

Girls (and Guys) Just Want to Have Fonts

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Think about your morning routine. You wake up, turn off your alarm, brush your teeth, have some breakfast while you read the paper, and drive to work. This may not be your exact routine, but chances are it looks familiar. Think about the words you see when you're going about your morning routine. The numbers on your alarm clock, the nutrition information on your cereal box, the signs directing you as you drive. How many different written words do you think you encounter? How many different fonts?

In all likelihood, you don't notice the fonts in your day-to-day life, and if you do, you're not going to think much of them. And with good reason: whenever you see a written word, you see a font. If one were to note each font one saw, there would be little room for any other thought. In his book, *Just My Type*, Simon Garfield tells the story of a man who tried to avoid the omnipresent **Helvetica** for a single day, going to such lengths as averting his eyes when he saw something written in the typeface and not using "any **Helvetica**-signed transport, nor buy any **Helvetica**-brand products" (Garfield 126). His task was more difficult than it would first appear to be, as the man found himself unable to use any public transportation in New York City or eat at any restaurant that used **Helvetica** on the menu (Garfield 126). This man experienced first hand the degree to which written language is used in everyday life. It is not obvious how important words and fonts are until you try to do without them. The things that most influence people aren't always the most arresting or grand; oftentimes, what changes lives the most are those things that we don't even notice. Fonts are one of these influencing factors. Though it may not necessarily be conscious, every single font one encounters elicits a distinct reaction in the individual.

Even to the average person with no knowledge of typeface or design, there is a clear change in the way different fonts are perceived. A college professor would never accept an essay written in a font like *Papyrus*, but would likely be perfectly happy to take one in typed in **Times New Roman**. Perhaps this is because *Papyrus* is difficult to read, perhaps it is because **Times New Roman** is required for MLA, or perhaps there is a deeper, subconscious reason: perhaps professors trust words written in **Times New Roman** over *Papyrus*.

In a survey conducted by the *New York Times*, it was found that participants trusted a statement written in _ over the same one written in _(Morris). Those participating in this survey did not know their reaction to the font was what was being gauged, but the varied reactions towards different fonts were evident: statements written in _ had the highest amount of weighted agreement, as well

as the lowest amount of weighted disagreement (Morris). Statements written in __, on the other hand, had the lowest amount of weighted agreement and one of the highest amounts of weighted disagreement (Morris). Overall, _ had a 1.5% advantage in terms of perceived truthfulness (Morris). This study demonstrates that the trust we place in words is dependent on the way words are written.

On the surface, there is no logical explanation for why some fonts are given more credibility than others: if the statement is the same in both fonts, there is no *real* reason that levels of trust should change. In the same way that a logical, well-written speech is rendered ineffective by a poor orator, the persuasiveness of written words is dependent on their appearance. The change in trust, it seems, must come from the font, or the presentation of the word. The fonts chosen for this particular study come from opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of credibility. _ is a font with a history going back several centuries (Garfield 97-105), whereas __ is often ridiculed and was created in the early nineties (Garfield 10-21). The long history of _ gives it a trustworthiness that the relatively new and generally derided __ simply does not have. _ is the kind of font used in the first editions of authors like Dickens and Tolstoy; __ is used on diner menus and children's book reports. While the fact that studies have actually been done about fonts may be surprising, the results likely aren't a huge shock to anyone who has ever seen these fonts. _ looks like it belongs on a playbill for a Shakespearian tragedy; __ looks like it belongs on the homework assignment of a first grader. _ simply looks more official, and, if you're anything like me, you tend to trust official looking things.

Why is it that we associate credibility with appearance? Is the phenomenon of trusting certain fonts over others really logical? Perhaps. Making judgments about the reliability or credibility of a font based on its appearance is just as rational as when you judge someone based on what clothes they're wearing. Fonts are essentially the clothing of a word. Like how a hipster clad in plaid is perceived differently than a jock in a jersey, the word **hipster** in Futura is perceived differently than the word **jock** typed in 24 point __. Even if you typed the same word in two different fonts, perception of the word would change. The word **hipster** typed in _ looks out of place compared to Futura. Indeed, it almost appears threatening, an adjective that generally doesn't come to mind when thinking of hipsters.

As with clothes, there is a wide variety of ways that fonts can be perceived. For example, typefaces "can have gender...heavy, bold jagged fonts are mostly male, and whimsical, lighter curly fonts are mostly female" (Garfield 25). In the same way pink is traditionally perceived to be a "female color," fonts like **Curls MT**, are perceived as feminine (Garfield 25). Professor of Psychology David Dunning, as quoted in Morris Errol's Opinionator blog, goes so far as to say "fonts have different personalities. It seems to me that one thing you can say about __ is that it feels more formal or looks more formal" (Morris). If fonts are like clothes, then _ is a three-piece suit and __ is a clown costume. One would automatically take someone in a suit more seriously than a clown costume because of the implications that the costume holds. From just visually comparing the two, it is obvious that _ is the more formal font.

While it is clear that certain fonts appear more official than others, it is difficult to determine what exactly makes one more formal than another. Perhaps looking at the history of fonts gives the most insight into why we look at certain typefaces with more trust than others. In the same way that an older book is presumed to have more literary merit than one recently published, an older font is looked at with more respect than a newer one. The primary visual difference between modern and classic fonts lies in whether or not they have serifs. The difference between a serif and a sans serif font “lies at the feet or tips of the letters, with a serif typeface carrying a finishing stroke often appearing to ground the letter on the page” (Garfield 35). The letter **A** typed in **Helvetica** demonstrates the visual difference between serif and sans serif fonts. The first example of a serif utilized in the Latin alphabet can be traced back to the 2nd century BC, and the characteristic has continued to be “used for centuries in many forms of scripts, and has of course come down to modern times in printed capital letters as well as in those cut in stone” (Harrer 4). In contrast, the oldest Sans Serif font is probably **Caslon Egyptian**, which dates back only to 1816 (Garfield 36). The fact that serif fonts have been around for so long gives them more credibility.

Serif fonts were utilized in some of the first printed books: while Gutenberg’s 1455 Bible used a typeface that resembled Old English calligraphy (and is quite illegible to the modern eye), serif font would become popularized in Venice by the 1470s (Garfield 28-29, 78-79). Venetian type of the 15th century was the first typeface to break “away entirely from the gothic weights of Gutenberg, Schoeffer and Fust: it is easily readable to use today... the first truly modern printed font” (Garfield 79). The works of Virgil, Shakespeare, and Copernicus were all first printed in serif typefaces. Though it may seem inconsequential, the little wings at the bottom of letters help to tell the story of language. The sheer amount of history that comes with serif type likely leads people to trust words written in these fonts more than those without serifs.

The perceived trustworthiness of serif fonts has real world applications in fields like advertising and marketing. Perception of fonts is particularly important for political advertising as candidates attempt to win the trust of voters. When politicians are seeking to find more credibility in an election year, the font chosen for campaign merchandise and advertising usually features a serif because it implies something that has been around for a while and will continue to remain steadfast. People like David Nalle use knowledge of fonts to their advantage; Nalle works as a font designer and a political consultant, reconciling artistry and practicality (Murphy). Nalle analyzed the advertising of the 2010 midterm elections to find that many Democratic candidates forsook progressivism and utilized serif fonts to compete with the grass-roots, handwritten quality of Tea Party signs (Murphy). The contrast between the handwritten signs of Tea Party protestors and the sleek steadfastness of the serif fonts used by party candidates attempted to emphasize the reliability of the party establishment. Think back to your daily routine. The font of the newspaper you read and the logo of the news program you watch are likely serif because these are entities that people want credibility from. *Time* magazine, CBS, and all the major daily newspapers (with the exception of *USA Today*) all use serif fonts, likely for this exact reason: readers and viewers expect to trust where their news comes from.

Though they may be perceived as less trustworthy, sans serif fonts are not any less important than their older relatives. Some of the most influential and widely used fonts in today’s society are sans

serif: **Helvetica** and **Univers** both emerged from Switzerland in 1957 and went on to change the world of design (Garfield 124). **Helvetica**, in particular, has been significant. Sans serif, readable, sleek, “**Helvetica** is a font of such practicality... that it is both ubiquitous and something of a cult” (Garfield 126). It is notable for its un-notableness: it is so unexpressive and clean that it can be used in almost any context. **Helvetica** first gained popularity in the 1960s as advertisers sought to simplify and modernize their images. Gaudy script typefaces were “swept away in favor of just one word in **Helvetica**” (Garfield 128). It is near impossible to navigate in modern society without it: BMW, Jeep, Urban Outfitters, Verizon, Nestle, Saab, Oral B, and Energizer all use the font for their logo, and it is used on many public transport signs (Garfield 127). Though it may be one of the most widely used typefaces in the entire world, **Helvetica** doesn’t actually *say* much as a font. If **_** is a clown costume, and **Baskerville** is a three-piece suit, then **Helvetica** must be a white, plain button-down shirt. Despite what some would call its blandness, **Helvetica** still manages to generate distinct emotional reactions from individuals. By simply altering the thickness or angle of the font, people’s perception of **Helvetica** changed.

There are different versions of every font. On a basic Mac word processor, **Helvetica** comes in six different varieties, including **bold**, ***Helvetica oblique***, and light. **Helvetica Neue** (simply an updated version of the original **Helvetica** created by the Swiss) comes in eleven different varieties. In addition to regular, bold, and italicized, one can type in a light, ultra light, or condensed version of the font. Even small variations like these can change the perception of a font. A recent study attempted to find out whether individuals associate different fonts with different emotions. Beth Koch, who conducted the study, sought to find out three major things: whether viewing typefaces produced emotional responses, whether people have the same responses, and whether certain emotions were associated with specific features of the font (bold, condensed, so on) (Koch 207). Koch used different versions of **Helvetica** to test emotional reactions to fonts (210). The study found that subjects associated different versions of **Helvetica** with diverse emotions: **Helvetica Ultra Lite** was associated with desire, **Helvetica Bold** with fear, and **Helvetica Condensed Bold** with joy (Koch 211). Though many of those who took this particular study had some background in typography (Koch 213), a layman like myself can see the emotion in these particular fonts. The fact that even in a font like **Helvetica**, which seems so boring and common, people still perceive emotion speaks to the way we process words. Even the small changes in a font are noticeable. Simon Garfield gives the example of typing a love letter: one wouldn’t write a note like this in a font like **Helvetica Condensed Bold** (Garfield 141). Indeed, it would look quite threatening, as if you were saying “love me, or else.” Instead, the lighter, more gentle **Helvetica Ultra Condensed** might be better suited to that particular proclamation

of emotion. Though we may not notice the way we perceive emotions in specific fonts, it is a phenomenon that influences us all in an imperceptible way.

Font doesn't just influence perception on an emotional level. Certain fonts have continually proven to be better for learning than others (French and Blood 301). In a study published in Great Britain's *Journal of Educational Research*, analysts saw that certain fonts helped students better retain information (French and Blood 303). The study found that while many educators preferred simpler fonts because they believed they would "reduce the cognitive load on the learner," in actuality, there is "evidence that harder-to-read, or disfluent, fonts hold promise for promoting recall and retention of written information" (French and Blood 302). Researchers hypothesized that this phenomenon was because students had to read over words written in more disfluent fonts multiple times, thus helping them to better retain the information (French and Blood 303). Disfluent fonts include ones with serifs, those that are italicized, or those that are otherwise ornamental. Using a disfluent font like *Monotype Corsiva* or even ...has been proven to be useful for the information retention of all students, but is particularly beneficial to those with dyslexia; indeed, this particular study saw an improvement of 19% between the regular and disfluent fonts for dyslexic students (French and Blood 303). In this case, the influence of fonts on individual perception goes past a merely emotional response: fonts have the power to change one's life for the better.

Next time you go about your morning routine, try to note the different typefaces you see. How many times do you see **Helvetica** ? **Times New Roman**? Question why the font on your box of Cheerios is different from the one on your toothpaste, and ask yourself what it says about that product. By choosing Helvetica over **Futura**, what is the designer of a product trying to convey to you, the consumer? Humans are visual creatures. Everyday, we are bombarded with different images, from advertisements on billboards to posters stapled on telephone poles, and are forced to determine their meaning. Visual literacy, or the practice of being able to see and interpret different images, has become a critical part of today's world (Elkins 4). The visual literacy that comes with looking at a font is more subtle than that of looking at an actual picture because it is impossible for "written word to be separated from fonts. Yes, we *read* the word 'horse,' but we also see the letters, the typefaces, the shape of the word on the page. Is this not part of the *meaning*?" (Morris). Nevertheless, recognizing the effects fonts have on us is necessary: being able to identify the way a font is perceived allows you to harness this power to influence others. Whether it is through advertising, political campaigning, or education, fonts have the power to change minds and change the world.

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