A type primer

Second Edition

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Maintaining x-height

Razors

Median

As you already know, the x-height generally describes the size of lowercase letterforms. However, you should keep in mind that curved strokes, such as in ‘i’, must rise above the median (or sink below the baseline) in order to appear to be the same size as the vertical and horizontal strokes they adjoin.

Compare the ‘a’ in the large examples above with the ‘o’ and ‘e’. The latter two characters clearly seem too small, and bounce around within the perceived x-height of the typeface, because they do not extend beyond the median or baseline.
Just as important as recognizing specific letterforms is developing a sensitivity to the counterform (or counter)—the space described, and often contained, by the strokes of the form. When letters are joined to form words, the counterform includes the spaces between them. The latter is a particularly important concept when working with letterforms like the lowercase ‘r’ that have no counters per se. How well you handle the counters when you set type determines how well words hang together—in other words, how easily we can read what’s been set.
Tracking: kerning and letterspacing

Originally, the term 'kern' described the portion of a letterform that extended beyond the body of the type slug. As the example on the right shows, this adaptation was required in letterforms with angled strokes, so that spacing between letters within a word would remain optically consistent. Today the term 'kerning' describes the automatic adjustment of space between letters as prescribed by a table embedded within the digital font.

Because kerning removes space between letters, it is often mistakenly referred to as 'letterspacing.' In fact, letterspacing means adding space between letters, not removing it. For our purposes, the term 'tracking,' used in most computer programs that incorporate typesetting, best describes the addition or removal of space between letters. Keep in mind that even the best tracking table sometimes requires minor adjustments, especially at larger point sizes.
As type size increases, particularly into display sizes of 24 pt. and up, it’s often a good idea to tighten the tracking slightly.
When setting text, tracking is critical to maintain easy reading. Note how loosely tracked text practically disintegrates right on the page, whereas tightly tracked text sacrifices readability as it comes to resemble no more than a series of stripes.

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible—or from one of today's newspaper.
Designers often letterspace uppercase letters, but there has long been strong resistance within the type community to letterspacing lowercase letters within text. The reason for this resistance is quite clear if you look at the examples here. Uppercase forms are drawn to be able to stand on their own (consider their epigraphic origins). Lowercase forms require the counterform created between letters to maintain the line of reading (consider their origins in calligraphy).

Even though, when displayed alone and not as text, lowercase forms allow for some play in tracking, a moment occurs when readability is sacrificed for effect and meaning is lost.