

# Spacing & Kerning [pt 1]

**W**HAT MAKES A TYPEFACE LOOK THE WAY IT DOES? The design of the letter shapes is a primary factor, but it's by no means the only one. The spacing of a font has a large impact on how it looks when typeset, and should be taken into consideration when choosing and using a typeface.

## Spacing

When we talk about a font's spacing, or letter fit, we're referring to the amount of space between the characters, which in turn gives the typeface its relative openness or tightness. The spacing of a particular font is initially determined by the manufacturer or designer and is somewhat size-dependent. Text designs tend to be spaced more openly than display faces. The reason for this? The smaller the point size, the more space is needed between letters to keep the characters legible. Conversely, as a typeface is

set larger, a snugger fit between letters creates word-shapes that are easier to read.

Although spacing is dictated by personal taste as well as typographic trends (for example, seventies typefaces were fit more tightly than today's fonts), the goal of good letter fit remains the same: to create even "color," or visual texture, between all character combinations. It's more difficult than it might seem, since the irregular shapes of many characters create some problematic letter combinations. This is where kerning comes to the rescue...

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Top: Letter combinations that are too closely or loosely spaced result in uneven color.  
Bottom: Improved spacing creates a more pleasing, readable text

## **Kerning**

Kerning refers to the adjustment of space between two specific characters, thus the term kerning pair. Most often, kerning implies a reduction of space, but it can also mean the addition of space. Kern pairs are created to improve the spacing between two letters when the normal spacing is less than ideal. A perfect example is the spacing between a cap 'A' and 'V.' Typically, both 'A' and 'V' would be set so the terminals of their diagonal strokes nearly touch the vertical stroke in the adjacent letter, like an 'H.' When a 'A' and 'V' are set next to each other, however, the spacing looks too open. Kerning adjusts the spacing to be optically correct.

Most fonts have between two hundred and five hundred built-in kern pairs. A high-quality font may have over a thousand kern pairs.

## **My font needs help!**

If you have a favorite font but the spacing or kerning leaves something to be desired, don't despair: you can do something about it. Today's robust design programs have advanced type handling features that can make vast improvements to your typography. ■

*Stay tuned for Part Two of this article to learn when and how to adjust the spacing and kerning of any font.*



**HAND  
VIM  
AVAILABLE  
AVAILABLE**

First and second rows: Both the A and the V look fine set next to straight-sided characters. Third row: Next to each other, however, the spacing appears much too open. Fourth row: Proper kerning can improve troublesome letter combinations such as these.