



INTRODUCTION TO GRAPHIC COMMUNICATIONS Section No. **LETTER SPACING AND SET WIDTH** 207

The 1970s fashion for tightly set type left a legacy of text that's difficult to read. Today, it's time to reconsider how much kerning and letterspacing is applied to letters.

In the 1960s, when phototypesetting was taking over from hot-metal typesetting, especially in the realm of display type for advertising, a new visual style emerged. The sudden ability to move letters closer together, without having to physically reduce the amount of metal in each piece of type, made it possible to do things that couldn't be done before (at least not without exceedingly difficult workarounds): overlapping type, distorting its shape, setting it at odd angles and in lines that weren't necessarily straight.

It was practical (though expensive) to have headlines set on photo-lettering machines even while body copy was still being typeset traditionally, on a Linotype or a Monotype. There was nothing automated about those early headline photosetters — each letter was positioned by hand — but the skills and the eye of a good typesetter could achieve wonderful, and precise, effects.

Urban Crowding

It was in the New York advertising world that the new style was developed — and popularized, since ads created in New York reached all around the world. Art directors like Herb Lubalin set the pace, gaining attention with bold, intri-



Figure 1: A logo needs to be recognizable more than it has to be legible. Herb Lubalin created the typeface Avant Garde, with a set of extreme ligatures, just for the magazine "Avant Garde."

cate layouts unlike what most people had seen before (see figure 1). In the 1970s, in the pages of publications like "Avant Garde" and "U&Ic," Lubalin demonstrated what display type — and even text type — could be like.

Not everyone was amused.

In metal type, whether hand-set or machine-set, the space between letters was fixed. The design of the typeface (and the process of its manufacture) determined the right spacing between letters; the spacing was literally part of the type. A typesetter could add space between letters, by inserting tiny extra strips of metal, but the only way to remove space between letters was to actually get out a special saw and cut away part of the metal in each piece of type. (The reason we call a type design a "typeface" is that the shape of the letter is literally the "face" or surface at the end of a piece of solid metal. The face is the part that prints. The width of the piece of metal that the typeface protrudes from determines how much space appears between letters when the type is composed into a word or a line.)

With no metal to worry about, only photographic images that had no physical body, typesetters could set type as close as they wanted. Art directors began asking for close setting when they sent their layouts to the type house (where the actual typesetting was done). Designers who saw the intricate, closely fitted layouts that Lubalin and other pioneers were creating tried to imitate that look themselves, demanding tight typesetting for their jobs.

The phrase they used when they spec'd the type for their ads and brochures was "tight but not touching." In other words, set the letters as close together as you possibly can without their actually touching each other or overlapping.

Read My Quips

There's only one problem with this fashion in setting type: It's usually not very readable. In the hands of a master (Herb Lubalin was a master of this art), it can be brilliant and it can work (see figure 2); in the hands of most practitioners, however, it produced a mishmash of crowded, cacophonous lettering that lost its impact and

*What
This Country
Needs Is More
"Music & Art"
(High Schools)*

failed to communicate.

The basic fact of contrast — which is how we see and read letters — is that it has two parts: the background, and the object that's against the background. Without the background, there would be no way to recognize the object, since there would be no differentiation, no contrast, no edges, no shape. The most traditional form of printing is black marks on white paper: letters against a contrasting background. The marks can be red or gray or blue or brown,

*touchingly, solidly tight
touchingly, solidly tight*

Figure 2: Kids! Don't try this at home with type of your own! (From the June 1977 issue of "U&Ic.")!

and the background might be yellow or green or black, but there must be a visible contrast between the two.

Since letters are not solid shapes but shapes made up of lines — thick lines, thin lines, curving lines, swelling lines, finely modulated lines of all kinds — you can see through them. They have space inside them as well as between them. Visually, when you space type, you have to take into account the balance between the space inside the letters and the space outside them. If

you squeeze out all the space between letters, you lose that balance, and you render the words harder to read (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Squeezing all the air out between letters, vs. giving the type some room to breathe.

(It's been said often that we read more by recognizing the shapes of words than by recognizing individual letters. There's a lot of truth to this. That's why it's easier to read words in lowercase letters, which have ascenders and descenders, than in capital letters, which all have the same height. But the shape we read isn't just the outline of the word; it includes the pattern of lines and spaces within the word, too. In reality, our eyes and our brains are more complex than our theories.)

Squeezing Into a Cab

The style that New York ad designers established in the 1960s and made dominant in the 1970s has had a long influence on type. Even though we don't design ads and brochures today that look like those from 1972 (or if we do, it's now considered "retro"), there's still an awful lot of tight type to be seen. The standards built into the early desktop-publishing programs were based on the prevailing style, and that style was tight. Too tight. Much too tight to be used by amateur publishers and by designers who had never set their own type before.

In the early '90s there was a counter-trend, which I think originated in the Netherlands, to go too far in the other direction and set text type so loosely spaced that the words didn't hold together — and again, readability suffered. This style is still with us, but so is the earlier too-tight

TAXI? TAXI!

Figure 4: Not all letter combinations can be tightly kerned. Nor should they. Too much kerning defeats its own purpose.

style. (And very few designers seem to realize that the spacing between type might have to be slightly different at large size than at small size, or that words in all caps or small caps are more readable with a little extra letterspacing.)

The effect of the long dominance of “tight but not touching” in typesetting is visible all around us — and it affects the readability of words in our everyday environment. Take the word “TAXI,” for instance — all in caps, as I just typed it here. If you follow the practice of setting letters as tight as possible, you would jam the A up against the T — just because you can. But you’re left with a huge visual space between the A and the X, which you can’t reduce except by overlapping the two letters. And there’s a smaller but still large space between the X and the I. For that matter, when you push the T and the A together, you’re left with a lot of space inside the A — much more than the squashed space under the arm of the T. The result (which I’ve seen often on real-life taxicabs, and on signs in airports and train stations) is a deformed word, a hard-to-recognize shape that looks less like “TAXI” and more like “TA XI” (see figure 4).

This sort of over-tight spacing between letters is often built into digital fonts, in the form of kerning pairs. “TA” is one of the most common kerning pairs, because in many typefaces, if you don’t do something to this letter combination, it looks way too loose. But the proponents of kerning tend to overdo it. I’ve seen all too many explanations of how to kern where the “before” spacing actually looks better than the “after.” (Sort of like those personal-appearance “makeovers” where you think the person looked better before the makeover artist got his hands on her.) The idea of kerning is to massage awkward letter combinations so they don’t stand out; over-kerning just makes them stand out more.

Striking a Balance

In the end, the only thing you can rely on is your own eye. A well-designed font will have good spacing built in — but not all of them do. Most often, the built-in letterfit and automatic kerning will err on the side of tightness (especially, it seems, in digital versions of typefaces originally designed for composition in metal). Running out tests is the best way to determine the best spacing for a font. (Looking at the letters onscreen, blown up larger than life, can be

very misleading.) In display type, where you may be setting only a few words, you can take the time to fiddle with the spacing of each letter, to make it look best in this particular use.

But the tendency is always, when you start playing with kerning, to take out too much space, to close things up so tight that the words don’t flow anymore. Leave your type some space to sit in. Look at how those spaces balance and fit together — within the letters, within the words, between the words, between the lines, between the text blocks, and among all the visual elements on the page. That’s where the artistry lies: the artistry of communication.