

The serif is a small stroke added to the ends of letter-strokes for reasons that are both functional and decorative. This feature came naturally to both chisel and pen, and was incorporated into the letterforms cut as typefaces. (Figure 1) Serifs form a link between letters that helps to bind them together as words for greater readability.



figure 1

A roman letter without serifs first appeared as a typeface in 1816 and was intended as a display face for occasional use in advertising. "Sans" means "without" in French, so sans serif means "without serif."

To many who had become accustomed to the delicate, elegant lines of typefaces such as Baskerville and Bodoni, sans serif typefaces were considered shocking and vulgar. At that time, the British found these letterforms to be so strange and ugly that they called them "grotesques" or "Grotesks." T.M. Cleland, a noted typographer in the 19th and 20th centuries, remarked, "Cutting the serifs off of roman letters in the name of simplicity may well be compared to simplifying a man by cutting off his hands and feet!" Sans serif type can be found on book title pages and advertisements all through the 19th century, but it was rarely used as a text face.

It is worth noting that sans serif typefaces were used on buildings and by signwriters before they were cut as printed typefaces – they were easier to draw, paint, or carve than letters with serifs. The sans serif cut in stone goes back to the days of ancient Greece. Stripped of unessential elements, sans serif reduces the alphabet to its basic elementary shapes.

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— T.M. Cleland

"Our sympathy for the shapes derived from geometry and science, is part of our inborn striving, both in things and events, which is redoubled when we are confronted by chaos."  
— Jan Tschichold

Riding a wave of aesthetic ideology washing over Europe in the 1920's, a sans serif called Futura (Figure 2) was the inevitable manifestation of a new design attitude.

Futura is primarily constructed of circles, squares, and triangles – the basic geometric elements of mechanical technology – and became symbolic of the new industrial society. An interest in these basic geometric shapes manifested itself in such art and design movements as Dutch De Stijl and Russian Constructivism.

Traditional type usage, particularly the use of serif fonts, was beginning to be questioned. At the Bauhaus, in Germany, a new design philosophy revolving around form and function flourished. This too aimed at streamlining the look of the type. The typographer Jan Tschichold is quoted as saying at that time, "Our sympathy for the shapes derived from geometry and science, is part of our inborn striving, both in things and events, which is redoubled when we are confronted by chaos."

Readability is the single biggest necessity of typography. Designers must always keep this as their chief priority. Copy that is meant to be read, but is hard to read, no matter how clever or cool the layout might appear, is badly designed. Readability need not mean dullness. On the contrary, the more attractive, the more exciting, the more creative the feel for tone and space, the more inviting and readable that design will become.

futura

figure 2

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Assignment 6: Brochure

Gill Sans (Figure 3), designed by Eric Gill, is one of the most elegant and influential sans serif typefaces of the 20th century. Issued in 1929, it was inspired by Edward Johnston's typeface for the London Underground in 1916. It is a humanist face, that is, more expressive and less mechanical than many sans serif faces.

*gill sans*

figure 3

If Gill Sans has a weakness as a text face, it lies in its various weights - the light is too light for continuous text and the regular is too heavy. Ruari McLean has noted that "the letters of Gill Sans contain subtleties and refinements which the Nazis, preferring the dictatorship of logic and compasses, could not admit. They hated what was truly modern in art because it was free and questioning: they labeled it as 'decadent' and proscribed it."

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During the 1950s, Swiss design, also referred to as the International Typographic Style, emerged as a dominant influence. Several European designers advocated elementary type forms without embellishment. Thus, sans serif type, in a range of weights and proportions, came to epitomize modernity. The sans serif's wide range of value and texture in the black tonal scales easily accommodated modern design's intellectual attitudes. At the time, it was argued that sans serif type best expressed clarity and unity. To this end, the designers who embraced these ideals sought to achieve them with various tpestyles within a single type family (such as Helvetica Bold, Helvetica Light, Helvetica Black Condensed, etc.).

Designed in 1957 by Max Miedinger, Helvetica (Figure 4) has been one of the most commercially successful type designs of the 20th century. Helvetica is a very legible sans serif which has a large x-height, short ascenders and descenders, and no eccentricities. Indeed, some people say it is characterless.

helvetica

figure 4

It has become acceptable as a text typeface and is widely used in publishing and advertising. Helvetica Neue, a modernized version of the font, has a full repertoire of variations, including shaded and ultrathin.

Optima (Figure 5) is a highly original humanist sans serif created by the leading German type designer Hermann Zapf. It was originally issued in 1958 and broke new ground in commercial type design. It successfully blends characteristics of both serif and sans serif letterforms. It has variable stroke weights and the letterstrokes have flared terminals. Its uppercase letters were influenced by ancient and Renaissance stone inscriptions. Optima is a popular typeface that benefits from loose letterspacing.

Optima

figure 5

These are only a handful of the sans serif typefaces available today. The future contains intriguing possibilities. Designers must maintain a high level of awareness and human understanding. They must continually remember that they are not creating something solely for themselves. They will be needed as long as humans exist on the planet, because people will always need to communicate in one form or another.

streamlining  
the word:

sans

serif type

Curated by Ruari McLean and Christopher Perfect  
Fine Arts Gallery  
University of Maryland, Baltimore County  
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