# **DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly**

2018 Volume 12 Number 4

# Best Practices: Teaching Typographic Principles to Digital Humanities Audiences

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### Abstract

Typography, the arrangement and use of type, permeates our visual landscape, from printed pages and digital interfaces to physical environments and interactive experience. Those who study and work in the digital humanities are called upon to make typographic choices everyday, yet few have any training in how to effectively design with type. Over the past several years, I have been involved in several initiatives that seek to help educate digital humanities scholars, technologists and students about the value of information design, including typography. This paper will discuss these experiences and some guiding principles for helping a digital humanities audience understand the basic principles of typography and apply them to their projects and research.

# Introduction

While digital tools allow digital humanities scholars and publics to analyze and display information in new ways, a focus on the interface and information design of these tools is often overlooked. Design education models are often preoccupied with examining teaching methods for educating future professional designers [Pat 2013], while ignoring how to introduce design principles to those outside of traditional design disciplines, including the digital humanities. From word-processing and blog theme customization to data visualization and interface design, those engaged with digital humanities research and teaching activities interact with the visual formatting of text-based information in a variety of contexts. Based on my current research into the role of visual communication and information design in the digital humanities practitioners, who do not have a formal training in design, are called upon to make typographic choices for their projects, yet do not have a solid understanding about how to make these decisions. This paper will discuss some basic principles of typography as well as the approaches I have taken when teaching these principles in a workshop environment for digital humanities audiences. I will discuss some of the challenges, as well as opportunities, of providing a basic awareness of typography and its significance to design practices in the digital humanities.

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# The role of design in the digital humanities

Digital humanists must become, at the very least, familiar with basic design principles and the breadth of practices, ranging from interface design and typographic design, to data visualization and information architecture [Burdick et al. 2012]. Tools such as Omeka, Tableau or Mapbox help democratize visual presentation while providing existing templates, color palettes, and typographic styles that limit the amount of information design choices one needs to make. Are designated designers even necessary?

Prior to my engagement with the digital humanities, my creative research focused on future implications for typography in digital environments. I was introduced to the digital humanities by a colleague in theatre history who needed an interface designer to collaborate on a web-based historical timeline tool. After what felt like a crash course in current digital humanities practices and discourse, I attended a THATCamp in 2012 and offered a session entitled, "Where are all the artists and designers?" (http://amypapaelias.com/thatcampne2012/wherearealltheartists.html). In Summer 2013, I

participated in One Week One Tool (http://oneweekonetool.org/), an NEH-funded Institute for Advanced Topics in the Digital Humanities, hosted at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University that brought together twelve participants from diverse fields to create a digital humanities tool in 5 days. As the sole graphic designer on the team, it was clear that working with a designer helped many of the humanities-based participants understand the value design can bring to digital projects [Croxall 2013]. Designers and design principles can play a positive role within the context of digital humanities scholarship and public projects, yet participation and knowledge is limited.

## Why is typography important?

Historical descriptions of "good" typography tend to describe it as "invisible" [Warde 1955]. Like many designed experiences, we often don't notice what works until we notice something that glaringly doesn't. The way type is arranged and information is organized impacts audience comprehension and engagement, both in print and in digital forms. Within the field of information design, typography functions as a visual system for organizing and structuring text-based content [Apfelbaum and Cezzar 2014].

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Humanists have embraced a variety of digital tools and their interfaces and outputs without questioning their forms and values through the humanist's critical lens [Drucker 2015]. The division of labor between the author / publisher has traditionally separated these tasks: research and writing and publishing and distribution. With the possibilities of self-publishing digital projects, the division between writing-designing-disseminating becomes blurred. Digital humanities research and public projects rely on a host of tools and applications that allow for some customization but most practitioners put little emphasis on the basic principles of typographic design. We may assume that the typographic choices already set forth within these tools and applications are satisfactory without considering better alternatives. We may accept that the typography of digital scholarship projects is sufficient to the user's experience without understanding basic typographic principles.

Several years before the rise of web font services (Typekit or Google Fonts), Oliver Reichenstein, designer and founder of Information Architects, wrote a popular essay entitled, "Web Design is 95% Typography" [Reichenstein 2006]. In the essay, he concurs with web designer Cameron Moll that text on the web should be treated as "a user interface" [Moll 2006], and that information designers are doing the work of traditional typographers (setting type in preparation for a printing job), but perhaps without the proper knowledge or training. Ten years later, and despite the great wave of browser support for web fonts, responsive design [Marcotte 2011] and countless resources for typography on the web, the implementation of typographic principles within digital scholarship remains limited. Good typography helps give form to an argument, and an awareness of typographic principles applied to digital environments is paramount.

As an example, Tableau, a data visualization software platform used by many digital humanities scholars and students, commissioned a custom typeface that is utilized in a variety of visualization contexts, from tables and bar charts to maps and timelines. "Without having to think about it, our users should create legible, meaningful text that informs and expands on the visual expression of their data" [Pettiross 2016]. By commissioning a typeface designed for the specific contexts of a data visualization platform, Tableau is making typography a priority in its visual design.

Scholarly publications and journals have always maintained a level of design and typographic neutrality in order to, perhaps intentionally, distinguish themselves from more popular or commercial venues [Waller 1999]. Consider the differences in reading experience between this journal (*Digital Humanities Quarterly*) and *The Atlantic* or *Wired*. What does the difference in tone imply about the importance of teaching and understanding information design within the context of the digital humanities? If typography does exist to honor content [Bringhurst 2004], humanities scholars should be concerned with how information is visually presented in digital environments for a wide range of audiences.

# Typography for [digital] humanists workshop

In February 2016, I offered a free workshop, "Typography for [digital] Humanists," through NYC DH Week 2016. The title of this workshop was inspired by the book, *Typography for Lawyers*, by Matthew Butterick [Butterick 2015]. Both a lawyer and a type designer, Butterick's book is a no-nonsense field guide for a profession that is intimately involved in

document typesetting with little concern, historically, for best practices. The workshop was held at the Fordham Graduate Center in Manhattan and attracted 15 participants. Workshop attendees included librarians, humanities graduate students, instructional technologists and web developers, with a wide range of technical skill levels and personal goals. With only 2 hours, the workshop was divided into four parts:

- 1. Typeface selection in digital projects
- 2. Basic typographic principles
- 3. Discussion and analysis of examples
- 4. Overview of typography tools and demonstration

Following is a detailed discussion on these four sections of the workshop.

#### Workshop Part #1. Typeface selection in digital projects

Choose a good type family, one with extensive character support and a variety of styles gives you design flexibility.

We have more typefaces available for use in digital projects than ever before. Selecting a typeface can feel like a daunting task, whether limited to our font menus or searching distributors or foundries. When choosing a typeface for a specific project, we want to make sure we are choosing fonts that have a full character set with necessary accents, punctuation and numerals, including extended language support. While it is popular to criticize Comic Sans for its overuse and playful, childish feel, it is a useful example for discussing how to begin talking about the visual tone we are trying to set with our typeface selection. In the workshop, I ask attendees to pick a typeface like they are choosing an outfit: what's the occasion? How are you feeling? What is the weather like? An appropriate typeface choice is relative to the content. Next, I go over some basic type classifications (including serif, sans, decorative, script, etc.), which can help when searching for typefaces. Body text, display text, UI text, and tabular data are each different kinds of content where certain typefaces may work better than others [Brown 2018]. Typefaces with obvious, visual personality (like Comic Sans) generally only work for very specific situations and are not the best choice when the reader is trying to absorb complex information. I give an example of Source Sans by Paul J. Hunt, Adobe's first open source typeface. Source Sans is a large type family with many different styles (from very light to very heavy and italic of all of these weights). I use Source Sans in a lively type specimen I created, to show that even a simple, sans-serif typeface can feel playful but still related by using multiple weights from the same type family.

10



Figure 1.

#### Workshop Part #2. Basic typographic principles

Contrast [in size, weight and style] creates hierarchy. To demonstrate this, I show the attendees a phrase set in one typeface in one weight. In the example, the hierarchy of visual information is even. The same style is used throughout (it's all italic), the same weight of the typeface and the same size. In some cases, we are striving for an even reading experience (think long paragraphs of text). However, what happens when we take that same phrase and incorporate contrast, in size, weight and style?

Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.

Figure 2.

In the next example, we can see how a shift in size or weight creates a sense of visual hierarchy, placing emphasis in specific places. I also remind participants that this is still the typeface we looked at previously, Source Sans. In digital projects, levels of visual hierarchy are absolutely crucial to the display of complex information, especially on the web. Hierarchy is already built into our web-based projects (HTML tags , <h1>, <a>) and style sheets allow us to customize these elements through contrast of weight, size and style of type.

Something Bold Something Bold Something italic.

Figure 3.

Negative space is a term that helps describe the absence of content or "white space" that plays a vital role in readability and visual interest. It is a natural inclination to want to "fill the page" with content but in fact, our eyes and brains

14

appreciate it when there are ample amounts of margins and negative space to give a visual pause when needed.

Here, I show an example of a paragraph of text that is taking up the entire width of the screen. There is negative space between the lines of text, but it is quite monotonous and doesn't do much to give a needed visual pause as we are reading. I then show the same paragraph, this time presenting the text with a shorter line length and more uneven negative space on the page. There is now less space between the line, so that most of the negative space is relegated to the right side of the screen. Even though it is approximately the same amount of space, it is far more dynamic and easier to read. I also show how I divided the space using a very simple three column grid. A grid is a powerful and fairly simple way to organize information. Establishing grid guidelines helps make decisions that will make your content easier to read.

15

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17



Figure 4.

Typographic details, including the conventions of typesetting punctuation, spacing, and alignment, are important for longer reading experiences. These rules and details are considered by professional designers and create a reading experience that is controlled and comfortable, without much thought or consideration by the reader. Many times, a professional designer makes typographic decisions not only on specific, dictated rules, but on what feels right for the situation. Typography, while dictated by some fundamental rules, is still contextual, subjective and interpretive.

#### Workshop Part #3. Discussion and Analysis

Analyzing a web interface and describing the visual hierarchy can help one gain an understanding of typographic principles. We practiced this with several examples of website home pages for non-profit and public agencies to review some of the discussed principles. I asked the participants to consider the following open-ended questions when looking at the examples:

In this example, how is hierarchy created? In this example, what feeling is the type conveying?



Figure 5.

For example, we reviewed Audubon.org. First, we analyzed the number of type treatments we found on the homepage. Although the page initially looks quite simple (a menu, a large full window image, a caption), we discovered that there are over 10 different typographic treatments on that one screen. We discussed how the size, color, typeface selection, alignment and spacing of each treatment affects one another and how deliberate these decisions are in order to make the page feel "simple". The more information we add (scrolling down on the site, we discover paragraphs, columns, maps, and other content), the more we begin to identify the relationships between each of these decisions regarding hierarchy, typeface selection, contrast and negative space. The ability to explain not only whether something works but why it works, is a skill that can be cultivated through practice and exposure. These questions help frame a valuable discussion on identifying successful typographic principles in practice.

#### Workshop Part #4. Typography tools and demonstrations

At the end of the workshop, I present some current resources and digital tools for experimenting with typography on the web. Participants were able to practice basic principles of typographic hierarchy through contrasts of weight and styles, within the browser. TypeCast is a web-based tool that allows the user to test typefaces in the browser. For the purposes of this workshop, it worked as a simple way to experiment with typographic hierarchy in context. As of 2018, TypeCast, while still available online, is no longer being supported. This remains a challenge of teaching with free, online tools: maintenance and long-term availability of the tool can shift overnight. A longer workshop with more time for setting up HTML pages and CSS stylesheets would allow for more experimentation with web fonts in context.

18

## Workshop approaches and reflection

In reflecting upon the workshop, several approaches were successful in teaching general concepts. Critiques of existing projects allowed participants to practice the concepts discussed in the workshop related to typeface selection and principles of contrast and hierarchy. Introducing and briefly experimenting with tools and techniques during the workshop helped solidify understanding. Because the workshop was offered to a wide range of people and skill sets, it was important to leave time for individual and small group discussions. Prepared examples of organizations, books and web resources were provided to participants. Workshop slides were made publicly available on SlideShare so that anyone can have access to these resources: http://www.slideshare.net/AmyPapaelias/typography-for-digital-humanists.

21

22

Although I originally intended to focus on design and formal principles of typography, many attendees were interested in discussing concerns related to professional practice, type use and implementation. For example, type licensing, especially for educational or research contexts with limited budgets, can feel quite complicated and came up in our discussions. As with any digital product, it is important for users to read the end user license agreement if purchasing a font from a foundry or distributor. Attendees were also interested in talking about how to find design collaborators on campus. Creating collaborative projects with design faculty and students has challenges and rewards. This requires time and planning, and clear expectations for all responsibilities, in order to develop successful collaborations. Questions arose about digital labor and fair compensation for work being done by students. A longer or separate workshop topic dealing with professional and practical concerns would be suitable for the audiences.

## Conclusion

When introducing basic typography principles to audiences beyond designers, we must consider the range of practitioners who engage in information design activities: researchers, scholars, developers and professionals. Short workshops on typography for digital humanities audiences can provide a general overview of best practices and demonstrate the value of typography as an important part of creating a visually engaging experience in digital projects. Web-based tools allow participants to experiment and test some basic principles related to typeface selection, hierarchy of information and visual contrast. Exposure to the complexity of typographic choices may encourage digital humanities scholars to include trained designers as collaborators earlier on in project development. Longer workshops, with time for discussion on professional practice and licensing, would ultimately benefit digital humanities researchers and professionals who seek ways to embed typographic best practices into their projects.

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