Type Classification: provides a way for designers to talk about and further understand type. Many classification systems exist. Type design evolves and systems of classification are constantly changing.

Serif Type: faces have serifs

Humanist/Old Style: Renaissance and Baroque-era type designers looked to Roman lettering and calligraphy as inspiration. These humanist letterforms incorporate elements of calligraphic handwriting such as the diagonal axis of the broad-nibbed pen and the softened, wedge serifs that replicated the pen stroke’s starting point.

Examples: Garamond, Bembo, Goudy Old Style, Palatino, Sabon

Transitional: Transitional serif letters retain humanist traces, yet their forms are more ordered and rationalized than old style characters. These rationalized features usually include a vertical axis, increased stroke contrast, and details that appear formalized and constructed, like symmetrical serifs.

Examples: Baskerville, Times New Roman, Perpetua

Modern: Typefaces like Bodoni and Didot modernize and streamline the forms of the alphabet, pushing them farther from their humanist origins. Modern letters have a strictly vertical axis, heightened or extreme stroke contrast, and serifs that feel mechanically drawn or constructed rather than smoothly written.

Examples: Bodoni, Didot, Walbaum

Slab Serif: As their name implies, slab serif letters possess squared-off serifs that abruptly extend from the character’s main strokes. First developed in the early 19thC for signage and advertising printing, the slab serif, with its relatively uniform stroke weight, was a counterpart to the extreme stroke contrast of the popular Ultra Bodoni styles.

Examples: Clarendon, Rockwell, Serifa

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Display: faces are often used at larger sizes and in headlines. There are Script and Decorative. Script faces mimic handwriting made from various writing instruments. Their letterforms are often connected. They vary in look and feel and can be playfully casual or very formal in tone. Decorative faces are often very illustrative and elaborate and may include embellishments that lend a very specific look and feel. Distinct and complex, again they are best used at large sizes and in headlines.

Examples: Edwardian Script, Umbra

San Serif Type: faces don’t have serifs

Humanist Sans Serif: Though sans serif type and lettering did not become popular until the 20thC, examples of sans serif lettering exist in some Renaissance inscriptions and have precedent in classical Greek letterforms. The modulated stroke weight, greater contrast, and true italic versions of humanist sans serif letters convey a calligraphic influence, which in some cases even includes flared terminals that suggest serifs.

Examples: Scala, Optima, Verdana, Gill Sans

Grotesque/Transitional: Transitional sans serif fonts, like their 19thC counterpart, the slab serif, were developed as advertising display type, based on the work of contemporary sign painters. While the letter shapes are similar to serif forms, most of the handwritten qualities are missing, giving transitional sans serifs a more detached, functional quality. Typically, transitional sans serif lack a true italic, display low stroke contrast, and appear rationalized and constructed.

Examples: Franklin Gothic, Akzidenz-Grotesk

Neo-Grotesque: Neo-Grotesque faces are born from the Grotesques, but they are more refined. Their forms are more regular and rationally constructed than Grotesques, lending them an objective, detached, impersonal tone.

Examples: Helvetica, Univers

Geometric: Based on geometric rather than humanist forms, the characters of geometric sans serifs are constructed around a basic set of elements – typically circles, triangles, and straight lines. This rigid design approach frequently imparts a modular and mathematical spirit to the letterforms. Although these alphabets were first developed in the early 20thC, the proportions of some geometric sans serif letters bear resemblance to those of classical Roman capitals.

Examples: Futura, Bauhaus, Avant Garde