

Typographic hierarchy: How to prioritize information

One of the most important elements for people looking at anything you design is the type. It needs to be clear and readable and it should **direct users through a design, from most important elements to least.**

Typographic hierarchy is a form of visual hierarchy, a sub-hierarchy per se in an overall design project. Typographic hierarchy presents lettering so that **the most important words are displayed with the most impact** so users can scan text for key information.

Without typographic hierarchy, every letter, every word and every sentence in a design would look the same. Can you imagine reading something where everything is the same font and size and color? Where do you start? How do you know what matters most?

Hierarchy creates contrast between elements. Designers achieve this through the use of typefaces, size, weight, capital and lowercase letters, bold or italics, orientation and color. Here are some of the most common techniques:

Typeface selection

More interesting typefaces can appear larger and draw the eye faster than ones with less visual intrigue. When using novelty, script or elaborate typefaces be aware of readability concerns and make sure the type is plenty big.

Size

The basic unit of typographic hierarchy. Text of different sizes attract different levels of attention. The bigger the type, the quicker the eye will be drawn to it. Type sizing should correlate to the order of importance in reading the text.

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The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

Cabin
16
normal
A
B I U S %
E Z M
Lorem ipsum

Weight

The thickness of the text, most easily increased through bolding. Although subtler than size, it's still a straightforward method of making your text stand out. Bolding is especially effective for adding weight to tertiary type. The thickness of letters can make text look larger (bold, thick strokes) or smaller (thin or compressed typefaces).



Bold

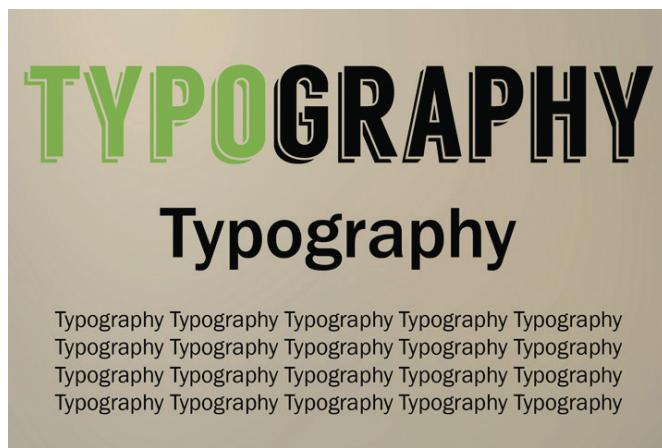
Bold lettering is a good point of emphasis for a single word or phrase. It works especially well in the tertiary level of type.

Italics

Italic lettering can highlight a single word or phrase in a less dramatic and more subtle way than bolding. It works especially well in the tertiary level of type.

Capital and lowercase letters

You've heard that sending an email in all capital letters is like yelling at someone. The same is true of all caps in design. Be wary of use. Capital letters will appear larger and come to the forefront while lowercase letters appear smaller and often fall into the background.



Color

Adding color to letters that typically do not have color creates specific and immediate interest. This effect can work in any level of text, but should be deliberate as to not create readability concerns or confusion.

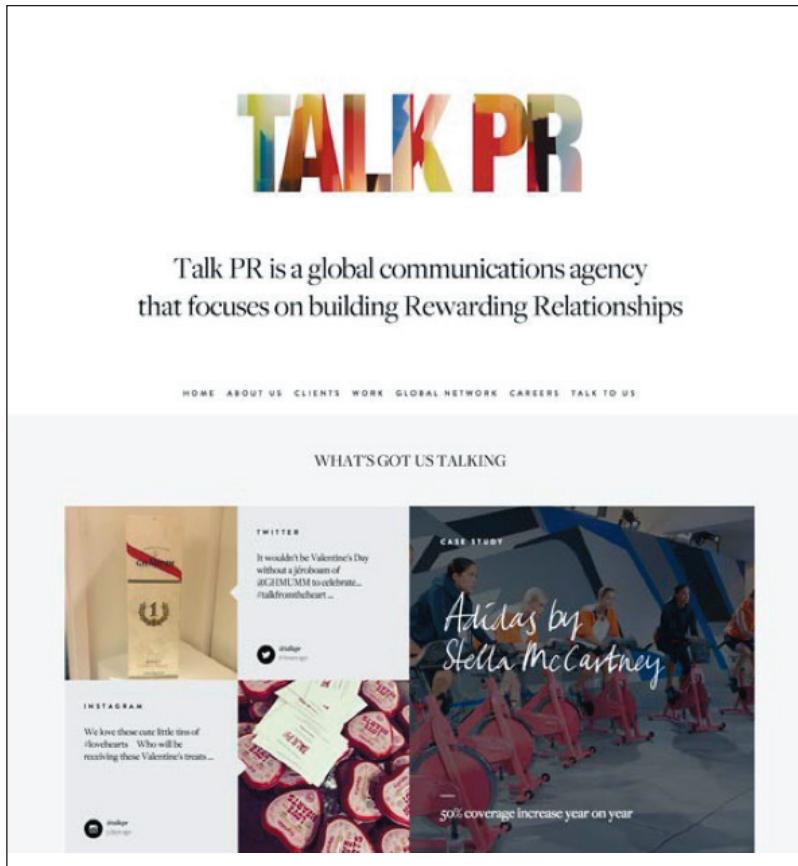
Warm colors (red, orange, yellow) tend to attract more attention than cool colors (blue, purple), especially if warm-colored text is set against a cool-colored background. Color contrast also matters, since saturated or bright colors jump out more than muted ones.

Space

White space can make text appear larger (and therefore more readable). Lack of space makes text feel more cramped and smaller. Every space affects your hierarchy, from simple kerning to the relationship between words and the edge of the screen.

Contrast

Contrast between any of these factors – size, weight, or color – will attract attention. Contrasting typefaces for headlines versus body copy helps create hierarchy.



Placement:

Where text is located on the page can establish hierarchy as well. Typically you read from top to bottom (a natural hierarchy of sorts) but this can be changed by employing some of the techniques above.

Position

Proximity can be a fast and simple way to convey meaning.

Your tools allow people move from theory to understanding by experiencing the ideas being shared and interacting in real time!

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Orientation

Turning letters on their side, upside down or with any other orientation that horizontal can have immediate eye-appeal, because they are placed in a way different than what is expected. This can work well for short words or phrases in the primary level of text.



Texture

Texture is highly subjective, making it one of the hardest elements to master. This doesn't refer to the texture of the lettering itself, but of the texture created through the typographic patterns on the page. Each block of text produces its own pattern, so to create texture, break the pattern by changing any of the other elements. Apply sparingly, otherwise it becomes distracting.



Combinations size, weight, capital and lowercase letters, bold or italics, orientation and color are used to create type that falls into distinct layers.

Primary Level

The primary level of typography is all of the big type. It's headlines and decks – also known as "furniture" – that draw readers into the design. This is the biggest type in the design.

Secondary Level

The secondary level of typography are the nuggets of scannable information that help readers stay with the design. This includes elements such as **subheads**, captions, pull quotes, infographics and other small blocks of text that add information to the primary level of text. The design of these text blocks is on the large side, but typically much smaller than lettering in the primary level of typography.

Tertiary Level

The tertiary level of typography is the **main text** of your design. It is often some of the smallest type in the design, but it needs to be large enough to be completely readable by all potential users. The typeface should be simple and consistent in design, spacing and overall usage.

Other Levels

The other levels of typography include effects applied to type in the tertiary level for small areas of impact. Effects such as bolding, italics, underlining and color can bring attention to specific areas of the main text. These effects work best when applied to text of the same size and typeface used in the tertiary level. Effects are used sparingly and for only a few words in sequence. Examples of other levels include links that are underlined, bold words for impact or italics or color for emphasis.

Print examples

Looking at this step-by-step example you can clearly see different levels of typographic hierarchy and how it makes the design both easier to read and more appealing visually.

Visual hierarchy in uses visual effects, size, color etc. to make specific bits of type appear more important.

