Neutral

Can a typeface be neutral?

While there are typefaces more ‹neutral› than others, sometimes it is exactly this connotation that spoils the idea of ‹neutrality›; such as with Helvetica: Because this typeface is so ubiquitously used, and because it is universally, but vaguely agreed among most graphic designers to lack any character, it was attributed, over time, the connotation of not having any connotations, the connotation of neutrality. The Amsterdam-based graphic design collective Experimental Jetset describes Helvetica as not neutral at all but as self-referential, or connoted to graphic design itself; they continue to say that the myth of Helvetica's neutrality has turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, and this is true whether the graphic designer that uses it is actually aware of the myth or seriously considers it neutral.

Aiming at neutrality is actually a very strong form of communicating a value, namely itself: Just like choosing a very strong and expressive typeface deliberately triggers certain associations in the reader, a neutral typeface and therefore a lack of associations is a way to support the text it is deployed for, but not by adding the ‹right› atmosphere to a text, but by trying to omit any kind of atmosphere and concentrating only on making the text easily accessible to the reader and focusing his mind on the content, not on a circumferential context.

Can a typeface be neutral?
Defaultism and indifference.

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Defaultism and indifference

One must be aware that while tempting, using ‹defaults› to achieve neutrality is a less than optimal approach: while the typographer (or whoever puts the text in its final form) can, by using a default typeface, minimise his own influence on the design by explicitly not choosing a typeface, the default typefaces that is (randomly) used then (a typewriter typeface, handwriting or a default computer font such as Arial, Times New Roman or Courier) can give very specific connotations, and may often even be self referential, by looking default and ‹unchosen›.

So who and what is this typeface for?

A neutral typeface can be for anyone who does not want to add any connotations or associations to a given content through the way it is represented, for people that strive for a clean and clear display of text and who want to prevent their work from being strongly connected to a style, fashion or trend through the typeface that is used.

Especially and explicitly, this typeface is also for Conceptual artists and conceptual writing artists: In 1968, Lawrence Weiner, at the age of only 22 years, proclaimed that for his art, it was not important how it was made, it was not important who made it, and it was furthermore not even important if it was made at all. This was to put the focus and stress on the ideas behind his art, and not on their physical manifestations. ‹The purest definition of conceptual art› writes Joseph Kosuth in 1969, ‹would be that it is inquiry into the foundation of the concept «art», as it has come to mean› and he offered another definition in 1996:

1. The artist may construct the work

2. The work may be fabricated

3. The work need not be built

Each being equal and consistent
with the intent of the artist

The decision as to condition
rests with the receiver
upon the occasion of receivership

(Lawrence Weiner, Declaration of Intent, 1968)

Why is neutrality good?
Who is this typeface for?

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‹Conceptual art, simply put, had as its basic tenet an understanding that artists work with meaning, not with shapes, colours, or materials.› (Godfrey: Conceptual Art)

Since even Conceptual artists, though, needs to have some form of manifestation, the concepts for the ‹art works› or happenings were mostly written down; often with the materials readily at hand: handwriting with pencil, fountain pen or ballpoint pen, or with the nearest typewriter. This is what I would like to call ‹Defaultism›: By not consciously making a choice for a specific form (which, viewed superficially suits the Conceptual Art approach very well), any whatever available form is being accepted. Unfortunately, this is also a physical manifestation that will always lend associations and connotations to the beholder; an unnecessary major flaw to the cleanness of the Conceptual art.

The neutral typeface aims at minimising these asso‑ciations and connotations, and aims at becoming a standard typeface for Conceptual artists.

Comparing typefaces
Step 1: Classes

Thirty spokes are united around the hub of a wheel,
but the usefulness of the wheel
depends on the space where nothing exists.

Clay is moulded into a vessel,
but the usefulness of the vessel
depends on the space where nothing exists.

Doors and windows are cut out of the walls of a house,
and the usefulness of the house
depends on the space where nothing exists.

Therefore take advantage of what exists,
and use what does not exist.

(from Lao Tze's Tao Te Ching)

Habgef
nostlidj
kyrpuG
125679

The Antiqua Roman Serif is rep-resented by Times New Roman, designed by Stanley Morison* in 1931, and the Sans Serif by Arial (designed by Nicholas and Saunders for Monotype in the 1980s)—both typefaces repre-sent their class well because they are probably the most widely used specimens of their category.

* Morisons authorship of Times New Roman has been strongly questioned since in 1994, Mike Parker claimed that Starling Burgess was the real designer.

Extrapolation

Exact answer

Interpolation

4. Legibility Although com-monly the Antiqua is thought to be more legible than a Sans Serif, this is often but an excep-tion, or a verdict based on a very narrow scope: it is true that the glyphs 1, l and I (one, L and i)

5. Readability The discus-sion about whether serifed or unserifed typefaces normally provide better readability is as old as the unserifed typefaces themselves, and sadly, so are

mostly the samples that are chosen to make the comparison; new and very readable Sans Serifs have made this debate redundant; but even if one would credit Antiquas with

Habgef nostlidj kyrpuG 125679

Exact answer

Extrapolation

1. Archetypes While both Times New Roman and Arial are representative archetypes of the broader ‹Antiqua› and Sans Serif classes, Arial is certainly closer in representing a completely ‹normal› typeface

per se than Times is; while this may not be entirely true in the field of book typography, the manifold applications of today's communication call for typefaces that are more versatile than a serif face can be.

are very similar in most Sans Serifs; but they can also be confusingly similar in some Serif fonts. On the other hand, the reduced Sans glyphs can often be read faster because less visual information must be processed.

3. Creation Associations
Most every Antiqua style serifed typeface is easily associated with notions of writing on incising the letters with pens or brushes, or chisels, respectively. While the same can be said

about some sans serif faces, and while some sans serif faces can be associated with other methods or inspirations, these connotations are generally to be considered stronger for ‹Antiqua› style serifed faces.

higher readability in continuous text: when fast recognition of short pieces of information is paramount, usually unserifed faces are employed.

2. Use and acceptance
As said, as long as one talks about typefaces for continuous reading, serifed typefaces are surely predominant; looking at it in a broader way, however, reveals that the majority of type-

faces used today are unserifed: Be it in signage, logotypes, jobbing typography or in new media, the ubiquity of sans serif faces can not be doubted.

6. Simplicity and cleanness
Because of their frequently more organic forms, their more pronounced contrast (variation in stroke thickness) and because of their serifs themselves in the Antiqua Roman Serif, the forms

of the Sans Serif class of typefaces is definitely more simple, more clean, more the ‹skeleton› of a typeface.

**Comparing typefaces
Step 3: Sub-Classes,
detailed comparisons**

A true revelation, it seems to me, will only
emerge from stubborn concentration
on a solitary problem.

I am not in league with inventors or adventurers,
nor with travellers to exotic destinations.
The surest—also the quickest—way to awake
the sense of wonder in ourselves is to look intently,
undeterred, at a single object.

Suddenly, miraculously, it will reveal itself
as something we have never seen before.

(Cesare Pavese, from Dialoghi con Leucò)

AG Buch
(Constructed Sans)
77,18% aperture size

Neue Helvetica
(Constructed Sans)
81,18% aperture size

Univers
(Constructed Sans)
81,91% aperture size

Grotesque
(Older Sans Serif)
90,48% aperture size

ITC Franklin Gothic
(American Gothic)
128,21% aperture size

If you look at a Persian rug, you cannot say that less is more because you realise that every part of that rug, every change of colour, every shift in form is absolutely essential for its aesthetic success.

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The aperture is measured in the lower case e—usually the character with the smallest aperture—in relation to the thickness of a downstroke. We see a relatively clear division of the test field into their classes,

With the example of the necessary complexity of a Persian rug, Milton Glaser explains why the phrase ‹Less is more› is nothing but a nonsensical and meaningless proposition that excites

us only through the inaccessibility of its paradox. Glaser goes in line with Rams, saying ‹Less, but better›. The lines quoted are an excerpt from Glaser's essay ‹Ten Things I Learned›

Frutiger
(Humanist Sans)
155,32% aperture size

Trade Gothic
(American Gothic)
168,06% aperture size

Documenta Sans
(Neo-Humanist Sans)
175,95% aperture size

The Sans
(Neo-Humanist Sans)
193,33% aperture size

Syntax
(Humanist Sans)
198,75% aperture size

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you cannot say that less is more
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solutely essential for its aesthetic
success.

If you look at a Persian rug, you can-
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with the Constructed Sans type-
faces having the smallest, and
(Neo-)Humanist Sans typefaces
having the largest apertures.
The average, and thus the
neutral typeface's e aperture is
135,04%.