Renaissance Italy. The principles that unite these distant schools of design are based on the structure and scale of the human body - the eye, the hand, and the forearm in particular - and on the invisible but no less real, no less demanding, no less sensuous anatomy of the human mind. I don't like to call these principles universals, because they are largely unique to our species. Dogs and

ants, for example, read and write by more chemical means. But the underlying principles of typography are, at any rate, stable enough to weather any number of human fashions and fads.

It is true that typographer's tools are presently changing with considerable force and speed, but this is not a manual in the use of any particular typesetting system or medium. I suppose that most readers of this book will set most of their type in digital form, using computers, but I have no preconceptions about which brands of computers, or which versions of which proprietary software, they may use. The essential elements of style have more to do with the goals typographers set for themselves than with the mutable eccentricities of their tools. Typography itself, in other words, is far more device-independent than PostScript, which is the computer language used to render these particular letters, and the design of these pages, into typographic code. If I have succeeded in my task, this book should be as useful to artists and antiquarians setting foundry metal by hand and pulling proofs on a flat-bed press, as to those who check their work on a screen or laser printer, then ship it to high-resolution digital output devices by optical disk or long-distance telephone line.

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durable visual form, and thus with an independent existence. Its heartwood is calligraphy - the dance, on a tiny stage, of the living, speaking hand - and its roots reach into living soil, though its branches may be hung each year with new machines. So long as the root lives, typography remains a source of true delight, true knowledge, true surprise.

As a craft, typography shares a long common boundary and many common concerns with writing and editing on the one side and with graphic design on the other; yet typography itself belongs to neither. This book in its turn is neither a manual of editorial style nor a textbook on design, though it overlaps with both of these concerns. The perspective throughout is first and foremost typographic - and I hope the book will be useful for that very reason to those whose work or interests may be centered in adjacent fields.