

*A Treasury of
Alphabets + Lettering
by Joan Tischhold
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LAYOUT OF LETTERING AND SIGNS

THE most beautiful lettering is of little avail unless it is attractively arranged. The illustration below shows a slightly reduced copper engraving of the year 1640. The layout of the five lines is as perfect as the form of the individual letters and their even and beautiful spacing. We are dealing here with letters of two sizes which are clearly, but not grossly, different. The decision of the writing-master Francisco Pisano to use only two letter sizes for his text is worth imitating. Often too many letter sizes are used for the same job. It is one of the important secrets of good lettering layout to use as few letter sizes and styles as possible in one design. Those

FRANCISCVS PISANVS
SCRIPTOR GENVENISIS
SIBI SVISQVE HAEREDIBVS
VIVENS POSVIT
ANNO DOMINI MDCXXXX

who observe this rule can count on good results. The rule also has practical advantages; it is far simpler to work with only two or three sizes rather than five or six.

The example also shows a harmonious relationship between letter size and line spacing. The spacing between the first and second line is rightly just a little larger than the spacing between the other lines. The arrangement of the letters is perfect because it fills the given space unobtrusively and convincingly.

Two letter sizes are not always sufficient for the layout. But the rule should be no more than three. Three sizes permit as good a solution of all conceivable problems as the use of four or more. The necessity for a fourth size is rare. We comprehend the message and its significance not because of the size of the letters but because of their arrangement. Appropriate spacing can convey the logical meaning.

The two letter sizes of the Pisano copper engraving might be termed its two elements. If, instead of the smaller letter size, we were to use lower case letters of the size of the first line, we would deal with only one letter size but with what amounts to two elements. The harmony of the engraving is based on the similar form of all its letters. The harmony of the next example is based on the use of the same letter size in the capitals in the first line as in the lower case letters in the lines

below. This example, too, is a model of a perfect, simple lettering solution. It does not have quite the formal effect of the historic example, but formality is not always in order. Informal uses demand somewhat more informal lettering designs.

We have learned that, rather than count letter sizes, we should speak of elements. This term seems necessary since roman letters can be used in two ways which have a rather different effect: as capitals alone and as capitals with lower case letters. The fact that we can achieve different effects with one size of roman letters, as we have seen in the last example, is another one of its great advantages.

If a layout begins with a small size, followed by a large one which, in turn is followed by the "same" size, we find that we shall have to use a third size to

FRANCISCUS PISANUS
 scriptor genuensis sibi suisque
 haeredibus vivens posuit
 anno domini mdcxxxx

achieve the desired effect. On the door sign "Rentsch" shown on page 44, the bottom line seems to be as large as the top one. It is, however, smaller, although not much. We are dealing with three elements which appear as two elements. It would be ugly, incidentally, to letter space the top line to the full length of the white line. And if we were to enlarge the letter size to attain the full length of the white line, we would not achieve the desired effect. These are fine points.

It is generally wrong to letter space lines not containing exactly the same number of characters to the same width just in order to achieve a squared off effect. We must follow the rule that lines consisting of letters of the same size in the same arrangement must, under all circumstances, have the same letter spacing.

ARCHITECTURAL
 DESIGN

Unsatisfactory.

The letter spacing of letters of the same size
 in the same layout must be the same.

ARCHITECTURAL
 DESIGN

Correct.

Identical letter spacing
 in both lines.

The following example shows a small group of letters in good and bad arrangements. In both instances the same size is used. In the left layout the characters and the lines are too close together and are hard to read. As we saw earlier, capital letters should not be used in such a clumsy manner. They must always be letter spaced. The smaller example at right is not only more legible, even though the letters are small, but is also more beautiful. The line spacing which is too tight at left is now equal to the letter size.

EXHIBITION
OPEN
10 A. M. — 5 P. M.

A letter jungle. Both the letters and the lines are too close. Hard to read.

EXHIBITION
OPEN
10 A. M. — 5 P. M.

Clear, legible and attractive due to generous letter spacing and line spacing.

It is a mistake to attempt to put the largest possible letter on a given space. Lettering does not increase in legibility with increased letter size, as most people seem to assume. The selection of the maximum size usually leads to letter spacing which is much too tight. Our streets are full of examples of this kind. Well spaced lettering is not only more attractive and more legible but also goes well with architecture. Poor lettering, which is too compressed and too large, is ugly and spoils our cities.

BAKERY

Ugly. The letters are too large and too close together in too small a space.

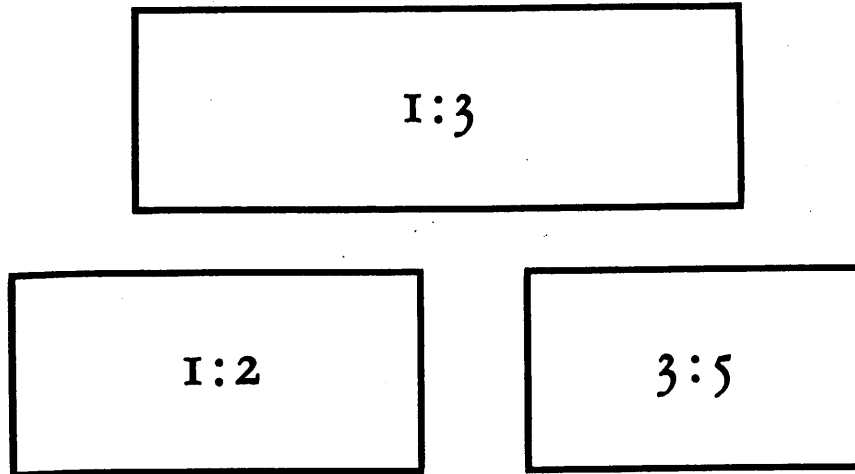
BAKERY

Smaller but well spaced and elegant letters delight the eye and are legible.

Beautiful Proportions of Signs

The over-all available space on which the lettering is placed is not always prescribed. It is then up to the designer to determine the size and proportion of the sign. These elements are far more important to the good appearance of the sign than is commonly assumed. A well proportioned background is necessary if a beautiful letter is to achieve its full effect. Signs which are perfectly square are generally

ugly. A sign must be either long or tall. It is well to remember that exact geometric proportions, such as 1:2, 3:5 or the proportions of the Golden Section (about 21:34) are better and more beautiful than proportions which only approach these precise relationships. The illustration on the top of page 44 shows a sign in the exact proportion 3:5.



The reason that older buildings, including those of the late nineteenth century, seem more beautiful than some recent structures is due to the fact that their fenestration and their entire linear system are based on these tried and true proportions. Recently, the well-founded rules of proportion, which were followed in the Gothic and Renaissance periods, have been tossed out in the belief that intuition is sufficient. However, we are not born with a proper sense of proportion but must slowly develop it like good taste. Proportions alone do not create art, but they are a good test for all graphic work including lettering.