

Making Choices: What's Neue?

You've always liked the Frutiger typeface. Finally, you can justify buying the complete family – but which one: Frutiger, Frutiger Neue or Frutiger Next? They look the same (well, pretty much) yet each has a different name. So, what's going on here?

What's Going On

Basically “neue” (and next, nova, etc.) designs are modern, revitalized and updated versions of classic, machine or hand-set typefaces. Many also have more weights and proportions than the original family, in addition to enlarged character sets and extended language capabilities. For the most part, they are better typographic tools.

Back in the Day

In the days when a font was something you could actually hold in your hand, it cost a small fortune to make a new typeface design. If the initial designs in the family proved to be financially successful, new ones were added to over time. Ultimately, popular designs became a family of typefaces that were similar – but usually lacked the systematic structure and cohesiveness of modern digital families. To complicate things, the technology of machine-set metal type put draconian restrictions on the design of typefaces.

When a family of metal fonts was adapted for phototypesetting, the compromises that had been made for machine-set typography were kept to ensure consistent imaging between the two different technologies. When digital fonts replaced photo fonts, many times the same thing happened again.

What's Neue?



Cover of brochure announcing Helvetica, originally called "Neue Haas Grotesk."

“Neue” means “new” in German. The first neue typeface was “Neue Haas Grotesk.” It was released in 1957 as a “new” sans serif design from the Haas Type Foundry in Switzerland. The Haas Type Foundry was owned by the Stempel AG, a German type foundry. Stempel released “Neue Haas Grotesk” under the name “Helvetica.” Neue Helvetica is an updated version of Stempel and Linotype’s Helvetica design. (Although, at 35-years old, Neue Helvetica isn’t all that new anymore.) It was designed in 1983 as an enlarged and improved phototype version of the original machine-set family. 2019 update of the original design with three optical sizes: Micro, for legibility at small sizes; Text, for comfortable reading in body copy; and Display, for headlines. The design also features alternate characters. Character design and spacing has been improved over previous versions.

Bottom Line

If you want the newest and best version of a typeface family, go with the “neue” design. If you’re looking to capture the flavor and idiosyncrasies of the machine-set versions of the typeface, pick the “non-neue” fonts.

There is, however, an important caveat to using neue typefaces: If your client is using the original design and you use a neue design, there is a strong likelihood that it will not match the weights, spacing or even the structural details of the original. If you want consistency and backward compatibility, you’ll need to stick with fonts of the original typefaces.

The [attached PDF](#) provides brief backgrounds for some of the more important “original” and “neue” designs.