



meta

a friendly font

meta

Meta was a font created in 1991 by the German typographer Erik Spiekermann. Meta is a humanist san serif font that can be grouped with other fonts such as Gill Sans and Helvetica.

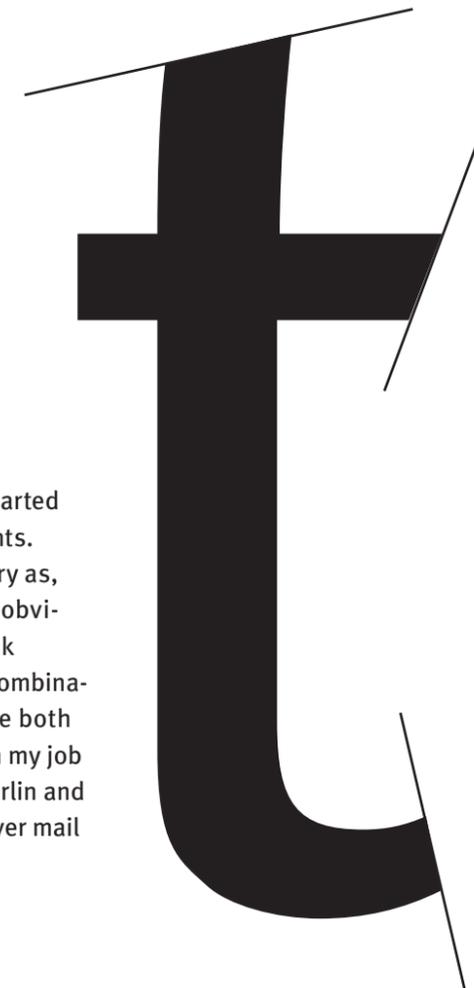
ERIK SPIEKERMANN

Erik Spiekermann was born in on May 30, 1947, in Stadthagen, Germany. He is equally comfortable and prolific as a writer, graphic and typeface designer, but type has always been at the epicenter of this communication dynamo. Even as a child, Spiekermann was drawn to the typographic arts. “I had a little printing press and taught myself to set type when I was twelve,” he recalls. “Years later, when I went to university to study art history, I made a living as a letterpress printer and metal typesetter.”

When it comes to the design of typefaces, Spiekermann sees himself as more of a problem solver than an artist. His process for beginning a new typeface is simple and straightforward. “Identify a problem — like space saving, bad paper, low resolution, on-screen use — then find typefaces that almost work but could be improved,” he explains. “Study them. Note the approaches and failings. Sleep on it, then start sketching without looking at anything else.”

SLANTED FINIALS

On February 8th, 1989, Spiekermann and his wife Joan started FontShop, a digital typeface foundry and distributor of fonts. Joan Spiekermann describes the beginning of the foundry as, “We had this thing that whenever we were aware of an obviously good product being unavailable, we would think ‘loophole in the market,’ as you do. Yet this time the combination of digital type and Erik-the-type-man clicked. We both thought “hmmm,” and so it came about. I packed in my job as office manager in an English design agency in Berlin and started the untested process of opening the first-ever mail order font boutique.”



“I’m not a very good designer or manager, I’m ‘medium’ at both.”

“The problem with designing typefaces is that 90% has to look like everything else, because an A has to be an A and a B has to be a B. But you have to use that other 10% of leeway to make it look different! ”

Aa Bb Cc Dd
Ee Ff Gg Hh
Ii Jj Kk Ll
Mm Nn Oo Pp
Qq Rr Ss Tt
Uu Vv Ww Xx
Yy Zz



ORIGINS

In 1984, the German State Post Office, the Bundespost, was persuaded by Erik Spiekermann of MetaDesign to commission a new, exclusive font for use on all of the Bundespost’s printed material. The aim of the project, which began in 1985, was to develop a face that was easy to read in small sizes, available in several weights, unmistakable as an identity, and technologically up-to-date.

Although the font was digitized, tested, and approved in the summer of 1985,

the project was canceled. The Bundespost returned to using one of its many previous typefaces, Helvetica, assuming that digital type would not catch on.

In 1989, after design software made creating new fonts more efficient, MetaDesign refined the Bundespost typeface for its own exclusive use, renaming it Meta. Initially, Meta was just used for in-house projects, but soon MetaDesign began to use it in mail-order catalogs for FontShop, the digital type foundry cofounded by Erik Spiekermann. FontShop encouraged the parent company to license the face. Released as FF Meta, it has become one of the most successful typefaces available from FonFont, a subsidiary of FontShop.

By 1993, the new FF MetaPlus corrected the crossbar on the lowercase “t” and revised the font’s spacing and kerning. At this time, the family included Normal, Book, Medium, Bold, and Black weights in Roman, Italic, Small Caps and Italic Small Caps. 1998 saw the name revert back to FF Meta, which was reorganized into FF Meta Normal, FF Meta Book, FF Meta Medium, FF Meta Bold, and FF Meta Black, all with Roman, Italic, Small Caps, and Italic Small Caps options. The total fonts in the FF Meta family rounded sixty.

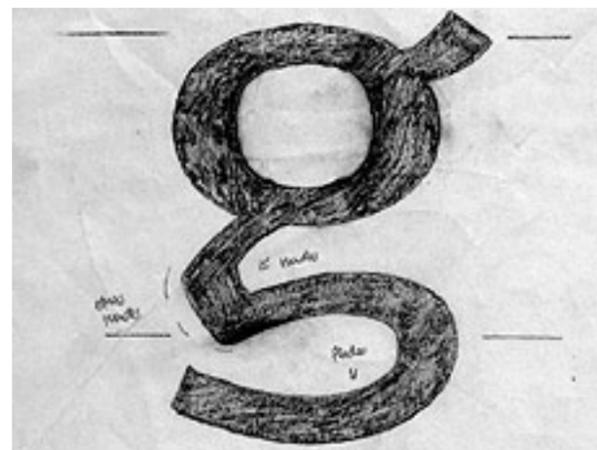
CHARACTERISTICS

As for the construction of the letterforms, Meta has capitals with flat apices, similar to those of Helvetica. It has a wider opening in the **C**, which also has angled finials. Angled finials also occur in the top strokes of the **E**, **F**, **G**, and on both ends of the **S**. The **E** has an extended base, while the base of the **G** has no spur and the **J**, no loop. The **K** has one junction, and the junction of the **M** rests on the baseline, like Helvetica, except that Meta stems are oblique. The tail of the **Q** is wavy and the leg of the **R** is

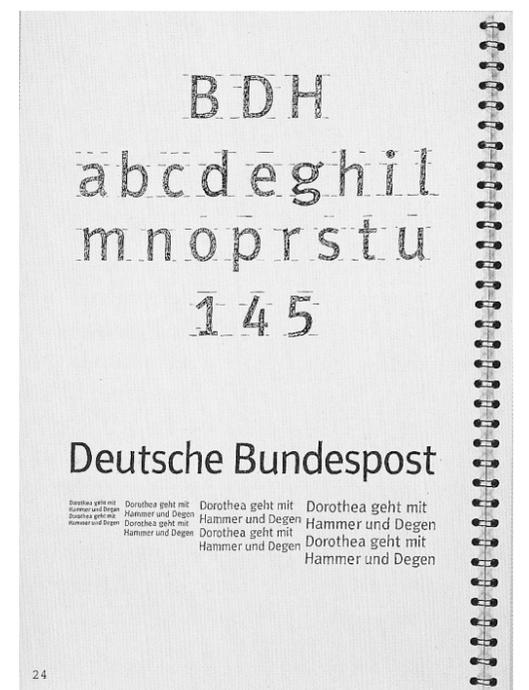
slightly curved. The junction and base of the **W** are both flat. The **Z** has angled finials on both ends, unlike the lowercase **z**, which has an upright finial at the top and an angled one at the bottom.

Several of Meta's lowercase letters have particular traits that distinguish the face from other sans serifs. The ascenders of the **b**, **k**, **h**, and **l** are slightly bent at the top, a feature that is carried through the stems of the **m**, **n**, **p**, **q**, and the spur of the **u**. The finials of the **v**, **w**, and **y** are slightly angles, unlike the Meta family capital letters.

Grüß dich! I'm Meta.



*Erik Spiekermann's first sketch for Meta, January 15th, 1985
The unusual lowercase G was the first letterform that Spiekermann experimented with.*



*Test sheet for Deutsche Bundespost, 1985
Sketches to apply the new font to the company's name.*

Guten tag. I'm Helvetica.

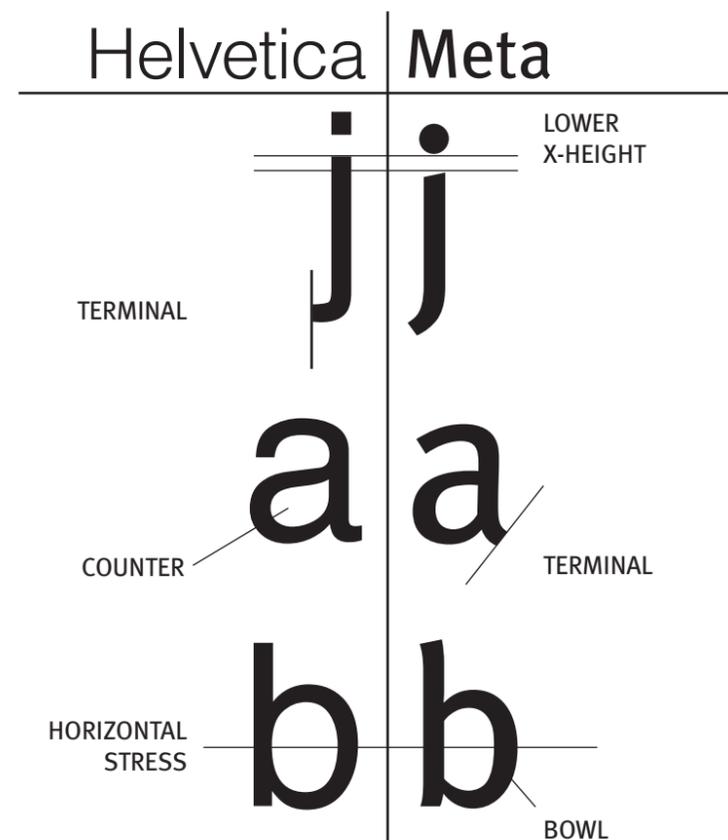
Helvetica was designed in 1957 by Swiss designers Max Miedinger and Eduard Hoffman of Haas Typefoundry. The sans-serif font was designed to maximize clarity on signage, while having no inherent meaning in its form.

Other distinguishing features include the double-storied g that has a highly unusual open bowl. This is a feature shared by the transitional typefaces Baskerville and Cheltenham; only a few other sans-serif typefaces, such as Meta, have this feature. The l has a slight curved tail and the y has an offset junction. Meta is overall a more condensed face, with only a slightly lower x-height.

Both Meta and Helvetica have thin shoulders. While the dots of Meta letterforms and punctuation are rounded, Helvetica has square dots. The nuanced construction of the Meta typefaces sets it apart from Helvetica's regularized structure, creating the face's appealing personality.

Meta has been called “the Helvetica of the nineties.”

COMPARISONS



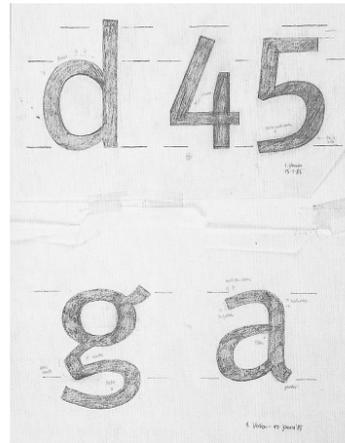
The dots for each font reflect their function; Helvetica's rectangle is much more utilitarian. There is also a marked difference between the x height and length of descenders.

Unlike Meta, Helvetica's terminals are cut at horizontal and vertical lines. The Helvetica counters are much more curvilinear and the bowl more ovalar.

Meta's counter has a vertical line while the Helvetica counter is completely round. Helvetica lacks terminals though has a similar horizontal stress.



Early sketches for Meta, 1985
Notice the experimentation with different weights.



Sketches for Meta medium
Erik Spiekermann, 1985

Cheerio! I am Gill Sans.

	Gill Sans	Meta	
DESCENDER		EAR BOWL	Meta's descender isn't closed like the one in Gill Sans, which has a much closer horizontal relationship to the upper bowl. The Meta G has the signature curved ear.
STEM		COUNTER STEM	The bowls in Gill Sans have much more consistent widths than those in Meta, whose counter rises upwards before curving. Additionally, the stems in Meta ascend from the bowls, though don't change the overall height.
LOWER X-HEIGHT		ARM	There is a significant difference between the height of the lowercase R's. The arm in the Gill Sans letterform extends much farther than that of Meta.

Eric Gill created Gill Sans in 1927. Its cap height is actually that of Meta's, but does not feature ascenders that rise above this line. Gill Sans has a lower x-height.

Unlike Meta, its finials are cut with vertical lines. As a whole, Meta is more condensed than Gill Sans and the counters in the O's are much more ovular. The base of the W's and V's in Meta are much flatter than the points of Gill Sans. The lower case B and D have stems that meet the baseline, while those letters in Gill Sans have stems that have been merged with the bowls. The relationship between the two terminals in Meta's lowercase F extend to a much closer distance than the terminals in Gill Sans, which create a stronger diagonal. The juncture in Meta's lower case Y is offset, while there is no horizontal at the baseline of the Gill Sans Y.

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