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Typography Matters: Document Design

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

In the May edition of *The Advocate*, I covered legibility and credibility related to font choice. The column was incredibly popular. The snippets on block capitals, serif fonts, and font choice lending credibility to writing seem to really have struck a cord with *The Advocate's* readers.

To those of us passionate about good legal writing, the response makes sense. We understand that good writing equals good lawyering. We also understand that all attorneys and judges do a fair bit of reading as part of their jobs — and their attention is a valuable resource. And we understand that if a document is readable, the reader is more likely to remember the content.

This month, I am turning to what I hope is an equally helpful topic: document design. Sit back and enjoy learning more about spaces after periods, cueing devices, point size, justification, and paragraph breaks.

Spaces after sentences

Many of us were taught to always use two spaces after the end of a sentence. Turns out, this practice is obsolete. Using two spaces after a period is a holdover from the bygone days of typewriters. The fonts of typewriters had to be uniform: each letter had the same horizontal proportion as every other letter. That made it difficult for the reader to easily tell where one sentence ended and the next began.

This trouble with fonts no longer exists. Computers use proportional fonts (the horizontal space between letters varies). Thus, readers no longer need the visual cue of two spaces after a sentence.

So to make your documents look more professional, train your fingers to hit the space bar only once!¹ This



will prevent unattractive gaps between sentences and help the reader glide undistracted to the next sentence.

Underlining as a cueing device

Like the “two-space” rule, using underlining as a cueing device is a remnant of the typewriter age. Typewriters didn’t have italics or bold characters, so you had to cue the reader into the importance of something by underlining. Unfortunately, underlining messes up the visual patterns of the letters and breaks the flow.

Readers read letters by shape — and the shape comes at the top and the bottom of each letter. Underlining gets ride of the half of the visual clue we use to comprehend words and thus slows down the reader.

Don’t believe me? Compare these:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

This is one of the most recognizable passages in America, yet simply underlining made it more difficult to read.

So what to do? First, use *italics* or **bold** to draw the reader’s attention. Of course, do so sparingly. Some scientific studies show that readers ignore italics.³

Point size

The most comfortable point size for reading is 11 when the lines are shorter than 4 inches. Yes, 11-point fonts are the easiest to read in most common formats: magazines, newspapers, and even reporters. Readers can also read 11-point fonts five percent more quickly than 12-point fonts and six percent more quickly than 14-point fonts.

Legal documents, however, tend to use 6.5 inch line width (standard

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paper is 8.5 inches wide). Reader studies suggest that as the line width increases, so should the font size. So if you can, use 12-point fonts for the body of your documents. Larger fonts should be saved for headings.

Justification

“There isn’t much justification for justified text.”⁴ Full-justification is when both the left and right sides of the page are aligned. Full-justification is common in professional publishing. (The columns in *The Advocate*, for instance, are fully justified (except for light feature stories at the back of the magazine.)

Here’s the problem. Fully justifying documents changes the spacing between letters and slows down the reader. Moreover, the jagged right edge of left-justified documents adds visual interest to the page without interfering with legibility. Indeed, experts recommend never fully justifying text because the result is course, dry, and uninviting.⁵

Choose, then, to left-justify your writing. It never hurts to add a little visual interest to your briefing.

Paragraph breaks

There are two ways we indicate the beginning of a new paragraph: first indents and a space between

paragraphs. First indents are when the first line of a paragraph is indented.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.⁶

A space between paragraphs is when there is an entire line of white space (like the space below):

All men are by nature free and equal, and have certain inalienable rights, among which are enjoying and defending life and liberty; acquiring, possessing and protecting property; pursuing happiness and securing safety.⁷

Because both of these techniques give the reader a break and signal a new paragraph, use only one. Using both white space and a first-indent is overkill.

Conclusion

Looking good on paper can help make your writing more memorable and more persuasive. Incorporate these tips to give your writing more emotional appeal and help save the reader’s energy and attention. Af-

ter all, persuasion literally includes looking good on paper.⁸

Endnotes

1. If you are using a monospaced or typewriter-style font, do continue to use the double space after a period. This will help give your reader the visual clue that a sentence has ended.
2. Declaration of Independence.
3. Ruth Anne Robbins, *Painting with Print: Incorporating Concepts of Typographic and Layout Design into the Text of Legal Writing Documents*, 116 J.A.L.W.D (Fall 2004).
4. *Id.* at 130.
5. Matthew Butterick, *Typography for Lawyers*, 136 (2010).
6. Preamble to the United States Constitution.
7. Idaho Constitution, Art. I.
8. Robbins, *Painting with Print* at 111.

About the Author

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