

## So You Want to Build A Letter

“Type is something we consume in enormous quantities. In much of the world, it’s completely inescapable,” (Matthew Carter). Typography is all around us. We find type on road signs, newspapers, books, magazines, computers and packaging. What I find most fascinating is the numerous varieties you can choose from. Typography does more than just create the words for the message, it also creates the mood. Through the study of various type designers, I will look at what inspires new typefaces as well as the step-by-step process for designing a typeface. One designer I will study is Tobias Frere-Jones, a pioneer in type design, who designed his first alphabet at the age of 16. Frere-Jones continually looks for inspiration as he develops new type for use in print and on the web. In addition, Frere-Jones also looks at reviving older print type styles and brings them into the 21st century. This process of bringing the past into the present, Frere-Jones compares to making a bowl of soup. “You have a basic stock... a geometric sans-serif stock with certain spices added to it and cooked just so. Nobel, for example, was Futura soup cooked in dirty pots and pans,” (Tobias Frere-Jones.)

The idea for a new typeface can be inspired by the surroundings of an artist or an artist can work at reviving an old typeface. When creating the typeface Gotham, Frere-Jones took his camera through the streets of New York and photographed signs that displayed the look and feel of the letters he was trying to make. Mark Simonson’s typeface Coquette was inspired by the logos on vintage cameras and radios. New typefaces can also be commissioned by businesses and municipalities to create branding that sets them apart from their competitors. Typographer Matthew Carter created the type Bell Centennial to be used in the US phonebook.

Where does an inspiring type designer begin? Let’s first discuss the tools needed for a designer. A computer, of course, but one must also consider software. Mark Simonson created Coquette using Adobe Illustrator, but advises that it was not the best software to work with. Type designer Thomas Phinney comprised a list of font creation tools for the website Quora.

- 1) For the \$50 to \$100 price point: FontLab Typetool, FontCreator and Glyphs Mini;
- 2) For the \$300 to \$400 price point: FontLab and Fotographer;
- 3) For the price point of \$550 or more: FontLab Studio, Robofont and DTL Fontmaster.

In a separate article for Quora, Phinney also shared some questions to ask yourself or your client before creating a new type design. First, know your client or the target customer and see if you are replacing a current type. If so, ask why they are changing. Also ask: How will the typeface be used? Will it be used for everything such as packaging, signage, logo design and body text? Will this be a print or web type? How many styles are needed? Styles include bold, italic,

condensed, or any combination of the three. Will you need to create symbols along with the letter and numbers? Once you have all your questions answered you can begin brainstorming your new creation.

Some designers will begin sketching their design idea on paper with a pencil. Matthew Carter, on the other hand, will go straight to his computer and begin to work. He also doesn't begin with the letter A. According to Carter, the letters he begins with are the lowercase h, lowercase o and the lowercase p. "A lowercase h tells me a huge amount about other letters, particularly if you've got an o and a p beside it. If you've got the h right, you've got all the makings of an n and an m and a u," (Matthew Carter).

If you choose to design on paper, your next step will be to scan your design into your computer and open the font creator software you choose to purchase. Create a Bézier outline of your letter design. While it might be tempting to just hit auto trace, don't, as it will easily distort your design by creating too many endpoints. Create a wire frame around your letters to help you find the height and width for each letter as they are grouped together.

A few things to keep in mind: Your eye will play tricks on you, so it's important to follow what your eye is telling you. Curved letters will appear smaller than square ones, so make them taller than the main body height of the lowercase letter (also know as your x height). This may be mathematically incorrect, but your eyes won't see that. Trust what your eye is telling you.

Finally, fine-tune your design. Decide the difference in thickness of the stem in a capital letter versus a lowercase letter. How far past the baseline do you want the descender to rest? The descender is the vertical stroke that moves downward in a lowercase y as an example. Remember to trust what your eye is telling you, and you will soon have a beautiful new typeface to share with the world.

If you are like me and have a fascination with typeface, study the designers I have shared in this essay as well as designers Jonathan Hoefler, Alastair Johnson, Mark Simonson, and Nadine Chahine. Many of them share their processes and ideas on their websites and blogs, and speak at design conferences around the world.

So the next time you are stopped at a traffic light or in the aisle at the grocery store, take a moment to look at the signs scattered around you. They may inspire you to create your own typeface one day.

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