

Amy Toole

Dr. Sonia Stephens

ENC 6261

22 April 2020

## Typography, Text, and the Reader Experience

### Literature Review

#### **Introduction**

Understanding how design affects perception is an important requirement for creating impactful content. This paper seeks to examine the rhetoric of typography and articulate the role that typography plays in reading performance, as well as describe the practical application of typography selection. This research is relevant because typography is a common part of document design and plays a significant role in the reading experience.

There are three important terms to understand: typography, typeface, and font. Typography includes all visual aspects of a written text; the “style, arrangement, or appearance of typeset manner” (Merriam-Webster). Typeface is an element of typography: “all type of a single design” (Merriam-Webster). A font is a subset of a typeface: an assortment or set of type of characters all of one style and sometimes one size” (Merriam-Webster). So: Arial bold 10 point and Arial regular 12 point are in the same typeface family but are two different fonts.

Interest in this topic was piqued with “The Rhetoric of Typography,” a three-part study by Eva Brumberger published in 2003-2004. A cited reference search of this study led to dozens of other articles, and investigation of these articles revealed studies that were repeatedly cited and used for further research. This review also includes studies on

the periphery of typography rhetoric research, such as authors who study a narrow aspect of the topic or who are not widely cited by other scholars.

This literature review is structured to mirror existing trends in literature. The foundation of the research is typeface personality, a concept based on intuition and a body of practitioner lore but backed by little empirical support until the early 2000s. In addition to typeface personality, the reader experience is shaped by the relationship between typeface personality and document genre, as well as specific typeface characteristics that contribute to personality.

The other theme in the literature is the practical application of typeface rhetoric. Some applications have long histories, such as pedagogy and advertising. Other applications are more recent, such as how typography rhetoric influences politics.

The relationship between typeface, text, and reader perception is complex and continues to change as communication methods and audience expectations evolve. Typography is a unique part of document design because it combines visual and verbal communication. By drawing on decades-old studies, scholars conduct modern-day research to find more effective ways of engaging with readers.

## **Reader Interaction**

### *Typeface Personality*

A widespread belief is that different typefaces evoke specific reactions: a text composed in Comic Sans, for example, will be received differently than a text composed in Times New Roman. Little data existed to support this assumption until the 2000s when a body of typographic rhetoric research began to grow.

The examination of typography rhetoric begins with determining the relationship between typefaces and personality. The foundation of this research can be attributed to

an early group of researchers who utilized empirical methods for print and screen text. Brumberger and Shaikh et al. were some of the first to provide data that supported long-held intuition and lore. Their findings prove that readers attribute consistent personality traits to typefaces (Brumberger “Persona” 221; Shaikh et al. 6). The results from these studies have been used as starting points by other researchers to study other hypotheses examining the nuances of typeface personality in more detail.

Establishing typeface personality categories paved the way for future research, and scholars began investigating why typefaces elicited different responses from one another. Close examinations of typeface anatomy by Amare and Manning, and later by Nedeljković et al., reveal specific qualities that explain the relationship between letterform shape and emotional and personality attributes. Features such as contrast, brightness, pattern, and alignment with universal structure are influential contributors (Amare and Manning 2; Nedeljković et al. 563). Both studies include detailed tables and graphs with insights into how fundamental design elements influence a typeface personality.

Researchers have also sought to broaden understanding of typeface personality and develop applications for other users. O’Donovan et al. uses the personality and attribute characteristics from Shaikh et al.’s study to develop an interface where users can select a typeface based on desired attributes, thus bridging the gap between abstract knowledge and practical application (3). This tool depends on understanding how users perceive typefaces and then anticipating user needs for document creation. Kulahcioglu and Melo used O’Donovan et al.’s data to expand this application, creating a formula that predicts the attributes of new typefaces based on data from existing typefaces (117,

122). As the number of new typefaces grows daily, these large-scale and analytic studies can help to organize typographic choices for the designer.

### *Typography and Text Interaction*

The interaction between typography and text has been examined from several angles. Type and text play a role in how content is perceived, but the data reveals conflicting evidence regarding how much influence these elements have. On the one hand, a narrow study comparing the perception of two satirical articles in two common typefaces indicate that typeface influences the perception of text emotion and persuasiveness (Juni and Gross 39). However, a study by Brumberger reveals different results. An experiment that intentionally mismatched type and text showed that although readers are aware of the dissonance between type and text, typeface persona did not have a significant impact on the perception of text persona (“Awareness” 230). These conflicting studies indicate that choosing an incongruent typeface does not guarantee a document’s ineffectiveness. Typeface is one of many tools that affect document effectiveness.

Juni and Gross’s conclusion that text manipulation affects reader emotion (40) can be applied broadly: typography is important for everyone to understand. Van Leeuwen and Butterick outline specific elements of typography that all writers can use to improve their documents. Van Leeuwen’s “grammar” of semiotic mode includes eight distinctive features of typography, paired with examples and samples, which show how typography fulfills the three functions of communication: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (“Towards” 148-150; 142). Butterick, in a unique online textbook, explains that typography should be understood by all writers because good typography makes text more effective (What is good typography?). Typography has the potential to engage,

guide, and persuade the reader, but to do this, the writer must understand the goals of the text (Why typography matters). Both Van Leeuwen and Butterick encourage the reader to see how the details of type have a ripple effect on the effectiveness of an entire document, which is relevant regardless of the purpose of the document. Effective typography, explains Butterick, relies on understanding the goals of the text.

### *Reader Performance*

Readers discern incongruencies between typeface and text, and researchers have investigated exactly the extent to which typography affects reading time, comprehension, and memory. Reader familiarity is one component of document design, as Bernard et al. discovered by asking participants to rank various typefaces on reading effectiveness, legibility, and attractiveness (5). Despite not having the highest score in any one category, Verdana most closely and consistently aligned with participant expectation. It is, therefore, according to Bernard et al., the best overall typeface for screen text (7).

Reader preference has been measured, but the relationship between typography and reader performance does not yield obvious results. Bernard et al. found that although Verdana was the most preferred type, it did not have the fastest reading time (2, 7). Additionally, evidence suggests that type, size, and spacing of text make a document easier or harder to read, but the combined impact is negligible. Brumberger measured reading time and comprehension for various typeface personalities, but the metrics did not show significant differences between categories (“Effects” 21). A study by Hojjati and Muniandy appears to reveal contradicting evidence. A comparison of two typefaces and measurements of reading time and retention lead to the conclusion that typeface does have an impact (171). However, the unreliability of this research should be

noted, as the article is incomplete in its presentation of methodology, results, and assessment.

Why, then, does typography matter? As Brumberger states, the role of typography exceeds legibility and readability (“Effects” 22). A typeface selection can enhance or detract from the readability and influence of a document, and the degree of impact varies with each situation.

## **Applications**

### *Teaching*

Typography is a crucial element of document design, but because many typographic decisions are made intuitively, writers face challenges justifying their design choices. Also, there are inconsistent teaching methods to train students to articulate the process of evaluating and executing strategic typographic decisions. The need for typographic literacy instruction is necessary, as Van Leeuwen explains, as more and more people exercise their own typographic expressions, and there is a growing body of research whose goal is to guide instructors through the process of teaching typography to students (“Typographic” 142).

Students who receive comprehensive instruction about typographic choices have the tools to effectively control the visual and verbal elements of documents. Rather than expecting students to rely on instinct, Mackiewicz and Van Leeuwen give detailed explanations on topics that instructors should teach. Van Leeuwen organizes a new grammar and semiotic understanding of typography (“Towards” 147), while Mackiewicz focuses on elements of typeface that have the greatest impact on the reader. Some of the elements that Mackiewicz emphasizes are supported by researchers elsewhere in this review, such as typeface appropriateness, personality, history, and anatomy (128).

Understanding what to teach is important but knowing how to implement these steps into the classroom is vital. Matching rhetoric intention with document design, as mentioned by Brumberger (“Effects” 22), Butterick (“What is good typography”), and Juni and Gross (40), is crucial for writers. Welhausen’s heuristic shows teachers how to teach the process of matching document intention and design. The guide has practical steps for developing a vocabulary to aid discussion of design choices (144-146). The practice of assessing, evaluating, and articulating typographical choices can be adapted for other design functions in fields such as health care, media, engineering, and social services.

The importance of matching typeface and text has significant implications for all writers. As more people compose messages across disciplines and purposes, understanding key typographic concepts are increasingly beneficial. Pedagogical articles offer many insights into how to improve formal education practices, and self-guided learning, such as Butterick’s online textbook, is becoming more popular as well.

### *Advertising*

Advertising has a long history of evaluating the relationship between document design and impact. Though other researchers find conflicting evidence that typeface affects reading time and comprehension, studies of advertisements indicate that typographic choices have a positive influence on viewer attention, memory, and overall response.

Typeface is the most common element in any advertisement, and it has a significant impact on the reader's experience. Readers are aware of typographic elements and tend to pay more attention to stylized typefaces, as Puškarević et al. reports (10). Through the use of eye-tracking as well as a participant survey, Puškarević

et al. find that stylized typefaces have a positive influence on response and attention. This impact is even more pronounced for hedonic products compared to utilitarian ones (13). The attention that consumers give to type is supported in a study by Rodriguez-Valero et al., in which participants demonstrate their capacity to associate typography with various brands (545). The ability of the average consumer to remember logos, interpret typography connotations, and notice stylized typefaces reinforces the need for businesses to be intentional when creating and using branding materials.

### *Politics*

Political campaigns, like advertisements, must convey complex messages using minimal text. Branding is no longer limited to consumer products; the phenomena for personal branding has increased for celebrities, entrepreneurs, and others in recent years. Examples of personal branding can be found in entertainment and the arts as well as in politics.

Typography is a powerful element in conveying political agendas and aspirations. The recent emergence of political candidate branding, according to Billard, began with the 2008 presidential election (4570). Typography can suggest national identity (4576), values (4581), and a political platform (4583). The unconscious association between type and national history, as described by Billard, is one of the topics for instruction suggested by Mackiewicz (121-122). It is also an example of Juni and Gross's conclusion that subliminal manipulation can impact reader perception (40). Billard's presentation of campaign documents provides a comprehensive look at specific elements that support and detract from a candidate's intentions. To get a closer perspective, Haenschen and Tamul conduct experiments to find the precise role of partisanship in typeface perception. Readers consistently view typefaces as liberal or conservative, and their



perception is moderated by personal beliefs (14). These findings indicate that politicized messages can be crafted based on a typeface perception and further enhanced based on the reader's existing ideas.

A wide body of research exists for typography rhetoric, but an exploration of typography rhetoric in politics is nascent. Further research in this area can facilitate better audience literacy as well as more effective political campaigns.

## **Conclusion**

Rarely is a document created that does not persuade the reader in one form or another. Authors seek to convince the reader that they have valuable information, that their event is worth attending, or that their company's item has the best value. Understanding the goal of the text – the specifics about the purpose of the document and its intended effect on the audience – is critical to selecting the most appropriate typography. Good typography makes text more effective which is why, according to Butterick, all writers should understand this element of document design (Introduction). This literature review shows that typefaces are consistently perceived to have personality, even though the effect of typeface and text interaction reveals mixed results regarding reader performance. The capacity of typeface to enhance or detract from the reader's attention, attitude, and ability is a topic that should be systematically taught in writing programs. Typographic literacy, as mentioned by Van Leeuwen, is also an important skill for the general public ("Typographic" 142). Advertising and politics are just two areas that depend on typography to convey complex messages to viewers. By developing a stronger vocabulary to discuss typographic choices, and by supporting design choices with empirical data, writers will be better equipped to make their documents distinct in a world saturated with information.

## Works Cited

- Amare, Nicole and Alan Manning. "Seeing typeface personality: Emotional responses to form as tone." *2012 IEEE International Professional Communication Conference*, Orlando, Florida, October 2012, pp. 1-9, doi:10.1109/IPCC.2012.6408605.
- Bernard, Michael, et al. "A Comparison of Popular Online Fonts: Which Size and Type is Best?" *Usability News*, vol. 4, issue 1, January 2002.
- Billard, Thomas J. "Fonts of Potential: Areas for Typographic Research in Political Communication." *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 10, 2016, pp. 4570-4592, doi:10.31235/osf.io%2Fg7j4u.
- Brumberger, Eva. "The Rhetoric of Typography: The Persona of Typeface and Text." *Technical Communication*, vol. 50, no. 2, May 2003, pp. 206-223. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43089122.
- . "The Rhetoric of Typography: The Awareness and Impact of Typeface Appropriateness." *Technical Communication*, vol. 50, no. 2, May 2003, pp. 224-231. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43089123.
- . "The Rhetoric of Typography: Effects on Reading Time, Reading Comprehension, and Perception of Ethos." *Technical Communication*, vol. 51, no. 1, February 2004, pp. 13-24. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43089069.
- Butterick, Matthew. *Butterick's Practical Typography*. 2nd edition, practicaltypography.com.
- "Font." *Merriam-Webster*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/font.

- Haenschen, Katherine, and Daniel J. Tamul. "What's in a Font?: Ideological Perceptions of Typography." *Communication Studies*, 2019, doi:10.1080/10510974.2019.1692884.
- Hojjati, Nafiseh and Balakrishnan Muniandy. "The Effects of Font Type and Spacing of Text for Online Readability and Performance." *Contemporary Educational Technology*, 2014, vol. 5, issue 2, pp. 161-174, doi:10.30935/cedtech/6122.
- Juni, Samuel, and Julie S. Gross. "Emotional and Persuasive Perception of Fonts." *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, vol. 106, issue 1, February 2008, pp. 35-42. SAGE, doi:10.2466/PMS.106.1.35-42.
- Kulahcioglu, Tugba and Gerard de Melo. "Predicting Semantic Signatures of Fonts." *IEEE*, 12th IEEE International Conference on Semantic Computing, 2018, pp. 115-112, doi:10.1109/ICSC.2018.00025.
- Mackiewicz, Jo. "What Technical Writing Students Should Know About Typeface Personality." *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, vol. 34, issue 1, January 2004, pp. 113-131, doi:10.2190/NMDQ-XBVH-Q79J-M749.
- Nedeljković, Uroš, et al. "Detecting Universal Structure and Effects of Typefaces." *Tehnicki Vjesnik*, vol. 24, issue 2, April 2017, pp. 557-564, doi:10.17559/TV-20150831131738.
- O'Donovan, Peter, et al. "Exploratory Font Selection Using Crowdsourcing Attributes." *ACM Transactions on Graphics*, vol. 33, no. 4, July 2014, pp. 1-9, doi:10.1145/2601097.2601110.
- Puškarović, Irma, et al. "An eye-tracking study of attention to print advertisements: Effects of typeface figuration." *Journal of Eye Movement Research*, vol. 9, no. 5, November 2016, pp. 1-18, doi:10.16910/jemr.9.5.6.

- Rodriguez-Valero, Daniel, et al. "Typographic Literacy: Are Users Able to Perceive What We Design?" *Advances in Ergonomics in Design: Proceedings of the AHFE 2016 International Conference on Ergonomics in Design*, edited by F. Rebelo and M. Soares, Springer International Publishing, 2016, pp. 537-546, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-41983-1\_49.
- Shaikh, A. Dawn, et al. "Perception of Fonts: Perceived Personality Traits and Uses." *Usability News*, vol. 8, issue 1, February 2006.
- "Typeface." *Merriam-Webster*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/typeface](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/typeface).
- "Typography." *Merriam-Webster*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/typography](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/typography).
- Van Leeuwen, Theo. "Typographic Meaning." *Visual Communication*, vol. 4, issue 2, June 2005, pp. 137-143, doi:10.1177/1470357205053749.
- . "Towards a Semiotics of Typography." *Information Design Journal*, vol. 14, issue 2, 2006, pp. 139-155, doi:0.1075/idj.14.2.06lee.
- Welhausen, Candice A. "Toward a Topos of Visual Rhetoric: Teaching Aesthetics Through Color and Typography." *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, vol. 48, issue 2, May 2016, pp. 132-150. SAGE, doi:10.1177/0047281616646752.