

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF

FONTS

FONTS
FONTS
FONT'S
FONTS
FONTS

Why do fonts have
personality? How can you
choose the right font?

Nick Kolenda

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NICK KOLENDA

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*Fast
Moving*



**Short
Bold
Bulky**



TALL
THIN

FIND FONTS WITH REAL-WORLD SIMILARITIES

Words that describe your brand should also describe your font.

All concepts are interconnected in your brain.

Toothpaste is connected to *floss*, *mouthwash*, *teeth*, and everything related to toothpaste.

Suppose that you see the logo for Avon:

(see fig 1)

Your brain will activate the visual traits of this font — *tall*,

thin — triggering *spreading activation*: Activation starts at these visual traits of *tall* and *thin*, spreading outward to every related idea (Collins & Loftus, 1975).

Like what? Well, most beauty standards favor *tallness* and *thinness*. So beauty is activated from these traits.

You can find a meaningful font by pinpointing fonts that can be described with similar adjectives as your brand.

Collins, A. M., & Loftus, E. F. (1975). A spreading-activation theory of semantic processing. *Psychological review*, 82(6), 407.

AVON

1

Serif

TRADITIONAL

SCIENTIFIC

Sans-Serif

MODERN

Script / Hand

PERSONAL

CHOOSE THE FONT CLASSIFICATION

Serif fonts look traditional and scientific, sans-serif fonts look modern, and handwritten fonts look personal.

Which *type* of font should you choose?

- **Serif Fonts Look Traditional.** Serif letters were chiseled into stone in ancient Rome, and these historical connections tie them to traditional craftsmanship.
- **Serif Fonts Look Scientific.** You often see them in legal documents, academic papers, and other documents that require trust (Kaspar et al., 2015).
- **Sans-Serif Fonts Look Modern.** They became more popular in the digital age.
- **Handwritten Fonts Are Personal.** They can increase donations (Chu et al., 2023).

TIPS

→ **Use Serif Fonts in Print.** They're more readable (De Lange et al., 1993).

EXAMPLES

(see fig 1)

Chu, X. Y., Tok, D., Zhou, X., & Chen, X. (2023). How companies use typeface design to engage consumers in charitable activities. *Psychology & Marketing*, 40(1), 107-123.

De Lange, R. W., Esterhuizen, H. L., & Beatty, D. (1993). Performance differences between Times and Helvetica in a reading task. *Electronic-Publishing-Chichester*, 6, 241-241.

Kaspar, K., Wehlitz, T., von Knobelsdorff, S., Wulf, T., & von Saldern, M. A. O. (2015). A matter of font type: The effect of serifs on the evaluation of scientific abstracts. *International Journal of Psychology*, 50(5), 372-378.

SCIENTIFIC
AMERICAN

SWAROVSKI

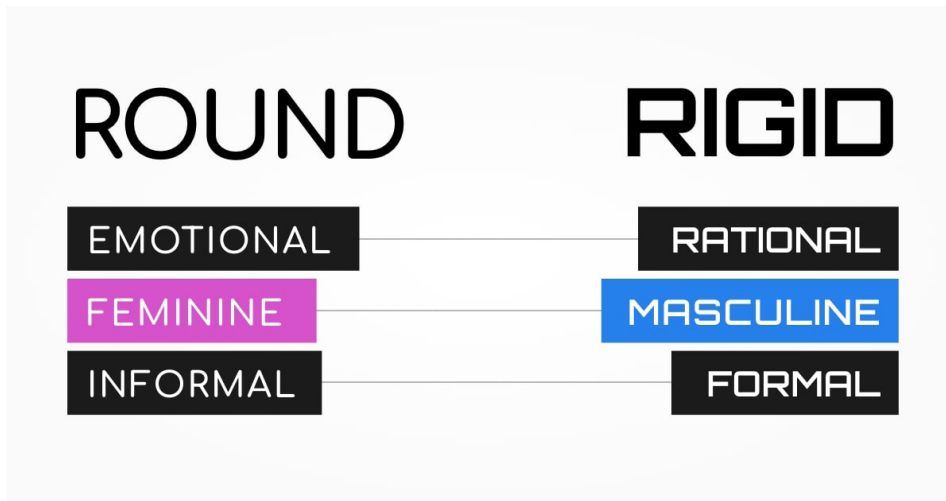
TRADITIONAL

dyson



MODERN

1



CHOOSE THE FONT ROUNDNESS

Round fonts are emotional; rigid fonts are rational.

Should your font have smooth and curved lines? Or sharp angular lines?

It depends. Rigid fonts are somewhat formulaic, resembling a sense of automation. And automation might be help or hurt your brand.

Just pick the side that *feels right*.

ROUND FONTS SEEM:

- Soft
- Comforting
- Feminine
- Beautiful
- Sweet
- Friendly
- Approachable

RIGID FONTS SEEM:

- Mechanistic
- Formal
- Official
- Masculine
- Powerful

You can follow these guidelines beyond fonts too. Adjust the corners of your photos or backgrounds to inject this meaning into other marketing assets.

Bar, M., & Neta, M. (2006). Humans prefer curved visual objects. *Psychological science*, 17(8), 645-648.

Brumberger, E. R. (2003). The rhetoric of typography: The persona of typeface and text. *Technical communication*, 50(2), 206-223.

Lieven, T., Grohmann, B., Herrmann, A., Landwehr, J. R., & Van Tilburg, M. (2015). The effect of brand design on brand gender perceptions and brand preference. *European Journal of Marketing*.

Velasco, C., Woods, A. T., Hyndman, S., & Spence, C. (2015). The taste of typeface. *i-Perception*, 6(4), 2041669515593040.

Simple

FAMILIAR

COMPLEX

DISTINCT

CHOOSE THE FONT COMPLEXITY

Simple fonts are familiar; complex fonts are distinct.

Should your font be *simple* or *complex*?

→ **Simple Fonts are Familiar.** Easy-to-read fonts produce a sense of ease and fluency, and we blame these positive emotions on the product (See Li & Suen, 2010).

→ **Complex Fonts are Distinct.** Gourmet products are preferred with difficult-to-read fonts because this disfluency is attributed to distinctiveness: "in the context

of special occasion high-end products, higher fluency serves as a negative cue...[difficult] processing of such products will make them feel more special (Pocheptsova et al., 2010, pg. 9)

Li, Y., & Suen, C. Y. (2010). Typeface personality traits and their design characteristics. In proceedings of the 9th IAPR International Workshop on Document Analysis Systems (pp. 231-238).

Pocheptsova, A., Labroo, A. A., & Dhar, R. (2010). Making products feel special: When metacognitive difficulty enhances evaluation. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 47(6), 1059-1069.



CHOOSE THE FONT WIDTH

Condensed fonts look tight and precise; wide fonts look stable and heavy

Should your font be *condensed* or *wide*?

I'll typically choose whichever style fits better in my canvas: A condensed font in a narrow canvas or a wide font in a short canvas.

But these fonts also convey meaning:

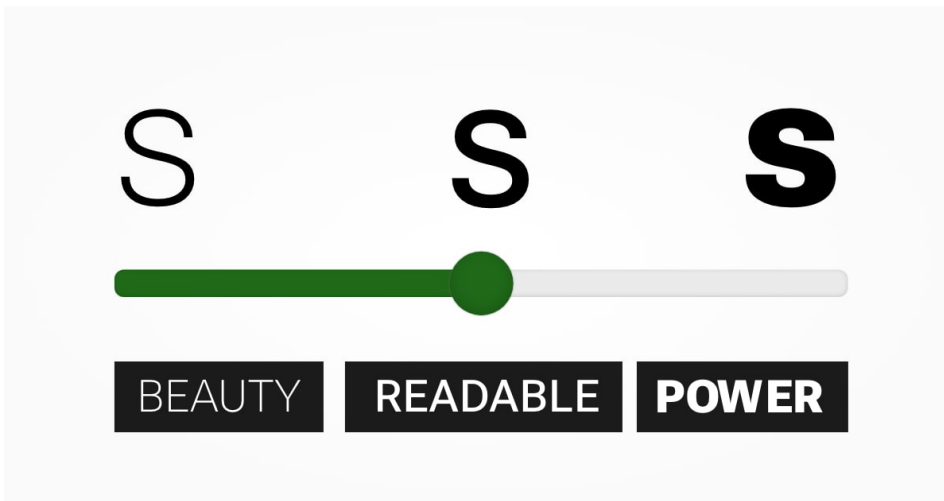
→ **Wide Fonts Are Stable.** Wide fonts look durable and immovable because they feel stable (Choi & Kang, 2013).

→ **Condensed Fonts Convey Slimness.** Ads for a "slim" phone converted better with a slim font (Choi & Kang, 2013).

(see fig 1)

Choi, S. M., & Kang, M. (2013). The effect of typeface on advertising and brand evaluations: The role of semantic congruence. *J. Advertising and Promotion Research*, 2(2), 25-52.





CHOOSE THE LINE WEIGHT

Light fonts are beautiful, medium fonts are readable, and bold fonts are powerful.

Should your font be *light* or *bold*?

→ **Light Fonts Are Beautiful.** Visual *thinness* activates your concept of beauty: "Typefaces that are lighter in weight (in width and stroke thickness) are seen as delicate, gentle, and feminine, while heavier typefaces are strong, aggressive, and masculine" (Brumberger, 2003, p. 208). Tall and thin fonts also convey lightness, quickness, and luxurious (Van Rompay et al., 2012; Choi & Kang, 2013).

→ **Regular Fonts Are Readable.** Medium weights are most readable (Luckiesh & Moss, 1940).

→ **Bold Fonts Are Powerful and Masculine.** Bold fonts seem *assertive, solid, substantial, and masculine*—yet also *domineering and overbearing* (Van Leeuwen, 2006; Lieven et al., 2015).

→ **Bold Power:** Craftsman, Patagonia, DeWalt

(see fig 1)

Brumberger, E. R. (2003). The rhetoric of typography: The persona of typeface and text. *Technical communication*, 50(2), 206-223.

Choi, S. M., & Kang, M. (2013). The effect of typeface on advertising and brand evaluations: The role of semantic congruence. *J. Advertising and Promotion Research*, 2(2), 25-52.

Lieven, T., Grohmann, B., Herrmann, A., Landwehr, J. R., & Van Tilburg, M. (2015). The effect of brand design on brand gender perceptions and brand preference. *European Journal of Marketing*.

Luckiesh, M. A. T. H. E. W., & Moss, F. K. (1940). Boldness as a factor in type-design and typography. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 24(2), 170.

Van Rompay, T. J., De Vries, P. W., Bontekoe, F., & Tanja-Dijkstra, K. (2012). Embodied product perception. *Psychology & Marketing*, 29(12), 919-928.

Van Leeuwen, T. (2006). Towards a semiotics of typography. *Information design journal*, 14(2), 139-155.

EXAMPLES

→ **Light Beauty:** Dove, Avon, Mary Kay

Dove[®]

AVON

MARY KAY[®]

BEAUTY

CRAFTSMAN[®]

patagonia[®]

DEWALT

POWER

1

lower — UPPER

friendly

POWER

LUXURY

CHOOSE THE LETTER CASING

Lowercase fonts look friendly; uppercase fonts look powerful and luxurious

Should your font be *lowercase* or *uppercase*?

→ **Lowercase is Friendly.** Use lowercase for *caregiver* brands to convey *altruism* and *compassion* (Oosterhout, 2013).

→ **Uppercase is Strong and Powerful.** Use them for “hero” brands to convey *energy*, *courageousness*, and *focus*: “BWM, Diesel, Duracell, Nike and Sony are also using capitals in their word marks, to express their power and strength” (Oosterhout, 2013, p. 39). Same with premium and luxury brands (Yu et al., 2022).

Though mixed case is most readable (Garvey et al., 1997).

EXAMPLES

→ **Friendly Lowercase:** Slack, Duolingo, Asana

→ **Powerful Uppercase:** Rolex, Prada, Tiffany & Co.

(see fig 1)

Garvey, P. M., Pietrucha, M. T., & Meeker, D. (1997). Effects of font and capitalization on legibility of guide signs. *Transportation Research Record*, 1605(1), 73-79.

Oosterhout, L. (2013). Word marks: a helpful tool to express your identity: an empirical study regarding fonts of word marks as a tool for transmitting an archetypal identity (Master's thesis, University of Twente).

Yu, Y., Zhou, X., Wang, L., & Wang, Q. (2022). Uppercase premium effect: The role of brand letter case in brand premiumness. *Journal of Retailing*, 98(2), 335-355.

 slack
duolingo
 asana

friendly

ROLEX
PRADA
TIFFANY & Co.

POWER

LUXURY

1

tight — bursting

spacious — relaxed

CHOOSE THE LETTER SPACING

Tight fonts are bursting; spacious fonts are relaxed.

Should you increase or decrease letter spacing?

→ Premiumness

Well, how would you describe tight letter spacing? Maybe *crowded*?

TIPS

→ Small text requires more letter spacing.

This description — *crowdedness* — might help or hurt your brand. A crowded store can feel popular, yet cheaper in value.

(see fig 1)

Research confirms that products feel cheaper in crowded stores and designs (Sevilla & Townsend, 2016; Huang et al., 2019). Interestingly, crowded designs are preferred by lonely people, perhaps because these designs imply the presence of people (Su et al., 2019).

INCREASE LETTER SPACING FOR:

→ Relaxation

Choi, S. M., & Kang, M. (2013). The effect of typeface on advertising and brand evaluations: The role of semantic congruence. *J. Advertising and Promotion Research*, 2(2), 25-52.

Huang, Y., Lim, K. H., Lin, Z., & Han, S. (2019). Large online product catalog space indicates high store price: Understanding customers' overgeneralization and illogical inference. *Information Systems Research*, 30(3), 963-979.

Sevilla, J., & Townsend, C. (2016). The space-to-product ratio effect: How interstitial space influences product aesthetic appeal, store perceptions, and product preference. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 53(5), 665-681.

Su, L., Wan, E. W., & Jiang, Y. (2019). Filling an empty self: The impact of social exclusion on consumer preference for visual density. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 46(4), 808-824.

HELVETICA

HELVETICA

1

HELVETICA

HELVETICA

← +50 →

→ -30 ←

LETTER-SPACING ADJUSTMENTS



Regular — *Italic*

STABLE

FAST

URGENT

CHOOSE THE FONT SLANT

Regular fonts look stable, italicized fonts look fast and urgent

Should you *italicize* your font?

Forward slants are associated with fast movements: "One graphic convention involves depicting items leaning forward into their movement, with greater leaning conveying greater speed" (Walker, 2015, p. 111)

Italics can trigger this connotation of quickness. For example, you're quicker to read the word *cheetah* in italics (Walker, 2015; Lewis & Walker, 1989).

Italics can also boost sales and click-through rates because they imply *urgency* (Mead et al., 2020). And I've replicated this effect in my own research — itali-

cized prices seemed more likely to change because they seemed alive and animate.

Therefore, use italics to convey *urgency* or *speed*. Like the Hertz logo:

(see fig 1)

Lewis, C., & Walker, P. (1989). Typographic influences on reading. *British Journal of Psychology*, 80(2), 241-257.

Mead, J. A., Richerson, R., & Li, W. (2020). Dynamic right-slanted fonts increase the effectiveness of promotional retail advertising. *Journal of Retailing*, 96(2), 282-296.

Walker, P. (2015). Depicting visual motion in still images: forward leaning and a left to right bias for lateral movement. *Perception*, 44(2), 111-128.

Hertz

1