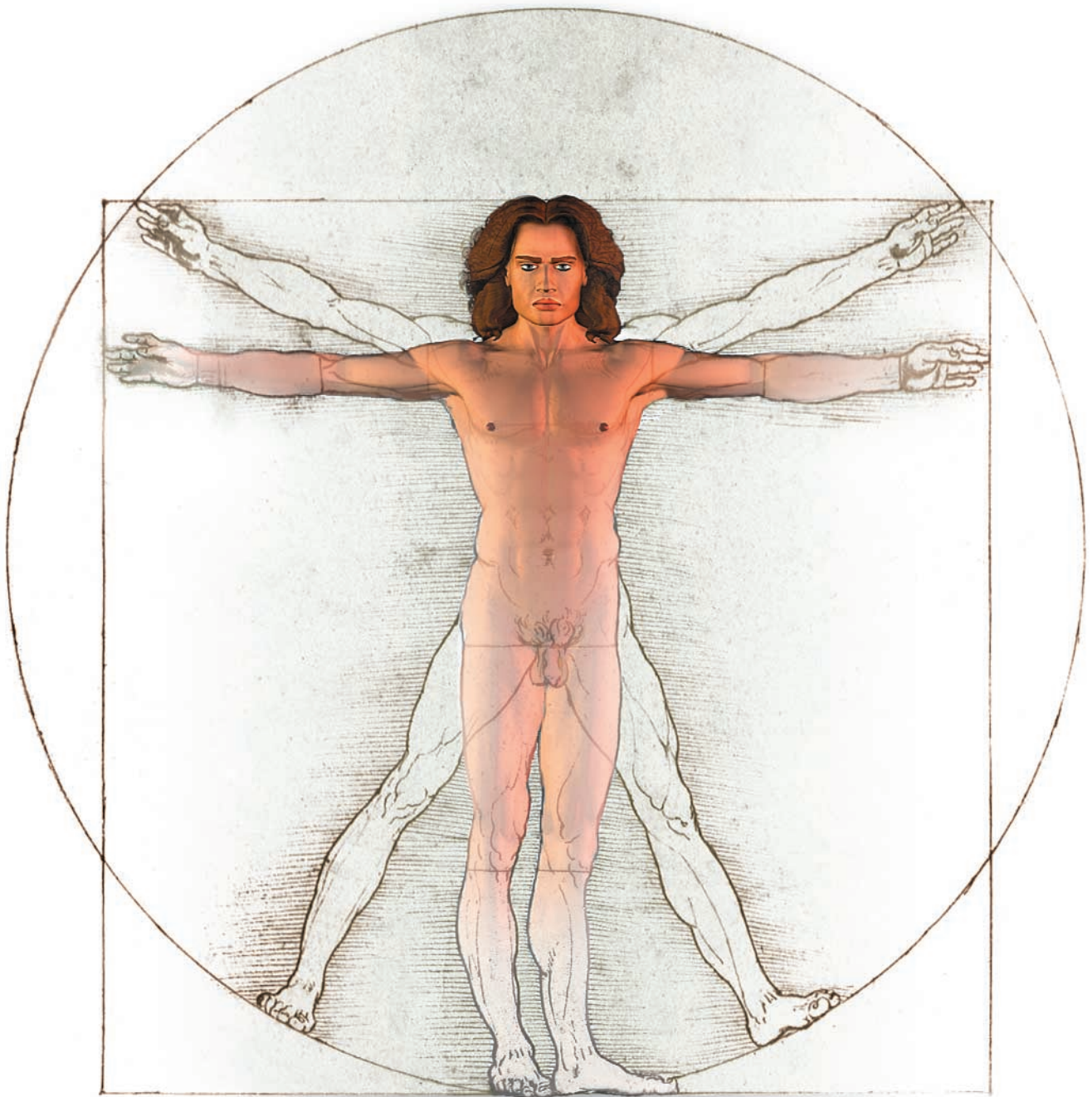


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Hype your web type

No, we're not talking killer image files or Flash effects,
but boosting the quality of basic HTML typography.
It's easy to do, and long overdue.

by Nick Shinn

HTML was developed outside the typographic tradition. You can tell this by looking at the nomenclature: along with terms that are familiar to graphic artists (such as the tags `` and `<I>`, for the bold and italic styles) there are the peculiar, alternative terms for the same styles, ``, and `` (that's emphasis, not "em space"). The logic of HTML is not quite typographic: for instance, the tag `
`, for linebreak, corresponds to a soft paragraph return in standard graphics software, and `<P>`, for paragraph, is in (my) reality a paragraph return with extra leading. The term "leading", which has been around for eons, is replaced by `<LINE-HEIGHT>`. Go figure.

HTML was not conceived as a flexible design system enabling infinitely variable positioning and sizing of elements, as we have become accustomed to with *Illustrator* and *QuarkXPress*. No, it wasn't designed for graphic designers to enable them to be creative with the plastic qualities of the medium but as a set of pre-defined formats useful for academic and scientific texts.

This non-graphic quality is particularly evident if you're trying to indent more than one line of copy. You can use the List code that gives you one huge, standard indent distance, plus unnecessary extra paragraph leading; or you can play around with the cell spacing or padding in Tables; or vary the margins in Frames, and/or your base HTML document. Consequently the ability to accurately position different text blocks in the same text flow in relation to one another, which is so useful for typographic layout, is severely compromised. To make matters worse, Explorer and Navigator interpret frame and table "indents" differently. Not nice.

However non-graphic it may be in its origins, the WWW took off when resourceful programmers began using the features of HTML (such as tables) for purposes for which they weren't intended, to create graphic effects. Much of the edifice is, therefore, constructed of kludges.

Originally, the typographic controls provided by Web authoring software and browsers were more like those of letterpress type

or primitive word processors, providing, for instance, the use of a limited range of type sizes. Yes, for some of us, it's like going back in time—to the Dark Ages.

In the notional environment of the Web, typographic capabilities are not grouped as such, with the result that some are readily available in authoring software like Dreamweaver and GoLive, some are hard to find, and some can only be implemented by typing code. The same thing is true of web textbooks and manuals—the concept of typography is spread thin.

But that's all changing. With the introduction of Cascading Style Sheets (CSS)—a term surely copped from Quark—things are becoming more familiar to graphic artists. Now, important capabilities such as indenting the first line of a paragraph or varying leading have become much more accessible. Authoring software is keeping pace. Significantly, Dreamweaver 3 has added a control palette which lets designers insert non-ASCII characters such as curly quotes without having to type code. GoLive goes one better, invisibly coding whatever special characters you type into it.

The examples shown gather together some of the underused typographic capabilities of the web. With them, your design options will increase dramatically.

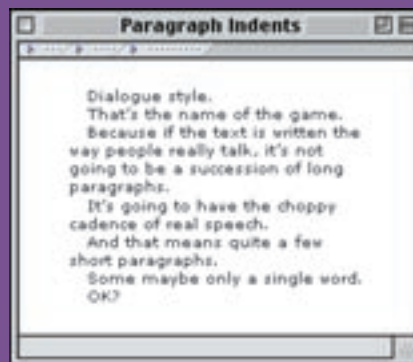
All this is certainly good news, but there are still some hurdles to overcome in the work environment.

TWO SOLITUDES

The vast majority of graphic designers and art directors graduated over five years ago, before the web went nova. They didn't study web design at college. So, in order to design for the web, they've done one of three things: (1) stuck with non-web media, creating documents in QuarkXPress and exporting as HTML, and/or "storyboarding"; (2) studied HTML code, either self-taught or at special courses, or (3) learned authoring software, such as Dreamweaver or GoLive. The bottom line is that there are very few professional graphic designers who don't rely on the

Seven tips for better Web typography

How you can easily add typographic refinement to your web pages, and dramatically increase your design options.



1. **PARAGRAPH INDENTS.** Many paragraphs in a narrow column of type that holds together. With the indent signifying a new paragraph, you don't need to waste an empty line for each new paragraph. Browser real estate is always at a premium, and the maxim is that people don't like to scroll.

TECHNIQUE

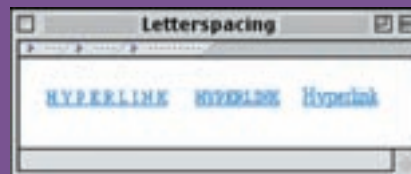
- i. **Way easy:** Use a couple of non-breaking spaces. This character is in the Dreamweaver "Insert" pull-down menu, or type either Option-Space, or Command-Option-Space.
- ii. **In the body:** `<SPACER TYPE=horizontal SIZE=n>`, where *n* is the desired indent size, in pixels.
- iii. **CSS:** In the Block category, enter a Text Indent value (Dreamweaver and GoLive). This is a bit of a hassle, as you can only see the effect in a browser.



2. **DROP CAPS.** This too is a space saver, compared with a raised cap.

TECHNIQUE:

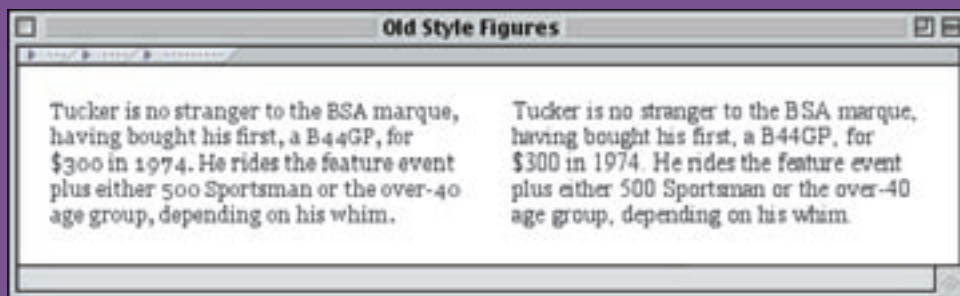
First, create an image file of the capital letter. Then insert `` where *letter.gif* is the location on the server of the cap image.



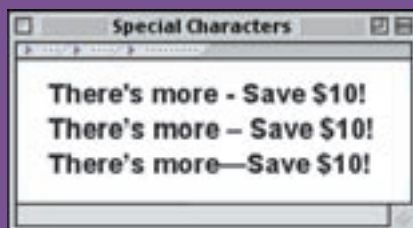
3. **LETTERSPACING.** Try this special web instance—an underlined hyperlink with letterspaced caps: the capitals avoid the problem of the underline running into descenders, and the letterspacing mitigates the cramped quality of a straight all-cap setting. In general, letterspacing adds variety. Play around.

TECHNIQUE:

- i. **Way easy:** Simply type a space between the characters you wish to track out. Because HTML doesn't recognize repeat spacing, if you want a more open spacing, use the non-breaking space (it's in the Dreamweaver "Insert" pull-down menu, or type Option-Space).
- ii. **CSS:** In the Block category, enter a value. This is a bit of a hassle, as you can't see the effect in Dreamweaver, only in a browser.



4. **OLD STYLE FIGURES.** Cap-sized numbers, such as years, or \$ values, tend to form clots in text. Old style figures avoid the problem. This refinement is widely available, thanks to Matthew Carter's Georgia (left, compared to Times, right), where old style figures are standard. It's a Microsoft "TrueType Core Font for the Web", so everyone should have it. That's amazing!



5. **SPECIAL CHARACTERS.** Here, compare the use of a single prime ("hash mark") and hyphen, incorrect, with an apostrophe and an en dash (centre, with a space either side) or an em dash (bottom, no spaces), correct.

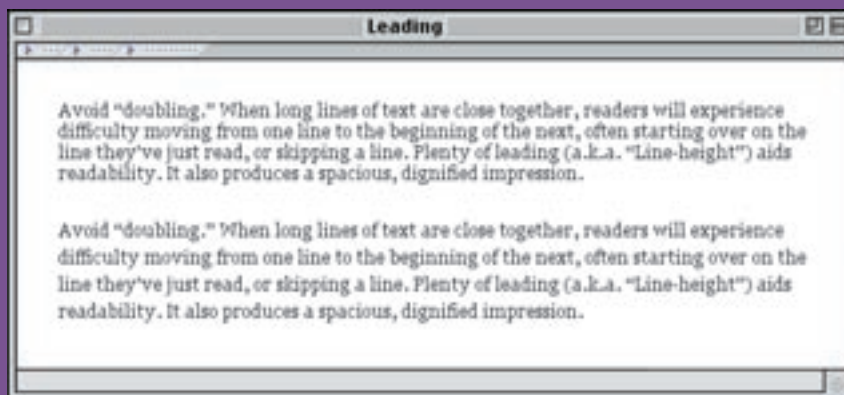
The right way looks nicer, and is the pro thing to do, like not having spelling mistakes. Whether the em- or en- dash works better depends on the typeface: good typography is all about making subtle, discriminating choices.

There are many foreign words in the English language which require accented characters. Not to mention the Prime Minister's name.

TECHNIQUE

Dreamweaver: Insert>Characters brings up a table with 98 special characters. There's an em-dash, proper "curly" quotes, accented characters, etc. Everything but the ampersand. For the ampersand, you have to insert this code into the HTML source: &.

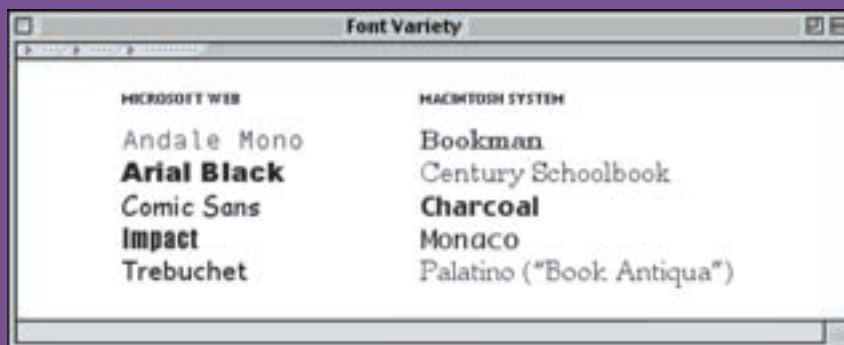
GoLive automatically converts characters typed in the text into the appropriate HTML coding.



6. **LEADING.** If there's one thing that will make web type easier to read, this is it.

TECHNIQUE:

CSS: In the Type category, enter a value. You have a dazzling choice: not just absolute value in pixels, points, inches, cms, etc., but also percentage and multiple. (Dreamweaver and GoLive)



7. **FONT VARIETY.** Web designers have to restrict the fonts they use to those that are likely to be installed on visitors' hard drives. But there's more than Helvetica, Verdana, Times and Georgia. You can expand your range with the Microsoft TrueType Web Fonts shown here, which come with Internet Explorer. If Netscape visitors, or Mac platform users, don't have them, it's not the end of the world.

TECHNIQUE:

Make sure you choose both the font you hope the end-viewers will have installed, and a default you're certain they do, that works OK in your web document.

So, if you choose <Book Antiqua, Times>, Mac users will get Book Antiqua, and those PC users who don't have it will get Times.

services of programmers.

Web work is split between designers and programmers. But it's different than the split in print work between designers and production artists. In print, the designers/art directors are usually adept at the software the production artists use. This is not so in web work. Now, in addition to the corporate cultural tribes of "suits" and "creatives" we have the "techies". Freaks vs. geeks, some will say. Are the skill sets so very mutually exclusive? I hope not, because typographic design has traditionally had a foot in both the art and technology camps.

A present-day scenario: Programmers, tasked with making websites that function flawlessly in numerous versions of several browsers, across two platforms, have little time for "making things look nice", a derogatory misconception of the function of graphic design.

For their part graphic artists, accustomed to the fine detail of printed typography, and the subtle effects of inks and varnishes on a welter of paper stocks, look down their noses at the crudeness of the web type image, and the limited selection of fonts. Elitists, they will tolerate type as bitmapped images, which they understand, and hope for Flash salvation. Typing code is anathema to them, and they think that any effort spent on improving basic web typography is a waste of time. This, too, shows a misconception of the function of typographic nuance.

The operative word is function. Typographic subtlety performs a valuable job—it enhances meaning and avoids bad meanings.

For instance, consider the em dash. Writers use it to convey a shade of pace, more urgent than an ellipsis or a comma. It adds drama and variety to text. But if the reader confuses it with a hyphen, that's deadly. Say you're reading some text on screen and you come to the word "land" at the end of a line, with a hyphen after it, masquerading as a dash. In print, the hyphen cues you to anticipate the rest of the word at the beginning of the next line, perhaps "ing", or "scape", and this anticipation carries

over to the web. The wrong character is confusing. (The double hyphen is an admission of failure, mere typing.)

The low typographic expectations of both designers and programmers create a self-fulfilling no-man's land, a wasteland where all the surfer sees is one layout: a column of type, overly wide, flush left, slabs of text piled on top of each other, every indent-less paragraph separated from the next by a gaping hole.

That's banal. Just because a medium is simple doesn't mean it can't be invested with significance. In fact much great art has a pure, minimal quality that is ultimately far more preferable to eye candy, no matter how spectacular. Sure, web type doesn't offer the expressive range of printed type, but it offers a heck of a lot more than most give it credit for, and quite enough to pump up the culture. Art can't exist in a vacuum; it's a give and take between creator and viewer. More than that, there's a wider context, a social contract. You want your design to please yourself, move product for the client, impress colleagues, and satisfy the end users. That's what everybody wants.

If enough people think web typography is worth paying attention to, then it happens. In the crucial instance, if a designer does something hype and the reader picks up the vibe, both score.

The WWW Consortium took a huge step forward with CSS. Software like Dreamweaver and GoLive take it further, giving designers more typographic controls with familiar-looking tools that can be used without resort to code. Now it's up to us to do the job. ■

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