PRINCIPLES OF THE CRAFT

Two fundamental aspects of typography are legibility and readability. Though in a non-technical sense "legible" and "readable" are often used synonymously, typographically they are separate but related concepts.

Legibility

is how well you

see the letters.

Readability

is how easily you read the words, as in long passages of text. there are very different requirements in each case, depending on the visibility of the text and the level of experience of the reader.

Legibility

Legibility describes how easily individual characters can be distinguished from one another. It is described by Walter Tracy as “the quality of being decipherable and recognisable”. For instance if a “b” and an “h”, or a “3” and an “8”, are difficult to distinguish at small sizes, this is a problem of legibility. Typographers are concerned with legibility insofar as it is their job to select the correct font to use. Brush Script is an example of a font containing many characters which might be difficult to distinguish. Selection of case influences the legibility of typography because using only upper-case letters (all-caps) reduces legibility. Some commonly agreed findings of legibility research include:

- Text set in lower case is more legible than text set all in upper case (capitals, all-caps), presumably because lower case letter structures and word shapes are more distinctive.
- Extenders (ascenders, descenders, and other projecting parts) increase salience (prominence).
- Regular upright type (roman type) is found to be more legible than italic type.
- Contrast, without dazzling brightness, also has been found to be important, with black on yellow/cream being most effective along with white on blue.
- Positive images (e.g. black on white) make hand-held material easier to read than negative or reversed (e.g. white on black). Even this commonly accepted practice has some exceptions, however, for example in some cases of disability, and designing the most effective signs for drivers.
- The upper portions of letters (ascenders) play a stronger part in the recognition process than the lower portions.

Readability

Readability refers to how easy it is to read the text as a whole, as opposed to the individual character recognition described by legibility. Use of margins, word- and line-spacing, and clear document structure all impact on readability. Some fonts or font styles, for instance sans-seriffed fonts, are considered to have low readability, and so be unsuited for large quantities of prose. Researchers have used various factors to measure readability, such as:

- Speed of perception
- Perceptibility at a distance
- Perceptibility in peripheral vision
- Visibility
- Reflex blink technique
- Rate of work (e.g., reading speed)
- Eye movements
- Fatigue in reading

A specimen sheet by William Caslon shows printed examples of Roman typefaces