

Fine Points of Design

Most punctuation marks work fine right out of the box of your design application; typeface designers have taken care of that for you. There are a few instances, however, where you might want to adjust the punctuation for added finesse. Some of the most important and common of these adjustments follow.

The Right Quotes

OK, it shouldn't have to be said, but always use "smart" or "curly" quotes when setting type – never the foot or inch mark. A simple "preference setting" in virtually any software application will make smart quotes the default. Sometimes, however, files of copy containing the wrong quotes will arrive on your desktop from writers, co-workers and even bosses. Don't assume that copy providers will do the right thing. Check all copy that you receive.

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“Creating visual interest is a balancing act”

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Smart quotes and not-so-smart quotes

Correct Spacing

Also be on the lookout for the use of a double space after a period. When people used typewriters – and monospaced fonts – two spaces were needed after a period to distinguish the end of one sentence from the beginning of the next. Even though typewriters have not been used for word processing since fonts were something you could hold in your hand, the automatic addition of two spaces after a period remains a deeply engrained habit. One space after a period is the right number. As with dumb quotes, be sure that the copy you receive is purged of superfluous spaces.

“Typewriters do not create typography. They create typewritten pages”

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Two spaces after a period looks bad and slows down the reading process.

Cap Alignment

Hyphens, en and em dashes, parentheses, braces and brackets look fine in lowercase settings because this is the context in which these characters are most often used, and type designers aligned them accordingly. The problem is that they can appear too low when set next to caps and lining figures. The larger the type, the more noticeable this will be. Use the baseline/shift feature of your layout program to raise the character slightly until it's optically centered with the height the caps or lining figures.

n–n N–N N–N

Adjust punctuation to align with the copy.

Hung Punctuation

The practice of extending lines of text that begin or end with punctuation marks slightly into the margin to improve the optical alignment of the column is referred to as hung punctuation. In flush left or justified text, a line that begins with quotation marks or an apostrophe can appear to be indented. This is because these punctuation marks are smaller than most other characters, with large amounts of white space surrounding them.

The same problem can occur in the right margin of flush right or justified text. Lines ending with quotation marks, apostrophes, periods, commas, hyphens, or asterisks will appear to end short of the margin. If available, use the optical margin alignment feature in your design application to create margins that are visually smooth.

If you remember the shape of your spoon at lunch, it has to be the wrong shape. The spoon and the letter are tools; one to take food from the bowl, the other to take information off the page ... When it is a good design, the reader has to feel comfortable because the letter is both banal and beautiful.

Adrian Frutiger

Hung punctuation looks clean and improves readability.

Downsizing Punctuation

Punctuation almost always looks too big at display sizes. If you are setting headlines, subheads or other copy larger than 24 point, try downsizing the punctuation by a few points.

“Buy now,” he said.

“Buy now,” he said.

Sometimes smaller is better.

Eliminating Clutter

A bunch of hyphens stacked up in the right margin is distracting to the reader. Some say there shouldn't be more than two hyphens in a row. An even better rule is that there shouldn't be more than two punctuation marks of any kind stacked on top of each other.

We are type designers, punch cutters, type founders, compositors, printers and bookbinders from conviction and with passion. Not because we are insufficiently talented for other, higher, things, but because to us the highest things stand in the closest kinship to our own crafts.

Rudolf Koch

Don't clutter the right edge of a column of type.

Typefaces used in this article

Alisal™

ITC Bodoni

Dante®

Palatino® Nova

Rockwell® Nova

ITC Souvenir®