

# Corporate Typefaces

*by Moritz Kleinsorge*

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## Introduction

**When I talk about typefaces, people are at first clueless and then amazed about the relevance of fonts. So why do they matter? Why are they vital for every company or employer?**

**If you are also clueless right now, feel free to read my story — my proposal as to why creating and finding the right typeface for your company is crucial for its success. Maybe you'll be amazed, too.**

**Get inspired and start reading now.**

## The two Levels of a Typeface

Let's begin with the basics. When we open a book, our brain does not immediately start to scan the words. Instead, it firstly perceives the image of the type. We see the typeface, but we do not yet read it. Although this distinction between perceiving and reading takes place within a few seconds, it may be the most crucial foundation for any work with type. The Dutch type designer Gerard Unger (1942–2018) summarized this phenomena in one sentence: *“It is almost impossible to look and read at the same time: they are different actions.”*<sup>1</sup> These two different actions of seeing and reading type illustrate two levels that are decisive for all fonts, but especially for corporate typefaces: the verbal, and the visual level. The font does not only reproduce written text, but also communicates a message to the reader through its image. Paul Watzlawick wrote about communication between people that they *“cannot not communicate”*<sup>2</sup>, the same applies to typefaces.

If we now start to read this text, we take in this written information. We understand the meaning of the words, the sentences, and may become interested, curious, bored or feel something else entirely. What is as important, however, is that we also observe the visual atmosphere of the text: the font character. We unconsciously “read” the impression of the font with its many unique forms and details.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, we can speak about two levels of type:

### **The verbal level<sup>4</sup>**

The verbal level of type describes what has been written. Here, only the content information is important.

### **The visual level<sup>4</sup>**

The visual level comprises the optical appearance of the font, which gives each letterform and word an unique appearance and individual character.

### **Two levels for a Hallelujah**

Both the visual and the verbal level function independently but a message may only be conveyed convincingly if form and content are in harmony. Only then,

perfect communication is possible. To quote the American graphic designer Paula Scher (1948, Pentagram): *“Words have meaning. Type has spirit. The combination is spectacular.”*<sup>5</sup>

This is why fonts matter. The interplay between meaning and design allows for a convincing dialogue between the company and a client. But what if this interplay is disturbed?

If the content and written form do not match, there is a risk of misunderstanding the message. Or, at least as badly, the consumer decides against buying a product/service, because the offer seems dubious.

You probably know what I mean. If I receive an e-mail from my bank with its text set in a comic font, I immediately doubt its seriousness and suspect it to be spam. Both statements - the information and font style - do not fit together. Since my bank wants to build trust (so that I hand them all my money), their goal should be to radiate seriousness. The comic font, on the other hand, communicates in a playful and casual way – the exact opposite to my expectations.

## Nonverbal & Paraverbal Communication

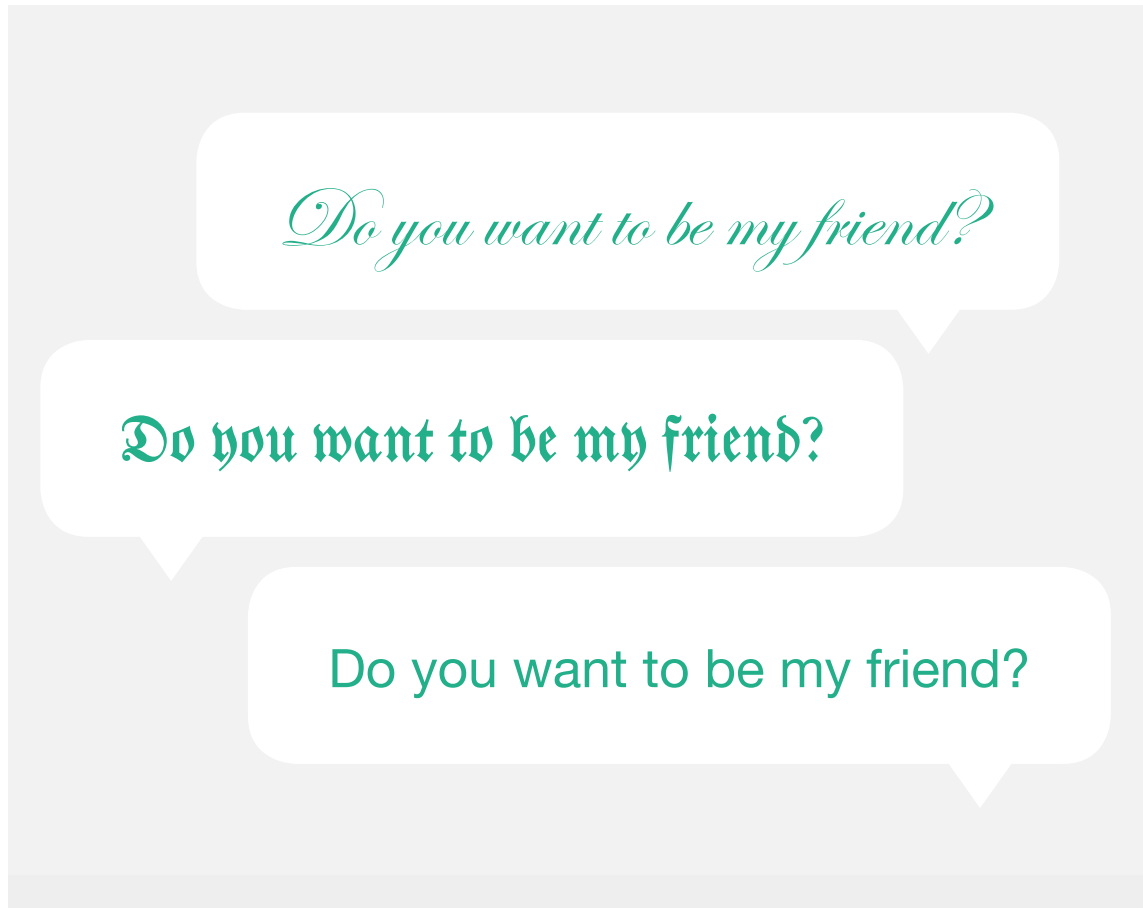
### Nonverbal communication

In non-verbal communication between people, this works similarly. We have all experienced of becoming confused when a person’s body language does not match what they had just said. In these instances, we give more weight to facial expressions and gestures, which are usually interpreted unconsciously, than to what is said verbally. The Iranian-American psychologist Albert Mehrabian examined the interpretation of dubious statements. He found that when body language and statements mismatch, 55% of participants trusted the others’ body language and only 7% the verbal content. The vocal expression therefore accounted for 38%<sup>6</sup>, hence, in everyday interactions, our gestures and mimics play a vital part in communication.

### Paraverbal communication

The visual level of type can be compared to the paraverbal communication between people. Among other things, paraverbal communication describes the voice, pitch, volume, speed or even the sound of the speaker’s voice.<sup>7</sup> A “yes” or “no” from a person’s mouth can sound decisive, but also questioning, hesitant or uncertain. These nuances of pronunciation can be transferred to typefaces. Kurt Schwitters said as early as 1927: *“Type is the written image of language, the image of sound”*<sup>8</sup>. Erik Spiekermann formulated this more succinctly: *“Type is visible language”*<sup>9</sup>. Thus, typefaces are not only a tool for communication, but more importantly represent a company’s pronunciation, tone and gesture.

Take the following example to experience the differences that typefaces can make yourself. Imagine the following situation: You are asked by three different people: “Do you want to be my friend?”. Each questioner has his or her own pronunciation/sound, represented by different typefaces. We do not (yet) know our possible new friends, but on the basis of their pronunciation/sound - their typeface - we can judge which of them we would like to hang out with.



*three different Persons = three different Characters = three different Typefaces*

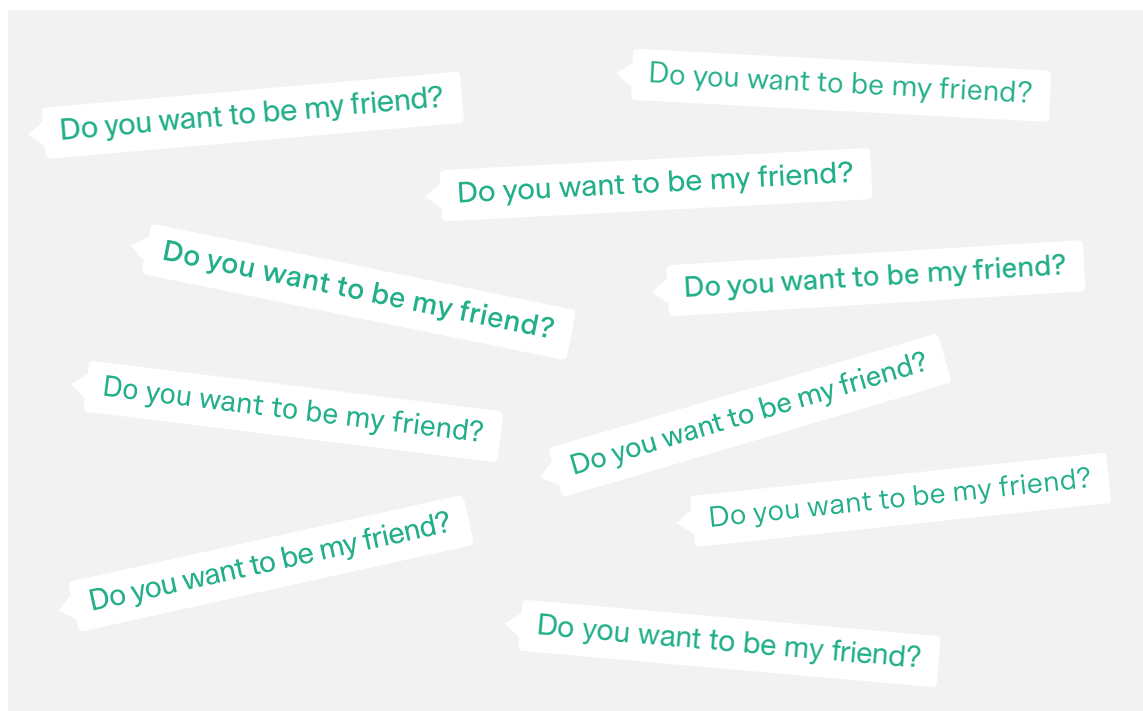
The example clearly illustrates the visual and verbal level of typefaces. My professor Dr. Jörg Petri created this illustration for a basic typography course I took almost 10 years ago. As you can see, it has left a lasting impression on me. Did you notice that the characteristics of each typeface created the character of your possible friend in your head? Who would you choose to invite over for dinner?

To me, the first typeface seems soft and delicate. The text seems to be handwritten, even though it is a normal computer font. This way, it appears personal and authentic encouraging me to be friend with this person. The second font is quite the opposite. It feels static, because of its thick and vertical stems. The overall appearance is darker and more spiky than the first typeface. The character of the font is loud and rough. As I am a quiet and pos-

itive person, I do not imagine I would like this person. In addition, I associate German history with this typeface Fraktur. The Nazis declared Fraktur to be the preferred typeface in 1933, as “true German Type”<sup>10</sup>. As you can imagine, this connotation reinforces my negative impression.

The third font, at first, does not trigger any reaction from me. The typeface seems very clear, sober and reserved. Neither positive nor negative emotions are triggered in me, at least in direct comparison with the first two examples.

Particularly in direct comparison with other fonts, we can see differences between the character of the typeface. After an analysis of the typefaces we can decide which person, (or typeface) we can assume we would most like to be friends with. After closer observations, we could even identify different preferences and characters within fonts which are, at first glance, fairly similar.



*Many similar grotesque typefaces on the first sight, but always with a different character.*

## The Problems with the Description of Typeface Characteristics and Effects

The great problem in describing the characteristics and effects of a typeface is subjectivity. Every person sees, feels and perceives a typeface in a different way. It is therefore not possible to form generally valid statements about how the character of a typeface appears and how it works. So in the example presented above, you may have come to a different conclusion than I did. Some will decide in favor of one typeface, others in favor of another.

*Beausite Classic*

Do you want to be my friend?

*Suisse*

Do you want to be my friend?

*Favorit*

Do you want to be my friend?

*Allrounder Grotesk*

Do you want to be my friend?

*Messina Sans*

Do you want to be my friend?

*Akkurat*

Do you want to be my friend?

*Scto A*

Do you want to be my friend?

*Fakt*

Do you want to be my friend?

*Unica*

Do you want to be my friend?

*Helvetica*

Do you want to be my friend?



## The Importance of Type in Design

The Corporate Design describes the visual appearance of a company. It consists of many small elements that harmonize together in a common system and thus visually represent the company as a closed unit. The individual components of this system include color, the style of image, photography and/or illustration and, of course, the font. The goal of a corporate design is to provoke recognition from potential clients and customers.<sup>1</sup>

The German architect, designer and typographer Peter Behrens (1868 - 1940) is considered the inventor of corporate design. While working for AEG (Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft), he designed both the products and the business equipment through uniform design approach, so that a consistent company identity was created.<sup>2</sup> He is also the eponym of the faculty {Peter Behrens School of Arts}, where his work was created.<sup>3</sup>

## The Role of Type in Corporate Design

When I reduce a corporate design to its two core elements, all that remains to me is color and font. Regarding both elements, Erik Spiekermann said that they would suffice to form a brand (“If you have a font and a color, you have a brand.”<sup>4</sup>). The importance of these two elements is unquestioned, but I think that in direct comparison with color, type has a much more important task in corporate design.

In the communication between a company and a customer, the typeface is not only a recognisable feature and thus a design tool, but it is also an information carrier. The font must always be used as soon as information is passed on: From a simple price tag, consisting of only a few numbers, to a complex instruction manual. A designer can do without a photo, without illustration, even without color, but he cannot do without letters. Letters must always be used. This makes the font the most important element of corporate design.

## Type vs. Language

Already in 1978 Günter Gerhard Lange (1921–2008) wrote “Type is—after verbal language—still the most important instrument of communication”.<sup>5</sup> In my opinion, our new digitalised world has moved even further towards written statements, although writing can never outstrip spoken language. Today, we communicate more and more via messenger services and even avoid phone calls.<sup>6</sup> The trend is also moving more and more in the direction of using websites to buy goods instead of going shopping in the city’s retail outlets.<sup>7</sup> As a result, writing as a communication element is coming to the fore and is thus becoming increasingly important. As a result, the significance of type has increased enormously in recent years.

## The Type Character / Theory

Now we have established why typefaces influence our understanding of written language. But how do they do it? What are the characteristics of form and shape and how do these alter our interpretation of type? This topic has been on my mind since I started designing my first font, James. Back then, I was writing my Bachelors dissertation and was just beginning to enter the world of typefaces and their effects. Ever since, the topic has not slipped my mind. If anything, I became more and more curious, so that ultimately I decided to write these pages. So what do I mean when I speak about typeface characteristics?

The word “typeface characteristics” illustrates that typefaces have their own character/personality – just like people. These characteristics make them individual and give them a personal expression. Do you think I am exaggerating? It’s not me who started this comparison. It’s even embedded in the terminology of type. Looking closely, you can spot many linguistic connections between type and people: For example, the word typefaces contains the word face, the /g has an ear, the /K and /R a leg, the /b, /d, /p, /q a belly, the /T two arms, ... Fonts are like people: They own body parts and a unique personality.

### **The Character of a Typeface**

The character of a typeface lets us perceive it as hard, soft, playful, serious, etc. It describes the look and feel of the typeface, it is responsible for the tone of voice in which a text speaks to us. The character of a typeface is created by many small design decisions, which are usually made at the beginning of the designing process. These decisions apply to all letters and thus determine the basic character of the font. The various design parameters and many other letter details ensure that no fonts look identical.

But what would a type designer look out for? What parameters make a difference? How do you create a new and unique typeface? In the following points, I give you an overview of small design decisions that in the end, can make your own font stand out.

The basic design parameters that apply to all letters are<sup>1</sup>

- \_ the stroke width contrast
- \_ the proportion scheme (classic or modern)
- \_ the size ratio of the letter heights to each other (x-height, cap height, ascenders and descenders)
- \_ the alignment of the contrast (wide nib - pointed nib)
- \_ the width of the letters
- \_ general basic shapes (round or square shapes, dynamic or static, ...)
- \_ opening of the counters
- \_ stroke ends

*(I have visualized the above mentioned design parameters in the second part of this chapter.)*

Depending on the typeface, these details vary greatly. This way, the character of a typeface may appear sober at times and very distinct at others. For example, the stroke width contrast can be low or very high, which has a direct influence on the effect of the font. If you start to combine all these characteristics together, you will – et voilà – design a new typeface which is unique (despite the hundreds of thousands of typefaces that have already been published).

In addition to these design parameters mentioned above, there are other characteristics of letter elements that contribute to the overall appearance of the font. Depending on the detail, these elements may appear on several letters in your font therefore, greatly altering its appearance.<sup>2</sup> To be more precise, I will use the following example: There are a number of design options for the spur at the stem of the lowercase letter /n. This small detail is a frequently recurring element in the alphabet, so it is very likely to affect the letters /a, /b, /d, /g (two-storey), /m, /p, /q and /r. This means that more than 1/3 of the lowercase letters already have the same detail and thus guarantee a sense of belonging between them. In a whole page of text this detail is then already “hundredfold”<sup>3</sup> and has therefore been frequently noticed by the reader.

This optical consistency between letters is obviously crucial for a well-created typeface. A very frequently quoted sentence by the British type designer Matthew Carter (\*1937, designer of the typefaces Verdana, Georgia, ITC Galliard and others) reads: *“Type is a beautiful group of letters, not a group of beautiful letters.”*<sup>4</sup> He describes that all letters must fit into the existing system of design parameters and characteristics, so that a sense of belonging between all letters can be guaranteed.

In addition to these frequently occurring design parameters and letter elements, there are a large number of other design options for individual letters, which are dealt with in the third chapter. For now, I would like to shift the focus to the different letters as a whole.

## Associations

As you have just read, it is not only the individual letter that influences our feeling towards a font, but the recurring design choices that attach a distinctive feeling to a font. This way, another component comes into play: association. Associations are triggered when we have already seen the typeface in another context or have some other prior knowledge about it. In my very first example “Do you want to be my friend?” (first chapter) I already described my association with the Fraktur type. Without my connotation, which definitely influenced my perception, I might have perceived the typeface differently and would have come to a different conclusion. People without this prior knowledge might understand the Fraktur completely differently and would rather be friends with person two than person one. It’s subjective as each individual decides only for themselves, but it is important to acknowledge association as a crucial influence on how we perceive the character of a font.

## Zeitgeist?

Typefaces with a high contrast in its strokes appear elegant. Mono-Spaced typefaces look technical. Geometric sans-serifs appear cool. Helvetica appears neutral. Why? Zeitgeist!?

Some statements about type characters seem to have become generally established in society or have been learned over the years and I can only speculate about possible specifics as to why this came about. It may be learned. It could be that certain design icons had such a great influence on the design world that we now attach their values to the fonts they had used.

Vogue magazine, for example, represents the world’s highest fashion and elegance, while using the typeface Bodoni<sup>5</sup>, a classicist antiqua with a high stroke-contrast. I now connect these type characteristics with fashion and beauty. As a result, all fonts with a high stroke width contrast appear elegant to me.

Helvetica is considered neutral.<sup>6</sup> However, the first sans-serifs in history were considered grotesque (synonyms: ridiculous, absurd), because omitting the usual serifs seemed funny or nonsensical.<sup>7</sup> Over the decades, nonetheless, we seem to have become so accustomed to this style that we can now call these typeface neutral. Or is it the frequent use of Helvetica that made this typeface so commonplace to us that it has become background noise? Who knows?

## Intended Usage of a Typeface

Obviously, the field of application also determines the character of the font. Do you need a typeface in a small size? The smaller the typeface is used, the less striking letter details can be seen and reproduced well. Hence, some design parameters are predefined at the beginning. In order for a typeface to be easily legible in small point sizes, the font should have a large x-height, its counters should be wide open, the contrast in stroke width should be low and the spacing should be open.

For display fonts (<16pt) the parameters vary completely. The more unusual the details, the more vivid the font, the more attention the headline will attract and appeal to the reader. For display typefaces there are no limits to creativity.

## Type Character in a Corporate Design

For corporate typefaces, which are supposed to work both in small and large sizes, you are looking for a compromise. However, to transmit information clearly and concurrently to enable recognition is, on closer inspection, a contradiction in itself. Letters with a strong character often do not enhance legibility, as their individual form makes them appear extravagant. These letters can be a frequent stumbling block within your reading flow, slowing down the reading speed. Finding a compromise between legibility and recognition is therefore a difficult task for the type designer.

### Typefaces to Remember

So, which possibilities are there to create a typeface with recognition factor?

*Firstly*, one can design a display typeface that has a strong and memorable character. In addition, however, it would be advantageous to commission a reader-friendly counterpart with a simpler design in addition to the character-strong version. This way, a strong recognition could be achieved by the headline version, but there would also be a similar, reader-friendly alternative.

Moreover, I call the *second* method “the Romain du Roi Method”. Strictly speaking, the Romain du Roi method is not a method at all, but rather a special design feature. The typeface contains one letter that stands out creatively, because it does not necessarily fit into the overall picture. I imagine this letter to behave similarly to a dancer in a group, who does not dance synchronously in the choreography. Their costume (stroke width, metrics, color) matches all other dancers’, but this individual stands out due to their own (dance) style. They will be remembered. It is just the same in typeface designs: One single letter may be sufficient to achieve recognition.

*Thirdly*, another way to create a recognisable typeface is to use it over a long period of time in a very media-effective way<sup>8</sup>. That way, the typeface burns into our memory on its very own. The more often we see a typeface on posters or commercials, the more likely we are to remember the brand/typeface.

## Formgestalt 01

Great, you made it through a long bit of theory. Now, let's focus on type-images and details instead. In the next section I present the various design parameters that I introduced in the previous chapter. They are visualized with the word "Formgestalt".

# Formgestalt

The basic form of the word has no optical contrast in the stroke width, it has angled terminals as well as straight spurs and sharp corners. The connections between the stems and arches are harmonious and the letters tend to be of equal width. I personally find the typeface smooth, open and friendly, but not particularly spectacular.

The comparison of the typefaces is done on two different levels. On the one hand, there are the "descriptive adjectives" (*d*), which compare the typeface only according to visual changes. On the other hand there are the "emotional adjectives" (*e*), which describe the resulting emotional effect of the font.

Have fun and click through the individual pictures, If you don't agree with my adjectives, I am happy to receive your responses via email.



## Connection of Stem and Arch

### The visual effect of a different connection

The typeface is more (*e*) cold, tough — (*d*) moving, constructed, dynamic, technical, composed than the default variant.



*default*

Formgestalt  
Formgestalt

*connection stem/arch*

## Reversed Contrast

### The visual effect of a different connection

The typeface is more (*e*) extraordinary, quirky, noisy, exceptional, heavy — (*d*) dynamic, modern, contemporary, lively than the default variant.



*default*

Formgestalt  
Formgestalt

*reversed contrast*

## Low Contrast

### The visual effect of a low contrast in stroke width

The typeface is more (*e*) elegant, retro, trustful, credible — (*d*) classic, balanced, light, curved, clean than the default variant.



*default*

Formgestalt  
Formgestalt

*low contrast*

## High Contrast

### The visual effect of high contrast in stroke width

The typeface is more (*e*) elegant, gentle, fashionable, attractive — (*d*) classic, light, fragile, delicate than the default variant.



*default*

Formgestalt  
Formgestalt

*high contrast*

## Ink Traps

### The visual effect of ink traps

The typeface is more (*e*) exciting, funky, fast, sportive, energetic — (*d*) dynamic, moving, active, lively/restless, instable, sweeping than the default variant.



*default*

Formgestalt  
Formgestalt

*ink traps*

## Large x-Height

### The visual effect of a large x-height

The typeface is more *(e)* loud, pushy — *(d)* big, wide, clear, space-filling, present, generous than the default variant.



The image shows two lowercase 'h' characters side-by-side. The one on the left is black and represents the 'default' variant. The one on the right is teal and represents the 'large x-height' variant. The teal 'h' is noticeably taller and wider than the black 'h'.

*default*

Formgestalt  
Formgestalt

*large x-height*

## Small x-Height

### The visual effect of a small x-height

The typeface is more (*e*) elegant, shy, decent — (*d*) small, delicate, short than the default variant.



Two lowercase 'h' characters are shown side-by-side. The one on the left is black and has a tall, standard x-height. The one on the right is teal and has a significantly shorter x-height, illustrating the 'small x-height' variant.

*default*

Formgestalt  
Formgestalt

*small x-height*

## Round Terminals

### The visual effect of round terminals

The typeface is more (*e*) friendly, childish, warm, optimistic, mellow, young — (*d*) soft, fluid, playful than the default variant.



*default*

Formgestalt  
Formgestalt

*round terminals*



## Rounded Terminals

### The visual effect of rounded terminals

The typeface is more (*e*) friendly, childish, warm, optimistic — (*d*) soft, blurred than the default variant.



*default*

Formgestalt  
Formgestalt

*rounded terminals*

## Classic Proportions

### The visual effect of classic proportions

The typeface is more (*e*) classic, humanistic, exciting, surprising — (*d*) lively, restless, active, jiggling, various, uneven



*default*

Formgestalt  
Formgestalt

*classic proportions*

## Bracket Spurs

### The visual effect of bracket spurs

The typeface is more (*e*) dynamic, modern — (*d*) technical, sharp, pointy than the default variant.



*default*

Formgestalt  
Formgestalt

*bracket spurs*

## Horizontal Terminals

### The visual effect of horizontal terminals

The typeface is more (*e*) locked, reserved, chilled, structured — (*d*) constructed, solid, closed, calm, mechanic than the default variant.



*default*

Formgestalt

Formgestalt

*horizontal terminals*

## Vertical Terminals

### The visual effect of vertical terminals

The typeface is more (*e*) friendly, fast, fluid — (*d*) open, dynamic, cutting, sharp, pointy than the default variant.



*default*

Formgestalt  
Formgestalt

*vertical terminals*

## Wide Letters

### The visual effect of wide letters

The typeface is more (*e*) slow, safe — (*d*) wide, static, calm, stable, robust than the default variant.

The image shows two lowercase letters, 'n' and 'm', side-by-side. The 'n' on the left is black and has a standard, compact width. The 'n' on the right is teal and is significantly wider, with a more open, spacious feel. This visual comparison illustrates the 'wide letters' variant of the typeface.

*default*

Formgestalt  
Formgestalt

*wide letters*

## Narrow Letters

### The visual effect of narrow letters

The typeface is more (*e*) fast, constricted, — (*d*) space saving, economic, tight, short, squeezed than the default variant.

The image shows two lowercase letters, 'n' and 'm', side-by-side. The 'n' on the left is black and has a wide, standard width. The 'n' on the right is teal and is significantly narrower than the first one. This visual comparison demonstrates the 'narrow letters' effect.

*default*

Formgestalt

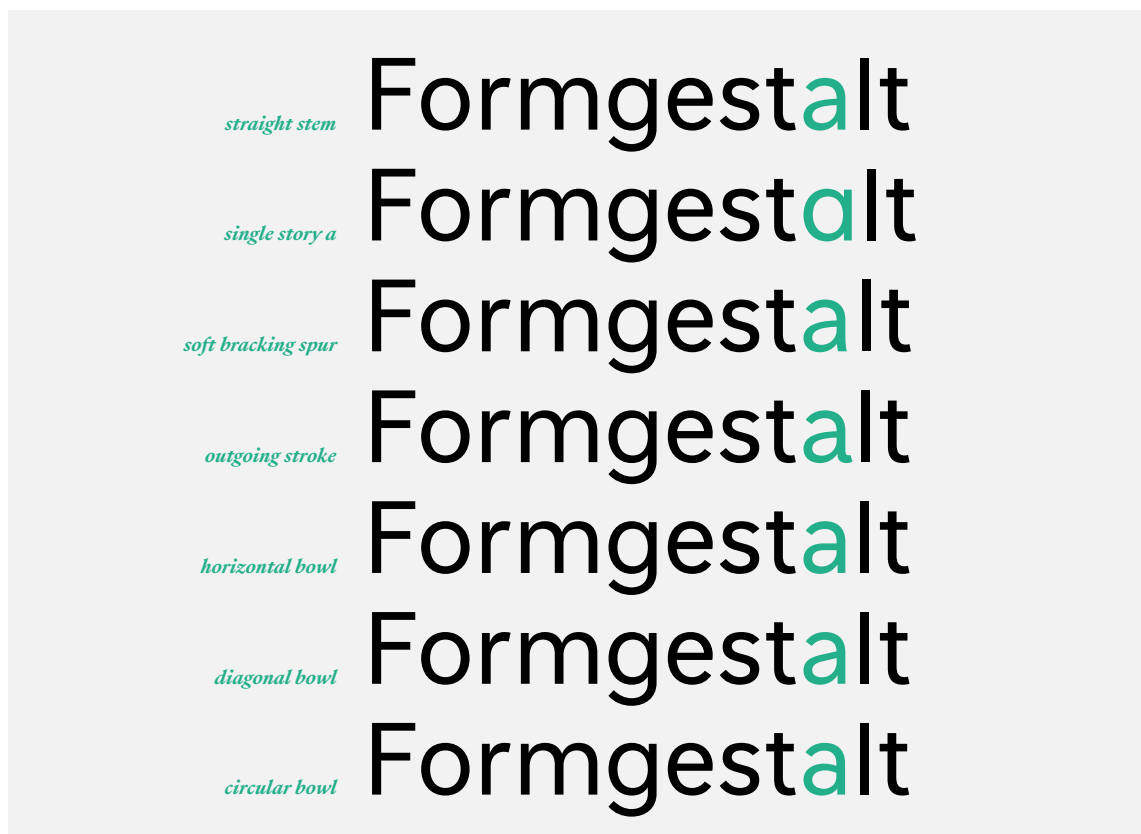
Formgestalt

*narrow letters*

## Formgestalt 02

After focusing on general design parameters of a typeface in the previous chapter, we will now take a look at the effect of one single letter within a word.

It's hard to imagine that even a single letter can change the effect of a word and accordingly the effect of an entire typeface. But let's have a look, in the following example, each of the seven lines contains a differently designed /a.



In line one you can see the /a from chapter 2. It is normal, quite average, so that the grotesque impression of the word remains. In the second line, the /a is replaced by a one-storey, simpler version. The whole word now tends to reflect a geometric script, differing from a grotesque one. The soft bending of the stem from line three reflects a humanistic trait and thus makes the word



appear more personal. The /a of the fourth line has an outflow at the stem, which has a dynamic effect on me. The horizontal middle bar in the fifth line adds a technical note to the font, as I associate this type of a with the famous DIN typeface. The steep middle bar in the sixth line makes the /a look a bit unstable, while in the seventh line the geometric idea from line two comes up again, although both letters are very different.

No matter how a single letter in a word is designed, its appearance also radiates to the other letters. In the second line, the grotesque design concept is turned into a completely different direction by the one-story /a. Immediately the two letters /o and /g are brought into harmony with the /a, which pairs seamlessly with the two letters and thus allows more geometric features to flow into the word. With the standard /a and its grotesque structure, I didn't consider the font to be geometrical, but with the one-storeyed /a it is.

### Focus on common letters

Letters that occur particularly frequently in the text, such as the vowels /a and /e, in contrast to rarely used letters such as /x, /y and /q, therefore contribute more to the character of a font. When modifying a retail font (see chapter "Various Types of a Corporate Typeface"), for example, these are letters that play an important role.

### And why does the /g matter?

Believe it or not, perhaps the most important "character letter" is the /g. This letter has a strong effect on the character of the typeface, because it is quite free in its design. The design of the letter /g begins with the decision whether it should have two or three stories. In the case of a three-storey /g the question now arises as to what its ear looks like, whether it is straight, sloping or curved (downwards or upwards). Is the lower loop open or closed? Is the connection of the loop to the counter soft or hard? These choices, coupled with the general design parameters, make a /g a unique element with a strong character that offers a high degree of recognisability.

Formgestalt

Formgestalt

Formgestalt

Formgestalt

Formgestalt

Formgestalt

Formgestalt

## Le Romain du Roi

When would you say the first corporate typeface was designed?  
Take a bold guess.

Going back in time, the first corporate typeface in history had already been commissioned in 1692 by the French King Louis XIV. He ordered the design of a typeface, which was solely intended for the use within the royal printing house.

The printing house was responsible for printing the King's notices and publications. For that reason – in my eyes – the Romain du Roi is the first Custom Corporate Typeface. The typeface represented Louis XIV, who spoke to the people through the printed statements. The french name Romain du Roi means translated “King's Typeface”, or strictly speaking “Antiqua of the King”.

*Was your guess close?*

### About King Louis XIV.

Who was the King who invented the concept of a custom corporate typeface?  
Let's take a closer look!

King Louis XIV (1638–1715) was appointed king at the age of four after the death of his father, but he did not take power until he was 23 in 1661. Humbly, he gave himself the title of Sun King as the sun is the center of the universe, just as he, the king, symbolized the center of the country. Under his reign, Louis XIV led France out of the Middle Ages and paved the way to modern times. He built palaces (including the Palace of Versailles), fortresses, monuments and founded academies that promoted science and art. To develop the economy, he introduced the division of work processes so that in manufactories, the forerunners of factories, mass production of goods could now begin. This led to financial gains through tax revenues, but his striving for power finally brought France to a financial ruin, as he invested money fighting numerous wars as well as magnificent but costly buildings.<sup>1</sup>

## The Origin of the Romain du Roi

Besides the fact that the Romain du Roi is the first custom corporate typeface, its design is also of particular historical importance. It represents a significant development in the evolution of typefaces: The Romain du Roi is considered the first transitional Antiqua, which „acts as a link between the Renaissance Antiqua influenced by writing and carefully planned and thought-out) forms of later classes“.<sup>2</sup>

Louis XIV was particularly interested in art and had already set up a group, the Bignon Commission, whose task was to produce illustrated books on the arts, crafts and trade. The committee began its research by studying the craft that they considered most important, the printing trade. So it was not surprising that Louis XIV entrusted the Bignon Commission, made up of Abbot Bignon (clergyman, writer and librarian), Jacques Jaugeon (royal typographer), Gilles Filleau des Billettes (scholar) and Father Sébastien Truchet (priest) with the task of designing his royal typeface.

The commission developed a grid for the letters, consisting of  $8 \times 8$  squares for the capital letters and  $15 \times 8$  squares for the lowercase letters. These individual squares in turn consisted of  $6 \times 6$  squares, so that the grid of an uppercase letter consisted of 2304 small squares in total. Within this grid, the typeface was designed and later scratched into copper plates by engraver Louis Simonneau. The punch cutter Philippe Grandjean, who was working as a royal punch cutter at the time, finally completed the typeface by making stamps from the originals. His final letters were understandably slightly altered in comparison to the hand-drawn designs.

### Special features in the design

As already mentioned, the Romain du Roi was the first transitional Antiqua. It laid the foundation for the development of the classicist Antiqua, whose most famous representatives include Bodoni, Didot and Walbaum. Typefaces of the age of Classicism are more rational and geometric than those of the Renaissance (compared to typefaces by Garamont, Granjon or Van den Keere), which were characterized being more calligraphic.

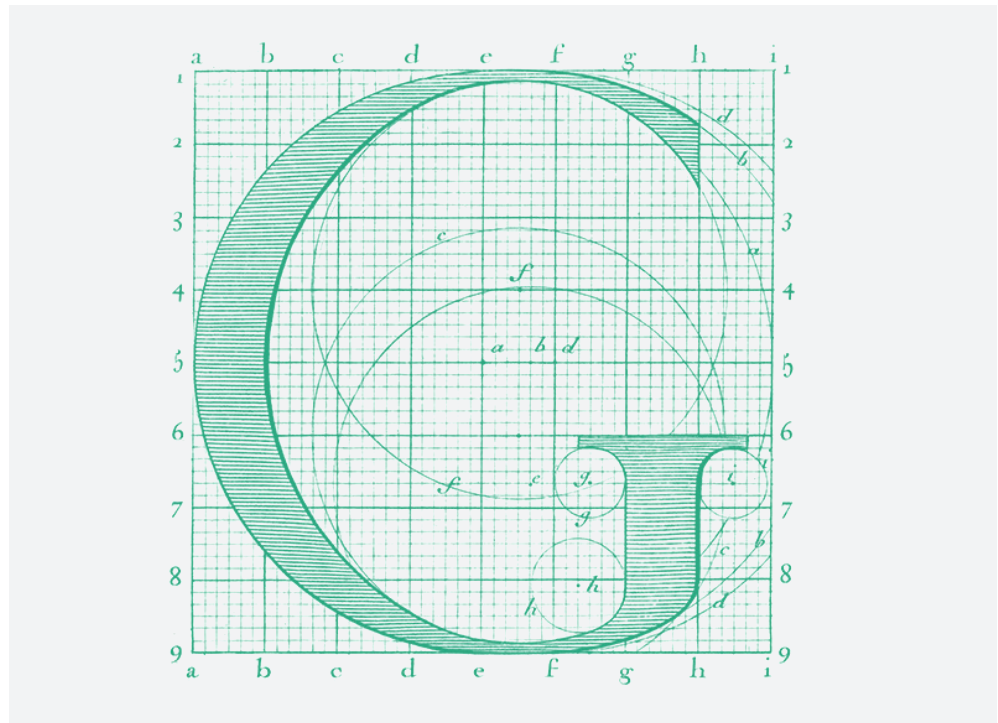
The Romain du Roi was the first typeface to be designed on the basis of a mathematical grid. The underlying grid resulted in perfectly straight stems, as well as perfectly horizontal serifs on the baselines. Another consequence of the grid was that the ascenders of the lowercase letters ended at the height of the uppercase letters. In the typefaces designed before the Romain du Roi, the ascenders slightly exceeded the uppercase letters.

## The Antiqua

Both the geometry and the symmetry are particularly evident in the design of the bowls of the letters /b, /d, /p and /q. These elements are clearly not derived from writing with a broad nib as they are symmetrical. For the first time in its history, the minuscule /b was given a proper foot serif on the left side, before that, the /b often only had a small spur.<sup>3</sup> The ascenders of the lowercase letters as well as the /i and /j were given a head serif on both sides, but this was dispensed with during the later development of the classicist Antiqua. These particular elements are therefore an important distinguishing features of the Romain du Roi.

The lowercase letter /l shows the most distinctive feature of the letters. It has a small serif on the left side at x-height, called *ergot* or *sécante* in French. The serif is a remnant of the calligraphic style which had not appeared in any previous typefaces. This serif makes the Romain du Roi unique.

The reason why the Romain du Roi /l possessed the serif is not clearly documented. One theory says that this serif was used to distinguish it more clearly from the capital letter /l, which has the same height. The other theory claims that Louis XIV wanted to have an unmistakable feature in the /l, because his name began with this letter. I personally find the latter theory more charming, but rationally speaking the former sounds more reasonable. Whatever theory may be true, the serif is THE identifying mark of the Romain du Roi.



*The Grid of the Romain du Roi*  
Photo © Riccardo Olocco

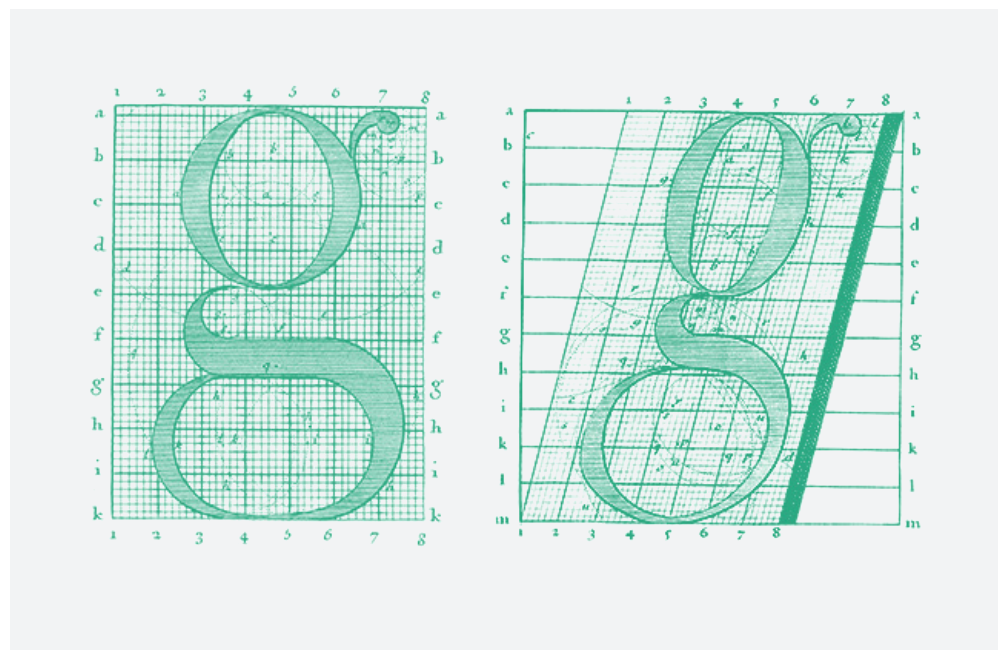
## The Italic

The Venetian, Aldus Manutius, first printed a book exclusively in italics around 1501. The italic type allowed more text to be used on one page, which led to cheaper and more portable books that were now accessible to a larger population. The books of Aldus Manutius were the so-called Aldinen, a forerunner of today's paperback.<sup>4</sup>

At that time, upright and italic type were usually used separately, which is also reflected in the design. The italic typeface is clearly derived from handwriting, so compared to the Antiqua, these are two independent typefaces and designs. Originating in Venice, Italy, cursive typefaces are today known as Italic. The italic of Romain du Roi, on the other hand, are an inclined version of Antiqua. Again, the grid, this time inclined, served as the basis for the design, so that the letterforms are very similar.

The use of the italic is also special, as it was used together with the Antiqua. The combination of upright and italic is common today, but in the times of Louis XIV, this was rather unusual.

The innovation in the letterforms of the italic version of Romain du Roi is the lowercase letter /h.<sup>5</sup> Until then, the serif of the second stem led into the counter of the letter, so that in small point sizes it could easily be mistaken for a /b. The Bignon Commission however, designed this serif outwards, just like it is on all other letters. From now on, this design became the standard version of the italic /h.



*Comparison of the Antiqua and Italic*  
Photo © Riccardo Olocco

## Use of the Romain du Roi

The Romain du Roi was first used in the book *Médailles sur les principaux événements du règne de Ludwig le Grand* in 1702. This book listed the achievements of King Louis XIV. He awarded himself medals for almost every event, including the fact that he recovered from an illness.

Shortly after the publication of the book, many designers began to imitate the style of Romain du Roi, but they often refrained from using the serifs on the /l and the head serifs on both sides.

Completed in 1745, long after the death of Philippe Grandjean in 1714, the final typeface had 82 different weights, 41 upright and 41 italics.

According to the legend, Louis XIV strictly prohibited the use of the typeface outside the royal printing house, which is understandable from today's perspective given its status as a corporate typeface. But it was not until 1814, much later than assumed, that the use of the typeface outside the royal printing house was formally prohibited. During the revolution, the British used the typeface in fake posters to destabilize the French regime.

Until 1816, the Romain du Roi was the font of the French king, until it was finally replaced by a Didot-style typeface.

## Evaluation of the Romain du Roi as a King's Typeface

How does the Romain du Roi represent the King? Is it a suitable corporate typeface? The most distinctive detail of the typeface, the serif at the /l, clearly marks the typeface as the belonging to the King. This letter, which is actually very simple in design, has become a real distinguishing feature with its serif at x-height. Every French citizen could immediately tell from this letter that it was a printed document from the King. Recognition being one of the most important tasks of a corporate typeface was thereby established very easy.

Compared to the typefaces commonly used at the time, the Roman du Roi has a higher contrast in stroke width, which nowadays makes the typeface appear noble and elegant - attributes that a King might traditionally be associated with.

Type design was taken into a new era by the Romain du Roi, moving away from organic to rational design. Thus, the typeface has been innovative and forward-looking. Likewise, under Louis XIV, France was developed from an agricultural to an industrial society. Thus, certain parallels can be observed between the reign of the king and his typeface.

## What if the Romain du Roi had not been a royal typeface?

Many printers copied the style of Romain du Roi. Fournier le Jeune, for example, was one of the typographers who adapted and developed the style of the Romain du Roi.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the typeface was visually represented throughout the country. The Italian Bodoni, the King of Printers, studied Fournier's work, among others, which finally led him to his typeface, which is the culmination of the classicist antiqua.

The evolution of letters and typeface design might have taken a different course if the Romain du Roi had not been a royal typeface but one from a normal punch cutter. Would the style have been adapted throughout the country?

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tard par Rochefort. Ce travail pr  
considérable; les premiers cuivre  
date de 1695, les derniers ont été  
1718. De ces cuivres gravés pou  
blée des arts» il ne fut tiré qu  
exemplaires au cours du XVIII<sup>e</sup> s  
les spécialistes en prirent conn  
Simon-Pierre Fournier, dans sa  
volume du *Manuel typographique*  
1764, se livrait à une brillante  
ces gravures :

«En 1692, l'Académie des sc  
treprit la description des arts, do  
graphie devait être le premier, co  
celui «qui conserve tous les a  
description de cet art fut en effe  
cée dès 1693. Malheureusement

*Highlights of the Romain du Roi*  
Photo © Riccardo Olocco



## Various Types of a Corporate Typeface

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It is a normal Tuesday morning, but you just got an exciting message. Congrats, you just got a new client! They are looking for a new visual identity, and – obviously – you are just the right person for the job. Whether they want a redesign or imagine needing an entirely new design, a new typeface is needed as the current one does not fit the company's image any longer. So, where do you start? What are your possibilities to obtain a new typeface for the Corporate Design?

On the way to creating a suitable corporate typeface, you have three different options to choose from: retail fonts, modified retail fonts & custom typefaces.

### Retail Fonts

Retail fonts are fonts that are accessible to every graphic designer and every company. Type designers develop and design these fonts according to their personal ideas, concepts and influences and then publish them. These fonts are sold via own online shops as well as distributors. Everyone can buy them and thus, theoretically, also the direct competitor of the company. The aim of a retail font is to sell well on the free market.

These fonts are available to designers within minutes and their costs are relatively low, at least at first glance. Well developed and designed fonts can already be purchased in the desktop version with up to five workstation licenses for about 20 € per cut, a whole font families with 16 cuts cost mostly between 140 and 260 €. However, depending on the size of the company and the intended use of the font, additional licenses may be required: For additional workstations, for web fonts (depending on the number of page views, the amount is staggered), for embedding the font in apps, installation on a server (annual license fees), etc. Thus, the use of retail fonts can become expensive in the end. For example, IBM is said to have spent about \$1.000.000 a year on licensing the font Neue Helvetica without all employees having installed it on their computers.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the corporate typeface IBM Plex, freely available as Sans Serif, Serif and Slab Serif, the company is now saving a considerable amount of licensing costs every year and also owns its own font.

When licensing retail fonts, there are a few more things to consider. It is advisable to read the EULA (End User Licence Agreement) very carefully beforehand in order to use the font correctly. A few type foundries do not allow the font to be used in a logo. However, many type designers and foundries have simple and fair licensing terms, but you should always be very careful about what you are allowed to do with the font and what you are not.

## Modified Retail Fonts

With comparatively few tricks, an existing retail font can be changed to better fit a company's appearance - and thus its character. In this case we speak of a modified retail font. Depending on the modification, just a few letters can be enough to significantly change the visual appearance of the font. Even small, often recurring details can make a big difference. For example, changing from square i and j dots and square punctuation marks to circular dots already changes the font and its character significantly. Letters such as /a and /e are more common in certain languages like than /Q, and hence change the font character more drastically (unless the company name begins with /Q). Depending on the country and language, the frequency of certain letters can vary, so different letters can contribute to character changes of the font in other languages.

Modified retail fonts are much cheaper and faster to implement than completely new designed custom corporate typefaces. The costs for the modification of retail fonts are difficult to quantify, as it is always the degree of modification that counts. It is often the case that the time required for the redesign of the font and its development is charged as well as the amount for the required licenses.

But be careful: Pay close attention to the licensing conditions of the retail font. Almost always the design adaptation may only be done by the designer or the type foundry of the font. In the case of fonts that are available free of charge and whose modification is permitted, the modified font must often also be freely available again.

## Free Fonts

Yes, there are free fonts out there in the internet. Some are good, but probably 99% don't have the quality you are looking for. Sources for good free fonts are google fonts and fontsquirrel. But again, take a look at the license, some free fonts are just free for personal use only.

## Custom (Corporate) Typeface

Custom Typefaces are designed according to the wishes and requirements of the company. The typefaces have exactly the right character, the appropriate character set (diacritical marks, numbers, symbols, ...) and the appropriate number of fonts. Everything is perfectly adapted to the requirements of the company, both visually and technically. It's your choice!

## The Typologo

A Typologo, also known as a Word Mark, is a purely typographic implementation of a logo - without a figurative element.

So coming back to your client, who needs a new Visual Identity. Of course you want to convince the client to commission a custom corporate Typeface. But maybe, a custom corporate typeface might not fit their budget right now, so you can propose a Typologo. It's the first step in the direction of a custom corporate typeface.

In most cases, the Typologo just consists of the letters that are needed to write down the company's name. Maybe at a later stage a type designer can create a complete typeface based on that Typologo (see next chapter).

Despite the written words, Typologos work like images. As soon as our brain has seen and stored the typologo a good amount of times, the font is seen as an image<sup>2</sup> - despite its composition of letters. We are familiar with the Typologo of Facebook or CocaCola, we don't have to read the logo first to assign it to the right company or brand.<sup>3</sup> We see familiar words as images, as discovered by scientists from the Georgetown University Medical Center (GUMC).<sup>2</sup>

## Custom Typefaces / Pros & Cons

How would you convince your client to invest in a custom corporate typeface? For you as a graphic designer, such a custom corporate typeface would be highly attractive to boost your design. For me as a type designer, these are the commissions I am looking for. But what are the positive sides for a company? How do you convince your client that this investment will pay off?

When I have to face a discussion, I love to be prepared. This way, it is easier for me to stand my ground and to be persuasive. So here are all the advantages and disadvantages of a custom corporate typeface I can think off. Feel free to look at them and decide: Do you think a corporate typeface is a sensible investment?

### **Advantages**

#### **Uniqueness**

The biggest advantage of a custom corporate typeface is its uniqueness. No other company will ever be able to utilise this typeface. That way, the typeface allows for the company to stand out visually. A big plus for creating visual recognition.

Moreover, its uniqueness eliminates the risk that the typeface will wear out or that people will become fed up with it.<sup>1</sup> Also, no negative associations could come to mind to interfere with your branding.

#### **Licensing costs and rights of use.**

Buying and using retail fonts always requires the purchase of licenses, which of course costs money. With a corporate typeface, on the other hand, all these license issues and costs are eliminated. The company owns all its rights, which means that the company can use the typeface where it is needed at no additional cost.

#### **Language and character range**

The company can independently set the range of letters and symbols that should be included in the typeface and which should not. Unnecessary char-

acters are therefore omitted by the type designer, which comes with the advantage of reducing the file size of the web font. Equally, if the company operates globally, every alphabet can be covered: the font could be equipped with Cyrillic, Greek, Arabic, Asian and Latin characters, all of which have been designed in the same style.

Additionally, the technical requirements can be adapted perfectly to the company. Tabular numbers as default? Or do you prefer the old-style figures? The conversion of the company name into the logo as a ligature? The possibilities are almost unlimited.

How do these advantages sound to you? As you might assume, I am greatly enthusiastic about all the possibilities that corporate typefaces pose to a company. But to be fair, I want to outline reasons as to why companies might decide against buying a corporate typeface.

### **Reasons against a corporate typeface**

The two negative aspects of Corporate Typefaces may be the factors time and money. A corporate typeface is time-consuming in research, in design and in production. This does not make a corporate typeface cheap, but depending on the size of the company it can pay off after only a few years.

Theoretically, it is even possible that commissioned third parties like design agencies have to pay license fees for the use of the corporate typeface. This would enable the company to recover the costs for the corporate typeface over the years. However, I personally don't find this option beneficial; the third parties will find a way to regain the costs another way.

Maybe this list will come in handy for you if you want to convince one of your clients in the future. Good luck and if they agree on buying a custom corporate typeface, you may think of me and this article.

## Custom Typefaces / Inspiration

Every designer probably knows the fear of the blank, sheet of white paper. Sadly, I am no exception. Creative block, lack of inspiration, and temporary hopelessness, all of which is represented with this A4 blank sheet of paper. But all beginnings are difficult. That also applies to the design of a custom corporate typeface. It may be that the customer only provides a few key points and then especially, it can be very helpful if you can offer a few ideas visualising different directions in which the design could develop. So don't worry, but be creative.

### Update / Upgrade

Probably the easiest way to create a Custom Corporate Typeface is to create a new typeface based on the company's current one. After all, the typeface has shaped the company and its outward communication for years. This way, the look and feel of the old typeface will be retained and the new typeface will quickly be associated with the company, as the differences in design are not too great.

### From a Logo to a Typeface

A further inspiration can come from the company's word or design mark ([see Typologo](#)). You could examine the design mark of the logo and inspect its design features, which you could transfer back into a new typeface. This way, the logo is visually strengthened and the font immediately offers a certain recognition. If the logo consists of a pure word mark, the typologo, you could derive the other letters from the few existing letters and on that basis design a completely functional font.

### Slogan

Based on existing slogans, keywords can be taken up by the slogan and used as a reference point for the design.

## Briefing from the Client

The first question that arises here is: Who is your customer? Is it the company itself or an advertising and design agency that already works for the company? The employees in a company do not often have a great deal of knowledge about typography and fonts, so that this is where the type designer comes in. The art directors however, have the necessary typographic knowledge and are often able to articulate what they expect from the typeface. So just ask them. Here, adjectives like dynamic, friendly, playful, neutral, etc or precise briefings such as „We need a legible, geometric font with humanistic features“ can be helpful.

## New Creation

The last option is to design a completely new typeface that visually reflects the company's values. These are determined together with the client and visually incorporated into the typeface, so that in the end a suitable typeface with the appropriate type character is created.

*In any way, creating a corporate typeface will be fun and challenging. And no creative block will stand in the way of a great outcome.*

## Conclusion

### **Typefaces Matter!**

**After reading these pages, I hope you agree that typefaces play a highly important role in (a corporate) design and, therefore, should be carefully selected and, more crucially, designed. Typefaces, that reflect the character of the company as perfectly as possible, will be remembered and thus create a connection between people and the brand.**

**In case it's tickling in your fingertips and you feel like you need a new Corporate Typeface, please get in touch with me. Simply send me a mail and we will start the process together.**

**I'm looking forward to receiving your message.**



## About

Hi, my name is Moritz Kleinsorge. I am a type & graphic designer based in Kempen at the lower Rhine Area, close to Düsseldorf, Cologne and Ruhr district.

During my studies I realized the charisma of typefaces and their power to support the meaning of a project. Since then, I am in love with lettershapes and started to design typefaces.

I hold a masters degree in Communication Design from Peter Behrens School of Art (Düsseldorf) as well as a postgraduate diploma from the Expert class Type design from Plantin Institute for Typography (Antwerp).

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