The Elements
of Typographic Style

version 4.0

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Renowned typographer and poet Robert Bringhurst brings clarity to the art of typography with this masterful style guide. Combining the practical, theoretical, and historical, this edition is completely updated, with a thorough revision and updating of the longest chapter, "Prowling the Specimen Books," and many other small but important updates based on things that are continually changing in the field.

The Elements of Typographic Style: Version 4.0 Details

Date   : Published January 15th 2013 by Hartley and Marks Publishers (first published 1992)
ISBN   : 9780881792126
Author : Robert Bringhurst
Format : Paperback 382 pages
Genre : Design, Nonfiction, Reference, Art

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From Reader Review The Elements of Typographic Style: Version 4.0 for online ebook

Misha Kuzemski says

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Phill Melton says

Sure, it's simply the best book on print typography out there. That's nice, I suppose, but the content of this book pales in comparison to its form. It's a book on book design that serves as its own case study in effective design. There's not a thing about this book as a book I don't love—the design incorporates so many little touches (marginal notes, a lay-flat spine on a paperback, proper paragraph layout, dead-on perfect justification) that it's a joy just to look at it.

Which is good, because you spend a lot of time looking at the book; the content inspires you to do just that, to learn and notice what good design and typography are. Bringhurst has made something close to a Perfect Book, then explained how it was done. Oh, and the section on type designers and foundries is worth the price of admission alone. This may be one of the coolest books I've ever used.

Carlos Scheidegger says

This book convinced me that there is a lot of art in typography. It convinced me that good typography can make a big difference in how good text looks in a page. And it definitely convinced me that Robert Bringhurst is a stellar typographer. But it hasn't convinced me that he can convey this knowledge effectively.

Bringhurst has deep knowledge of typography, and the historical chapter on typefaces alone makes it worth your read. However, in many instances he falls into the trap of confusing tradition with quality, and begs most of the raised questions. The chapter on page proportions, as a concrete example, is pure numerology.

His style is a little florid for my tastes, and I feel like his love of the subject matter got in the way of his exposition.

If you are willing to read past rationalizations and are willing to appreciate just how much someone can love typography, and how it obviously comes through in form and function of this book, I highly recommend it. If you are looking for a guide on specifics, perhaps only a fifth of the book will be of direct use.

Ken-ichi says

Yes, I seriously read a typographic style manual, but believe me, it was worth it. Not only is this a detailed, informative, and surpassingly witty survey of typography, but it's simply a beautiful book to hold and to read. It's a bit like taking an introductory lesson from a friendly architecture professor, learning about intricacies and critical minutia you had never before considered, and slowly realizing your teacher designed the room, the building, perhaps even the chair you're sitting in, and that the entirety of your surroundings is an expression of the lesson itself. I feel similarly about Tufte's books, except there the classroom is a church, and the professor is a jerk.

I picked this up as a sort of sideways approach to improving my web design (planning on moving on to The Elements of Typographic Style Applied to the Web next). I hope I absorbed a little (because there's a lot to know), but I think the main thing I've learned is a finer appreciation for the discipline. Invisibility is the mark of almost all good design, but good typography is hard to see even when you're looking right at it. Words are hard not to read, but at least now I know to at least try and take a closer look.

Did I mention this book is hilarious? There's this one note on setting ragged text, in which Bringhurst cautions against giving software free reign over "an honest rag." "Unless the measure is excruciatingly narrow," he writes, "you may prefer the greater variations of a hard rag. This means fixed word spaces, no minimum line, no letterspacing, and no hyphenation beyond what is inherent in the text. In a hard rag, hyphenated linebreaks may occur in words like *self-consciousness*, which are hyphenated anyway, but they cannot occur without manual intervention in words like *hyphenation* or *pseudosophistication*, which aren't." The note, of course, is set with a hard rag. I mean, how many ironic involutions *can* you fit in a paragraph? I guess paragraphs about paragraphs provide extraordinary opportunities.

I'm finding myself increasingly fascinated with (and amused by) expertise in all its forms, and this book is a prime example. Parts of it are akin to reading wine labels that speak of odors and flavors you could never even imagine, let alone recognize in a glass of wine. The specimen section is particularly wine label-like, where Bringhurst analyzes an assortment of notable typefaces. He describes Quadraat as "not pretty; its beauty is deeper and stranger than that" (p. 244). Throw in some talk of ascenders and bicamerality and you've got attributes just as arcane and remarkable as "hay-scented" and "overtones of kumquat."

Some words I learned and will soon forget:

elision (n): an omission, particularly of parts of a word.

helpmeet (n): a helper. (p. 227)

Darren Goossens says

This review appeared at a blog. Here.

There's a certain incongruity in writing about The Elements of Typographic Style, a book about how to design books, using my Alphasmart Neo, which gives me five narrow rows of heavily pixelated characters.

Except this is not true; it is in fact completely in keeping, because one of Bringhurst's messages is, I think, learn about your tools (where a tool might be a typeface or a page design, as well as a piece of software), use the right ones for the job, and use them well. For producing plain text the Neo is the right tool; it is not the right tool for designing a page or driving tent pegs.

Bringhurst's book is a modern classic and a 'review' is at best redundant, so instead I'll just make a handful of random comments and saying that lots of people should read it.

* In some ways the centre of the book is in this extract:

'The needs of the text should take precedence over the layout of the font, the integrity of the letterforms over the ego of the designer, the artistic sensibility of the designer over the foundry's desire for profit, and the founder's craft over a good deal else.'

Indeed, the first subsection of the first chapter is titled Typography exists to honour content. But how do you recognise the needs of the text and design a page and choose type accordingly? Surely there are essentially three parts to mastery of most things: (1) Being able to physically do it. (2) Being able to tell shit from clay. (3) Knowing what to do about the shit. (I apologise for the crudity, but the idiomatic force is irresistible.)

Sticking to the subject of typography, thanks to computers (1) is now not an issue for most of us. Where once the physical act of setting type was a skill in itself, even apart from getting the subtleties right, now we can get a first pass just by bunging text into a program, whether InDesign or Quark or LaTeX or whatever, and we can get on with (2) and (3). These require an educated eye and a brain that knows a few rules and tools for finding solutions to design issues, and it is here that this book is so very useful.

* The title reminds us of Strunk and White, a prescriptive little book about writing; and the quoted text above contains the word 'should'. Educators can argue about the value of highly prescriptive guides. Do the strangle creativity? Are they even correct? How much of it is purely subjective? A good prescriptive guide should at least give the beginner something sound to start with, and doing what Bringhurst suggests will get you most of the way to a useful, usable result. Deeper mastery will tell you when even Robert Bringhurst should be ignored. It's a bit like Orwell's five rules for writing, which are all definite and clear, and then at the end are followed by 'Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous'.

* For me, the ideal of book design is rather like a comfortable, handsome armchair. On the first meeting it is nice to admire it and appreciate its many good qualities. But its main task is to let me engage with the text. Bringhurst makes this point over and again. The typography serves the text.

* I guess it is one of those arts that only gets noticed when something goes wrong.

* The book is (of course) clearly written; it is almost too easy to read. It is (of course) very well designed, and extremely informative.

* The back cover tells me that Hermann Zapf himself said 'I wish to see this book become the Typographer's Bible.' Who am I to argue? Maybe the typographic Gideons could make sure a copy shows up in the desk drawer of everyone charge with flanging together the office newsletter.

* The book could act as a text for a course, a gift to anyone who likes books as objects, or the beginning of an education for anyone who has to design, well, almost anything -- not just books, and not just working with text.

* I recently read The Form of the Book by Jan Tschichold, an equally, possibly more, prescriptive look at designing books. Bringhurst edited the English translation, as it turns out. The two have much in common, including a pragmatism that grounds them and makes them at once useful and inspiring.

* Page 321 suggests that 360" = 1o; I am pretty sure that should be 3600. I'm sure that will be fixed in version 4.1. Should I email the publisher? No, someone will have told them by now....

H James says

Aside from some mystical mumbo jumbo about the pseudoscience of golden ratios in page layout, this is a brilliant, succinct, and comprehensive guide to typographical best practices. Skip Chapter 8 and this guide will serve you well.

Andrew says

Part Tufte design book, part Chicago Manual of Style, part encyclopedia of fonts. Wonderful book for anyone interested in design.

The book can be read in one of two ways:

1) This book is pretentious! When the author describes a poor choice of margins as abuse of your publication's readers, he is clearly exaggerating the importance of his field.

2) Typography is an old field that, unlike modern UX, which continues to abuse software users with poor application design, has already figured out the rules and can write them down in a neat, orderly way that modern software usability can not yet.

The book includes:
* Rules for how to lay out a page, how to space text, how to kern letters, and what to look for in a font
* Which decisions in the above process are hard-and-fast rules, and which are reasonably left up to artistic discretion
* Historical considerations in font design, particularly with
* Distinctions between print and online publications and how that affects typographical choices
* High concern for glyphs and character sets from a variety of languages
* Details regarding modern electronic font file formats and their implications

Does that sound interesting? Read it!

Lindy says

The Elements of Typographic Style is pretty much the bible for its field. I read it some time ago (it was first published in 1992) and decided to revisit it recently. Bringhurst writes with clarity, passion and humour. He loves the printed word and celebrates when it is presented with grace and beauty. So do I. The printing museums in Antwerp and Lyon have both enthralled me.

Bringhurst's aim for typographers is to "induce a state of energetic repose which is the ideal condition for reading." He warns of "typographical slums," "hyphens like refugees" and texts like "shrink-wrapped meat." It isn't all about the fonts, either: "Perhaps fifty per cent of the character and integrity of a printed page lies in its letterforms. Much of the other fifty per cent resides in its margins." Yay for white space!

I'll close with a quote about one of my pet peeves when I'm editing: double spaces after a period. "In the nineteenth century, which was a dark and inflationary age in typography and type design, many compositors were encouraged to stuff extra space between sentences. Generations of twentieth-century typists were then taught to do the same, by hitting the spacebar twice after every period. Your typing as well as your typesetting will benefit from unlearning this quaint Victorian habit." To my dear blog readers, may you take note.

Morgane says

What a beautiful book! It almost doesn't matter what this book was about, because it was so thoughtfully laid out and lovely to read, which is in itself a testament to great typography. But the content was equally good. I learned so much about type, from the mundane technical details to the influence of language and politics. Bringhurst's little jokes and anecdotes are the cherry on top.

Anyone who is interested in type, words, history, design, art, and all that is good in the world should read this book.

Daniel Riesco says

Five stars, if not out of enjoyment, than for sheer quality. I find it difficult to imagine a text of typography more brimming in style and grace than this one. The font guide at the very end is gorgeous and invaluable.

This one's for anyone with even a bit of interest in the matter. At times accessible or inaccessible, what more could you ask for?

Theut says

La domanda sembra strana ma... come facciamo a leggere? A districarci in merito al senso del testo, ai dialoghi, alle convenzioni scientifiche, alle lingue straniere (con caratteri non latini), a non soccombere cioè allo stream of consciousness degli autori? Grazie ai tipografi e agli stampatori!
Bellissimo studio, tecnico e affascinante, di Mr Bringhurst che è, tra le altre cose, un tipografo di grande esperienza e perizia.

Abrahamus says

Within a short time after completing my formal education and entering my profession, I became rather painfully aware that my training in the art and craft of typography had been sorely lacking in many respects.

There is an incredibly rich history and a fascinating set of accepted principles and rules which govern typography, the skillful use of letterforms and typeset matter which is a very important sub-discipline of graphic design. These were practically occult to me early in my career. I had some vague sense that they were floating around out there and that others were aware of them and made good use of them, but they were as yet undiscovered by me. After I languished for a couple of years or so in this state, a helpful co-worker (eternal thanks, Jade!) recommended this book. My well-worn paperback first edition copy of Bringhurst's respected manual still sits within easy reach on my shelf and I refer to it – sometimes out of necessity and sometimes out of sheer delight – on probably a weekly basis, at least. I would say that its contribution to my career has been inestimable, though I have by no means begun to exhaust the vast store of knowledge on the subject and am always captivated to learn more.

There are those who will assert that rules have nothing whatever to do with aesthetic enterprises, to which I say *Hogwash!* Of course I will grant that the rules have to be employed with a rather loose grip and a free hand, especially when it comes to aesthetics. But even one intent upon bending or breaking the rules (which is appropriate and even obligatory from time to time) must understand them thoroughly if it is to be done with thoughtfulness and effectiveness. (This is true, incidentally, with respect to literature, poetry, music and any other art form as much as it is within the visual arts.)

For all its value, Bringhurst's book is not without its flaws. In my opinion, these have more to do with what is left unsaid than what is said. (Some of the reviews on amazon.com, while overwhelmingly positive, do highlight this fact. I would particularly *Amen!* virtually every critique offered by Erik Fleischer.) Hopefully the author can address these in a future edition. That said, I would consider this a must-have book for every graphic designer and a handsome edition to the library of anyone who has even a casual interest in typography.

Matt says

As the title clearly indicates, Bringhurst sets out to do for Typography what Strunk and White's Elements of Style did for writing: condense the vast array of typographic rules into one thorough reference manual. Of course, the role of typography has vastly expanded over the past century, and the typographic rules for billboards are entirely different from those for websites. Wisely, Bringhurst restricts himself primarily to one form: the book.

Within that field, the Elements does a wonderful job of exploring the minutiae that most normal readers never notice, such as kerning (adjusting the spacing between certain pairs of letters which, if spaced the same as other letters in the font, would read as either too tight or too wide – example: fi) or tracing the histories of various fonts. What makes the book appealing, even to non-specialists, is how the book reveals a hidden language – subtle moves such as how the book designer chose to emphasize certain aspects of the text by the way in which he/she floated the textblock on the page. Indeed, in Bringhurst's conception, these decisions should go unnoticed – at one point, he summarizes the job of the typographer as "creative non-interference."

Like any attempt to define out a system, Bringhurst's may appear to be overly prescriptive to some practitioners. But for the rest of us, the strong views help create a clarifying lens, a new tool with which we can understand another little corner of the world.

Akshay Bakshi says

I didn't finish this because it was far more technical and went deeper into the art of type than I feel I will ever need. Almost a textbook for a professional.

However, everything I did read and understand, I loved. The precision and richness of information that goes into setting text on a surface is breathtaking. Glad I know a bit more about it now.

Jacob says

I am in the process of transforming myself into a book. In order to do that, I am having my spine surgically removed and removed and replaced with a smyth sewn binding. My skin is being stripped off in large patches and replaced with 12 pt cardstock with a four color cover and scuffless matte film lamination. I have hired a designer to come up with a treatment for my textual body. I can't take it anymore. Someone please take me off of the shelf and put me in your lap. I know it doesn't really matter. I know a book can easily burn or mold or be eaten by silver fish or fall apart because the paper is not archival and I don't care. I am becoming a book.