



INTRODUCTION TO TYPOGRAPHY

Lesson 1

“Perfect typography is more science than an art” is a famous quote attributed to Jan Tschichold—the man that published his revolutionary book *The New Typography* in 1927. He, among other typographers from that era, had a profound impact in the field of typography.

“Typography is more art than engineering—though engineering is certainly a part of it” is what Robert Bringhurst, author of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (recognised as the typography bible), believes in.

It might seem strange at first, that such influential men in typography could have such contradicting opinions when it comes to defining it. Tschichold believed it was more science, Bringhurst sees it more as an art. Both placed it on the line connecting the two but they placed it on the opposite ends.



Figure 1: Different definitions of typography.

Tschichold was a part of the revolution in graphic design in the early 1920s. It was the time of industrialization. A time when the engineer was seen as the savior of the world. Engineering was in front and

center of whatever was produced. Type setting as a process was being swept into this new industrialized world. Whatever tools graphic designers used at that time, they needed engineering skills. This probably shaped Tschichold's opinion when it came to defining typography.

Bringhurst already witnessed the magic of digital design. There's no more physical parts that need to be assembled in the type setting process. The age of information made that process a matter of seconds instead of hours. Designers only need the right software and a right printer these days. Both are tools they don't produce themselves. So there's very little, or no engineering in a modern print design process. Bringhurst focused on the print typography in his book which is what may sway his definition of typography more on the side of art.

Web developers should have typography skills too

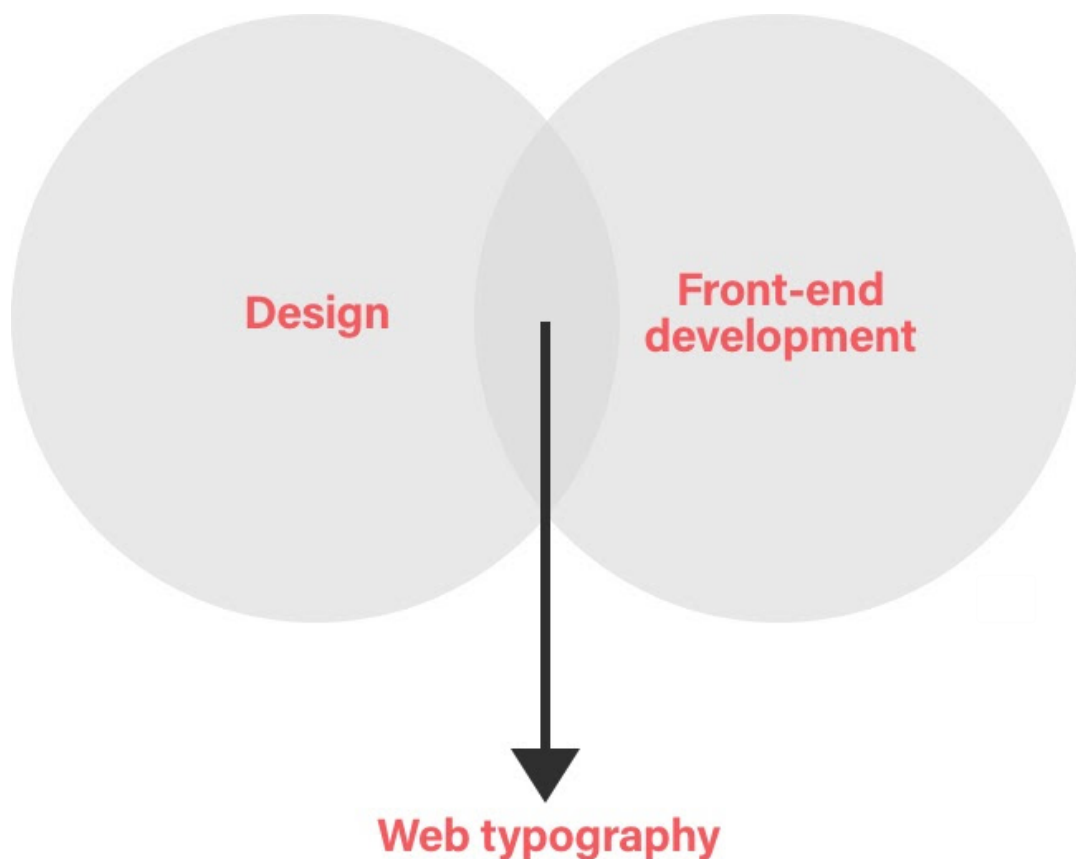


Figure 2: Web typography, along with interaction design, UX design, web animation etc. all belong into the gray area between design and front-end development.

I believe that when it comes to the web, typography lies right in the middle. That's why I think both designers and developers need to learn the basics of typography. It is expected from designers to have these skills. It's expected that they know how to type set and when to choose what typeface. How to shape a paragraph and how to use a scale. How to use grids to establish rhythm in their work. I've worked with many

designers so far and found that's rarely the case. Either the designers are self-taught and haven't learned about the importance of typography yet or they studied graphic design and saw it just as a class they had to attend. Developers, don't expect your designers to be proficient in typography.

Whatever gets designed for the web needs to be transformed into code. There is no printer. No magic button that transforms designs into code. Not in a way that could actually get used. People that can do both parts well, design and code, are rare. It takes a lot of time and dedication to really master both sets of skills. This means that even the designers who have good typography skills usually don't have the skills to transform their work into what really counts—code. So it falls on web developers to cover a large part of this grey area. Web developers who aren't expected to have any of those skills. Web developers that try their best to transform those designs into code, but fail to see small details that make a difference. It's time we recognize the importance of their role in shaping web typography. It's time we stop excluding them from the design process. The design process isn't something designers should own themselves, it's something where other people can take part and make their own contributions. Don't simply follow what is drawn by a designer—an approximation of what the website should look like. Understand why it's done so. Correct your designer when it doesn't make sense. Work on web typography. Work on typographic details with your designer. Work together. It's your job to produce a typographic style that works—as a team.

That's where Better Web Type comes in. And that's why it's designed for both web designers and web developers. Its goal is to put web typography right in the middle between art (design) and engineering (development). To cover most of that grey area and invite web developers in the design process. To educate the people that are involved (or the ones that should be) in a web design process to do a better job when it comes to web typography. To start producing a better web typography in order to be able to contribute to a better web. A web that is readable. A web that doesn't scream at the reader. A web that informs.

Why is typography important

Jan Tschichold and Robert Bringhurst may not agree on how to define typography, but they certainly agreed on what its goal is. They just used different words to describe it. "The essence of new typography is clarity" is set in bold in Jan Tschichold's book. "The new typography is distinguished from the old by the fact that its first objective is to develop its visible form out of the functions of the text... form must be

created out of function” Tschichold elaborates.

Bringhurst was more concrete. Typography must invite the reader into text, reveal the tenor and meaning of the text, clarify its structure and order and link the text with other existing elements.

Most people think typography is about fonts. Most designers think typography is about fonts.

Typography is more than that, it's expressing language through type. Placement, composition, type choice.

—Mark Boulton

Typography is not about fonts alone. It's not about type size, margins, spacing, scales or colour. Typography is about organizing information in an objective way. It's about information and how we transfer this information to the reader. Size, colours and fonts are just tools that help us put this information into the right shape. And as we will see, all these tools must work together as a whole. None is independent of the others. Web designers and web developers alike need to take a step back from merely choosing fonts and take a look at the bigger picture that typography actually is.

Font or typeface?

Let's clarify this before we continue. Using the word “font” in a company of typographers will earn you a few odd looks. Some of them might even get on the offensive and won't hesitate to call you a newbie or even an ignorant. “Font” is for a typeface like “mp3” is for a song. And I have never heard anyone say “I really like that mp3”!

I tend to use both words. It simply depends on who I talk to. “Typeface” might be unclear to people who aren't into typography so I'll use “font” in that case. But in this course I'll use the words according to their actual meaning. A “font” will mean “helvetica.ttf” and a typeface will mean “Helvetica” (a family of different weights and styles).

Explore further

1. [Web design is 95% typography](#)
Article

2. [Font vs Typeface](#)
Article
 3. [Jan Tschichold](#)
Article
 4. [The Elements of Typographic Style by Robert Bringhurst](#)
Book
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Today I learned why web developers should have typography skills. [#BetterWebType](#)

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