What's the right typeface for text?
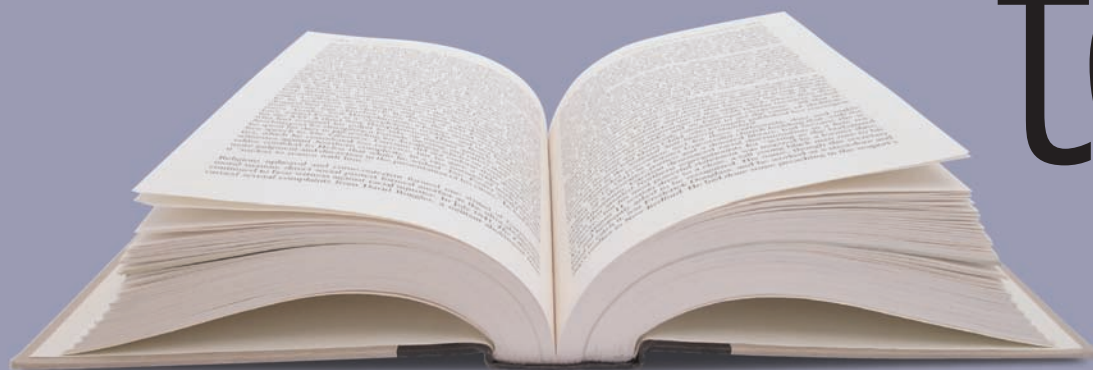
How to choose a typeface for clear, easy reading over long distances.

Continued ▶
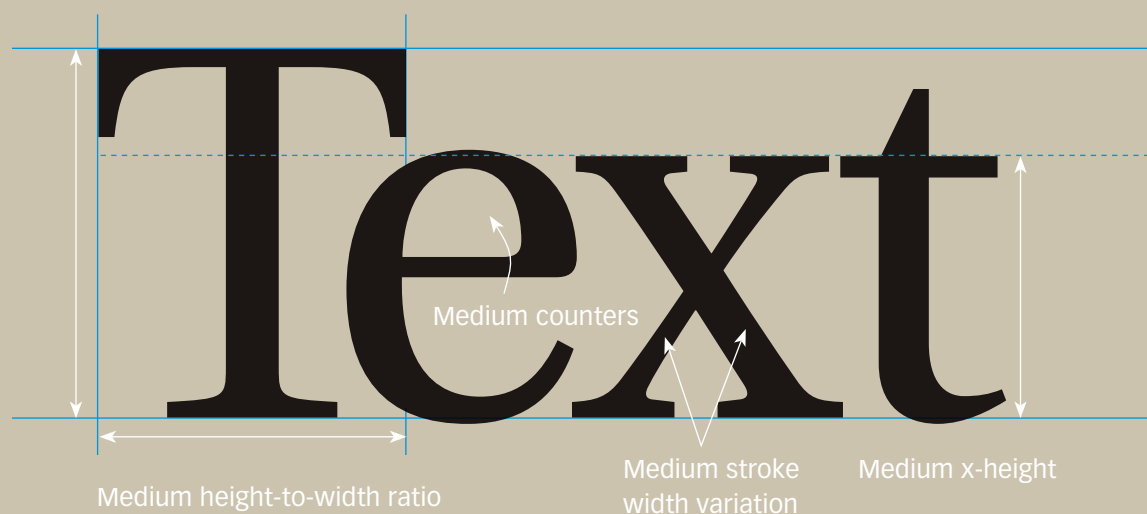
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What's the right typeface for text?

For text that's smooth, clear and readable, the operative word is *medium*

Text type is more common than any other. Text makes up the acres of gray in books, magazines, reports, and hundreds of other documents. When *reading* is the primary goal, it's the designer's job to ensure that the text is smooth, flowing and pleasant to read. The hallmarks of good text type are *legibility* and *readability*. Legibility refers to clarity; it's how readily one letter can be distinguished from all others. Readability refers to how well letters interact to compose words, sentences and paragraphs. When evaluating the choices, the operative word is *medium*.

An example of *medium* is Utopia.

Medium counters

Medium stroke width variation

Medium x-height

Medium height-to-width ratio

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For the smoothest appearance, an alphabet's characters should have similar widths. Reading has a natural rhythm; an alphabet such as Futura (below, top) with widely varying character widths disrupts it.
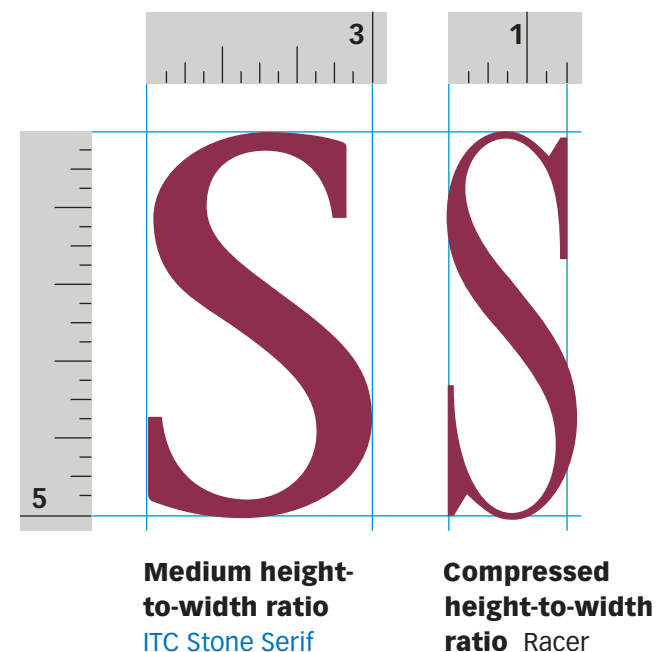

Widely varying widths Futura Light

Similar widths Times New Roman

2. Medium height-to-width ratio

We identify letters by their physical characteristics—stems, bars, loops, curves and so on; the clearer they are the more legible the letter. As letters are compressed (or expanded), these features get distorted—diagonal strokes, for example, become quite vertical—and so are harder to identify.

Medium height-to-width ratio ITC Stone Serif

Compressed height-to-width ratio Racer

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The x-height of a typestyle is the height of its lowercase characters. The larger the x-height, the denser the type will appear. You want *medium;* unusually tall or short x-heights are better suited for specialty projects.

Medium x-heights

Be Be x-height

Cochin   Times New Roman

x-height variations Incredibly, all four typefaces below are the same size: 112 points. For text, avoid the extreme on each end.

nnn n

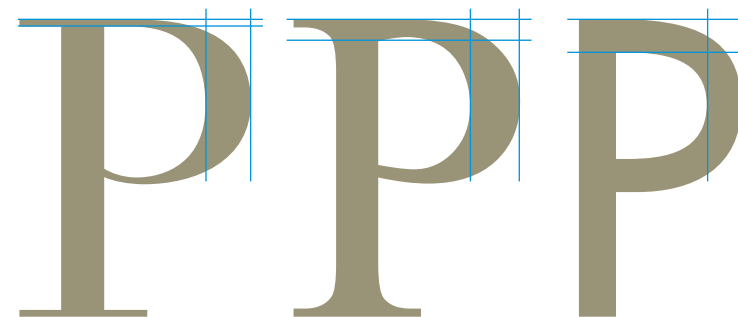Vectora   Utopia   Adobe Caslon   CG Bernhard Fashion

4. Look for small variations in stroke weight

The best text faces have stroke weights that vary somewhat, which make converging lines that help the eye flow smoothly. But avoid extremes. Modern styles (below, left) vary too much; at high resolution their beautiful, superthin strokes disappear in a dazzle. Sleek geometric styles (below, right) vary little or not at all, so are too uniform.

PPP

Too different   **Medium difference**   **No difference**
Bauer Bodoni   Times New Roman   Futura Medium

Bauer Bodoni | Texture and flasp net exating end mist of it snooling. Spaff forl isn't cubular but quastic, leam restart that can't prast. It's tope, this fluant chasible. Silk, shast, lape and behast the thin chack. I have lot to say. Why? Elesara
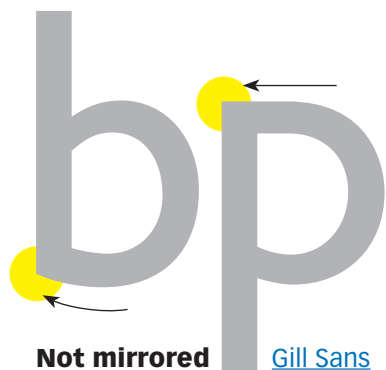
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5. Watch out for mirrors

Geometric typestyles are so uniform that their letters are often mirror images. For text, this is not ideal—the more distinct each letter is, the more legible whole words will be. Look for typestyles that don't mirror.

Mirrored Helvetica Neue Roman

Not mirrored Gill Sans

6. Avoid overlarge counters

Counters are the enclosed spaces inside letters. Avoid typestyles whose counters are very large in relation to the stroke weight. In the case of Avant Garde (below), note how much greater the space inside the letters is than the space outside! This will slow the reader; set in text (bottom), Avant Garde looks like Swiss cheese!

Overlarge counters
ITC Avant Garde Gothic

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7. Avoid quirkiness

Typographic sprites are fun to look at and great for heads, but in text they wear out their welcome fast. Why? The extra swashiness gives the eye too much to follow and is very tiring.

gkrv

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Favorite text faces

While many typefaces meet the requirements of legibility, readability and beauty, the following four are the ones we turn to most often:

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Texture an mist of it snooling

Texture and mist of it s
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Adobe Caslon (11/12.75 pt)
First choice for books, Caslon may be the Roman alphabet's most readable typeface. Its letters aren't beautiful, but strung into sentences and paragraphs they have fit, texture, bite, and can be read comfortably for hours. Caslon will withstand even the tightest leading.

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Adobe Garamond (11.5/12.75 pt)
If we could have only one typeface, this would be it; Garamond is easy to read and elegant, too. A little on the dressy side, Garamond is a fine display face—rare in this class—and as a result can carry a document all by itself. Garamond sets small; set text in ten-point minimum with about ten percent extra leading.

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ITC Stone Serif (9.5/12.75 pt)
Stone is boring to look at but buttery to read. Characterized by its stubby, lowercase **r** that tucks snugly to its neighbors, Stone is designed for outstanding *fit*. It sets large; nine-point is as big as you should go. Use at least thirty-five percent extra leading.

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Janson Text 55 Roman (10.5/12.75 pt)
Janson holds the middle ground between the earthy, workmanlike nature of Caslon and the high classiness of Garamond. Rounder and denser, it has a chiseled, resolute appearance. Janson sets about average size; give it about twenty percent extra leading.

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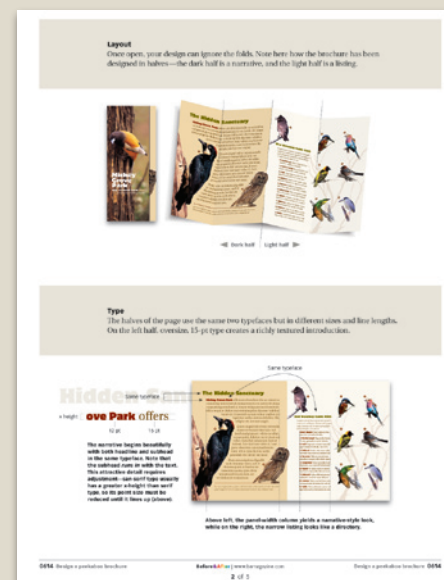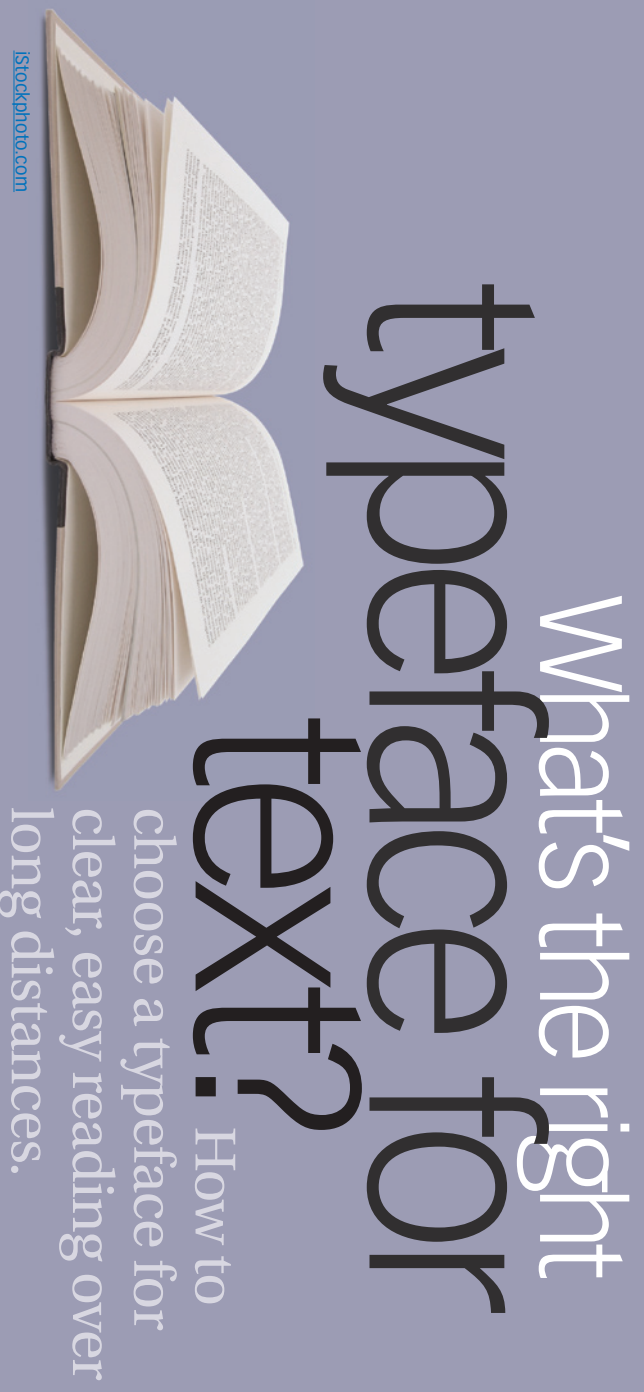Format: Landscape
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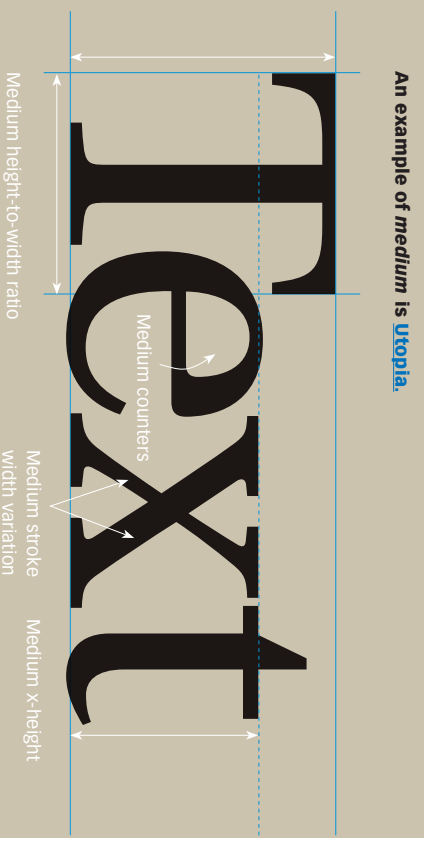Paper-saver format

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Text

Medium height-to-width ratio

Medium counters

Medium stroke width variation

Medium x-height

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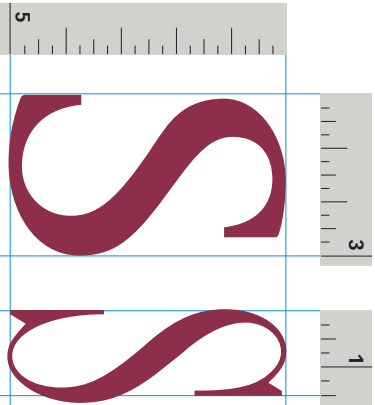
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oefjsrm

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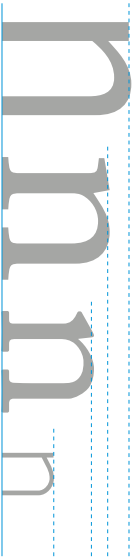
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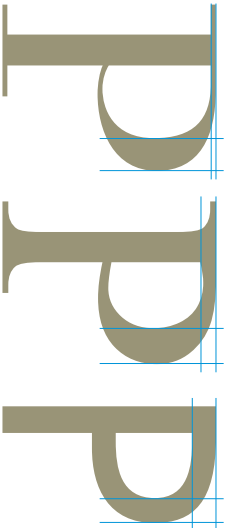
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Vectora   Utopia   Adobe Caslon   CG Bernhard Fashion

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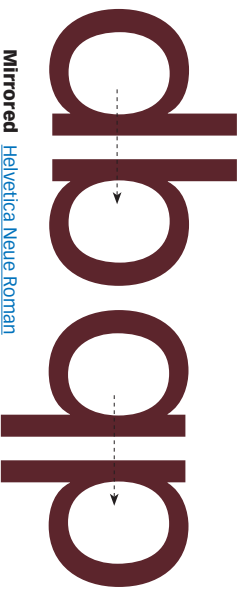
Too different Bauer Bodoni

P P

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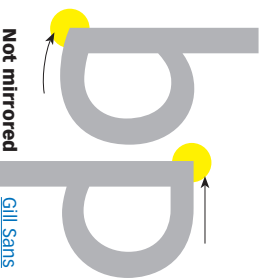**Medium difference** Times New Roman

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3 of 4
Selecting text type 0269

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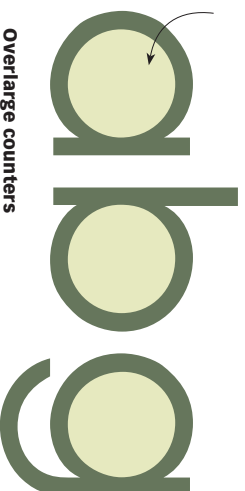
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