Choosing and Pairing Fonts

Introduction

Hello and welcome to the first typography lesson on choosing and pairing fonts. In this lesson, I will be sharing some tips for choosing and pairing fonts for your web design projects.

I do want to note that I don't think being able to choose a good font is the most important typography skill - because you choose fonts just once. It is a very small part of your work, really.

The main skill is being able to style and work with the chosen typeface afterward, but if you like to have a bit more understanding about typography and different font types, this lesson should be quite helpful.

Choosing fonts

Here are a few things we should consider when choosing a font.

Text function

First, we have to determine what will be the function of the font. Is it for display text? Is it for body text? Or is the font going to be used for functional text?

Display text is basically short text in larger sizes - for example a title, headline or pull quote. You should set it to 20 pixels or more. And the font you choose for this kind of text can be more striking and have more personality or more details. You can use these display fonts to show the vibe of your project and attract your website visitors.

Body text is the main part of text for long reading content. It should work in regular sizes like 16 pixels. Good body font is actually quite boring - it does not draw much attention to itself and it just lets the content speak.

This is very important when designing for long reading formats like news websites or blogs, but even a simple website with only short paragraphs will benefit from a good body font. Your body text needs to be very easy to read.

Functional text is just a nice way to say "everything else", like everything that's not a title or body text. This is the kind of text for user interfaces, navigational elements, labels, captions, and other small interface elements. It has to work in very small sizes from even 10 pixels to 14 pixels. Picking a font with a consistent stroke and highly distinct characters is important here.
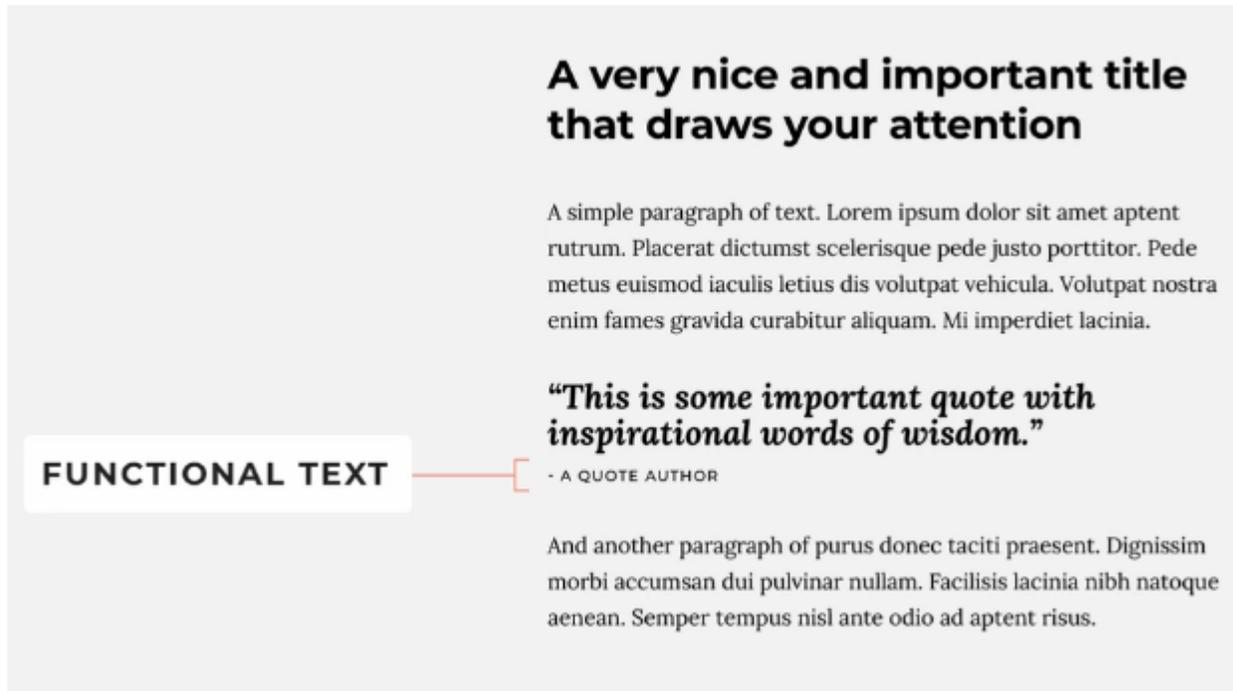
Weights and styles

The next element to consider is what weights and styles you'll need on your site. It's tied to the first point, because making up your mind about what you want to do with the font will make it easier to narrow down your options.

For example, if you look for a typeface for headings or large, short text only, (display font) one weight might be enough. But if you are looking for a long reading text (a body text font), you most definitely need regular weight and bold and italic style in addition to that.

Making sure your chosen font has the necessary weights and styles is very important.

Language support

If your fonts need to support different languages, if you are building a multi-language website, you have to make sure that the fonts include the special characters you need.

In the Polish alphabet we have some non-Latin characters. And I see it a lot: when a designer chooses a font that doesn't include special characters, the browser switches to the fallback font for that one missing character. And this creates these awful-looking words with letters from different fonts.

Nieznośnie

And you certainly don't want that. If working with a non-English language, make sure the font you choose is up for the job.

Use good fonts

This tip may sound a bit confusing. And you might be wondering how to determine which is a good font. With thousands of different typefaces out there to choose from, separating the good from the bad can be an intimidating task.

The first, single, most rookie mistake that we make is not keeping it simple. For non-designers and even beginning designers there is this idea that the best way to make something feel "designed" is to pick a crazy font. But if you want your website to look professional and beautiful, you need to start picking fonts that are a little bit more subtle.

Because you don't need to go all out there.

How to pick a good font?

Here are a few tricks you can use to start picking out high-quality typefaces right away.

This isn't always true, but as a general rule, typefaces that come in a lot of different weights tend to be crafted with more care and attention to detail than typefaces with

fewer weights. Google Fonts let you **filter by "Number of Styles"**, which is a combination of the available weights as well as the italic variations of those weights.
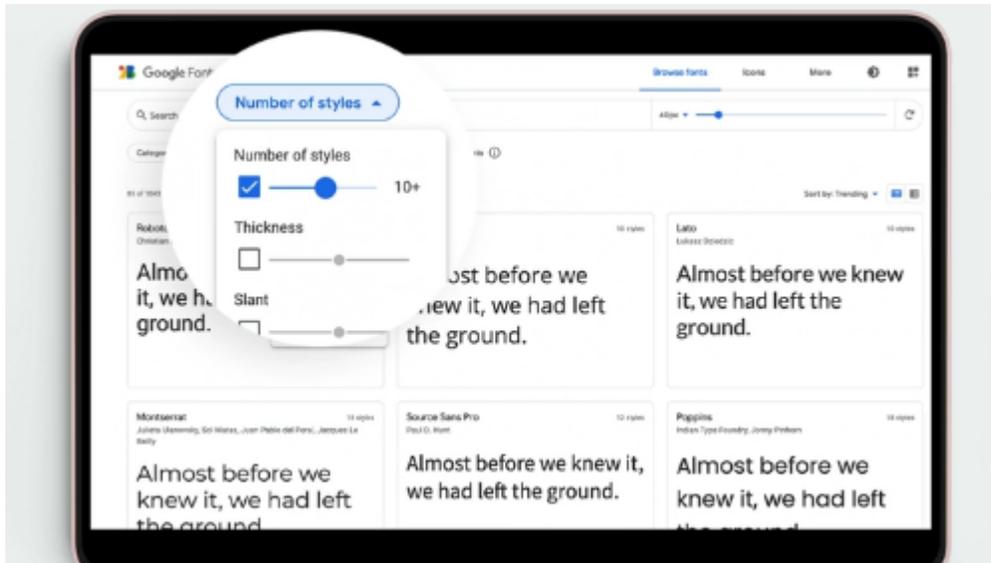
So, the great way to limit the number of options you have to choose from is to **filter the fonts to only display those that have more than 10 styles** (to account for italics). On Google Fonts this will leave you with around 50 sans-serif fonts to choose from.

And also consider this: if it is a popular font, it's probably a good font. Google will let you **sort by popularity**, so this can be also a good way to limit your choices.

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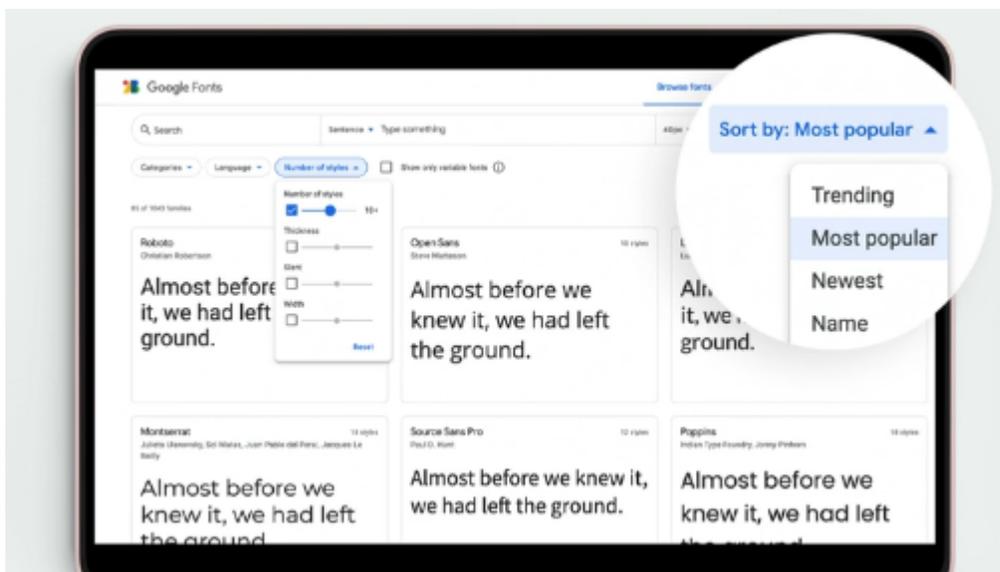
This is especially useful when you're trying to pick out something other than a neutral UI typeface. Picking a nice serif with some personality can be a difficult task, but looking at what thousands of other people have chosen can make it a lot easier. There is a risk of using a font that is too popular, as in overused - but I guess it is better to pick an overused font than a bad font.

Brand personality

The final and probably most important aspect to consider when choosing a font is what emotions, what brand personality the font should convey. And this leads us to the classification of fonts.

Types of fonts

I think it will be very helpful to know what broad categories of typefaces exist and what feelings they evoke. So, this is a very rough classification. Please, consider this as an orientation point.

While the first three types (sans-serif, serif, and slab serif) are pretty straight forward, easier to distinguish, and might be suitable for all kinds of texts, the differences between the latter three (script, handwritten, and display fonts) get a little bit of blurry; these kinds of fonts should only be applied for display text in most cases.

So, looking at the first three, sans-serif fonts appear simple and have a monoline structure, serif fonts have decorative tails or tapers like it's called serifs, and contrasting strokes, different weights of strokes, and slab serif fonts have thick, striking serifs. But

you shouldn't waste time overthinking whether a font belongs to this or that category. Better think about what mood a font creates and what sort of text it fits best.

SANS-SERIF   SERIF   SLAB SERIF

Sans-serif

MODERN

CLEAN

MINIMALISTIC

TECHNICAL

DRY

RESTRAINED

Futura
Helvetica
Roboto
Myriad Pro
Impact

Sans-serif typefaces have letterforms without tiny tails or lines at the end or beginning of a letter. Many sans-serif typefaces have a monoline structure, meaning all the strokes of a letter optically have the same width. It provides them with a sense of simplicity and clarity.

This, and the fact that the sans-serif started to gain popularity at the beginning of the 20th century, might be the reason why they are associated as modern typefaces.

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Sans-serif can feel modern, clean, minimalistic, technical, but on the other hand also dry or restrained… or even boring. So, when using sans-serif fonts for long reading text, consider not too geometric typefaces.

Also bear in mind that sans-serif typefaces in digital design are the more popular choice, and sometimes it might be a good idea to swim against the current to make your project stand out.

Serif

TRADITIONAL

CLASSIC

ESTABLISHED

TRUSTWORTHY

WARM

NOBLE

OLD-FASHIONED
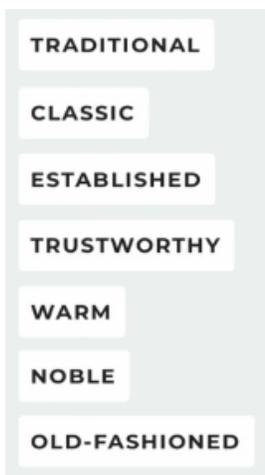
Garamound

Georgia

Bodoni

Merriweather

Times New Roman

Serif typefaces on the other hand do have these tiny decorative tails or tapers and have been used in print since the 15th century. And this background makes them appear more institutional, traditional.

Serifs can feel classic, established, trustworthy, warm, noble, but also maybe dusty or old-fashioned.

So you notice that serifs are not only decorative, they also give letters more distinctness, which is beneficial for readability, especially in body text.

Slab serif

CONFIDENT

STABLE

STRIKING

SOLID

CLUNKY

WILD-WEST

Clarendron
Rockwell
Courier
Roboto Slab
Bitter

These typefaces can have thick, sometimes exaggerated, block-like serifs. They came up in the 19th century, and that was when they were the most popular. This is also the reason why they might be associated with the wild west, especially in display sizes with very striking serifs.

Slab-serif fonts may feel confident, stable, striking, solid, but also clunky, or simply too wild-west. Slab serifs will work great for display text but can be hard to read when there are paragraphs and paragraphs of them.

They are quite popular, because in a way they combine the best of both worlds – distinct letter shapes and a mostly monoline structure (without any differences in stroke width). They can be both very modern or more traditional.

Script

SKILLFUL
ELABORATE
LIVELY
EXPRESSIVE
INDIVIDUAL
PLAYFUL
ELEGANT

Brush Script MT
Bello Script Pro
Snell Roundhand
Brokenscript
Alex Brush

When the first three categories were pretty straight-forward and somehow historically clearer, with Script fonts the definition starts to blur. Script typefaces represent calligraphy, writing tradition. This is a very broad category, and it can go from something you would see on a wedding invitation or a beer label.

Script fonts can feel individual, playful, expressive, elegant… Remember, they only work for display text. That's what they are made for. Make sure to set them in larger sizes and only use them for a headline, a drop cap, or a very short leader.

Handwritten

HUMAN
APPROACHABLE
FRIENDLY
CASUAL
NATURAL
AUTHENTIC
DOWN-TO-EARTH

AMATIC SC
Chalkboard
Bradley Hand
CHANTAL
Marker Felt

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When script fonts were about skillfulness and the craft of writing, handwritten fonts are about creating the illusion of being handwritten by someone.

They should seem approachable and relatable, not necessarily fancy, artistic, or written by a penman. The whole point of using these fonts is to make the handwriting seem authentic, so the problem is that it is quite difficult to find high-quality handwritten fonts.

Display

With the Display font category, the classification line gets really fuzzy. Display fonts are basically everything that did not fit in the previous categories.

Display fonts are usually designed for short-form and large-format applications. They can get very thematic or atmospheric, and create all kinds of moods. They often only have a single style and can work great for a logo, a short heading or maybe only a nicely featured drop cap.

But they don't always have to look that striking. For some typefaces, there can also be special display styles, a version of the same design that is made for larger sizes with different spacing and maybe some finer details.

Hopefully, this classification helps you choose the right fonts for your projects.

Limit your font families

And when talking about fonts, I need to make this very clear: most people are using too many fonts, too many type sizes and styles in their website. I am guilty of this myself.

Usually, it happens by accident. Sometimes we are just lazy, we leave the default theme fonts in some areas and then add our brand fonts but use different sizes and font weights, making all the styling decisions as we go. We might find a new font we really love and we can't help but add it to the site.

The longer the page, the more different styles and sizes appear, which then leads to a cluttered and messy look.

So this next tip is like the holy grail of all typography tips: **limit the number of font families you use for one project**.

It's a great idea to stick to just one (look at the Apple website: they are using one font family and it looks great) or you can go ahead and use a second font family if you're feeling fancy.

But consider this: instead of adding new typefaces, try using different font variations, e.g. different font weights, an uppercase style, or a lighter color to maintain the desired visual hierarchy.

It is almost never a good idea to use more than 3 font families on one website.

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Pairing Fonts

We know that some fonts are great for headlines and others will work best for body text. But how do we make sure that all the elements work well with each other?

Here are my tips for pairing fonts.

Use styles of the same font

First tip is to skip pairing them at all and to basically just use the same font. You can achieve a lot of variety by using different font weights, or different opacity, or italics. Sticking to one font will make sure your design is consistent and I do recommend it, but that being said - using more fonts and pairing them is fun, so this idea is probably not for everyone.

Use a superfamily

This is another very simple strategy: to use fonts from within the same font family or the superfamily, as it's sometimes called. For example, Adelle and Adelle sans (the similar names are not a coincidence) were meant and designed to be used together.

Use fonts by the same designer

Another simple strategy you can use is to choose the fonts made by the same designer. So, on Google Fonts for example, you can search by the designer's name and see if you'll find a second font to match the one you picked.

Match serif with sans-serif

This is also a great approach because there's already an element of variety. Pick one as a display face and the other as the body, but since you're starting with a lot of contrast, look for ways to unify the two faces.

Study the forms of the letters side by side: do they have a similar character width? A similar x-height? Are the round letters more geometric (perfectly round) or not? If the two fonts don't have any kind of structural similarity, they probably won't work great together.

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Find inspiration online

There are a lot of great tools and resources you can find online when it comes to beautiful typography. The one website I think you need to know about is fontjoy.com. It is a Google Font pairing generator tool that lets you choose the contrast between fonts it'll show you - from high contrasting to very similar fonts. And it's a must-check if you are struggling with choosing a font combination for your project.

I hope these tips will help you make good typography decisions.

Resources

GET INSPIRED:

Google Fonts

Font Joy

GUIDES (available in the Downloads section of this lesson):

Typeface Legibility Guide

Good Google Fonts

Action Items

☐ Download and read the Typeface Legibility Guide. Learn how to determine if the font will be easy to read.

☐ Download the Good Google Fonts list and browse through it for inspiration.

☐ Install the WhatFont browser extension (if you haven't yet) and inspect fonts on a couple of different websites.