



## Swash & Alternate Characters

By Ilene Strizver

**SWASH AND ALTERNATE CHARACTERS ARE NOT A NEW INNOVATION.** They have existed since the days of Johannes Gutenberg, considered by many people to be the inventor of typography as we know it. Gutenberg used over 240 alternate characters in his famous Bible to emulate the fine writing of scribes.

The availability and usage of swash and alternate characters has endured throughout the centuries – from metal type to phototype to current digital typesetting. In fact, their popularity has increased, thanks to the greatly expanded character sets of today's digital fonts, which have "room" for thousands of characters.



The standard caps for ITC Edwardian Script (upper) are much more decorative than the alternate caps (lower). The swash y (upper) balances the visual statement.

### Swash Characters

Swash characters are decorative letters that have a flourish or an extended stroke, terminal, or serif, usually at the beginning or end of the character. They tend to be calligraphic in appearance, and they add an elegant touch to an otherwise straightforward letterform.



Even vintage-inspired fonts such as ITC Zinzinnati can contain funky swash characters.

Most swash characters fall into one of three categories: *fancy capitals*, *beginning and ending characters*, or *stylistic swashes*. Historically, *swash capitals* were used at the beginning of a sentence; today, they are often used as an eye-catching initial letter to begin a paragraph, chapter or article.



Levato comes with many elegant swashes, some of which are meant for the beginning or end of a word (*M* and *o*), while other stylistic swashes can be used anywhere (*n*).

*Beginning and ending swash characters* are caps or lowercase characters whose swash extends horizontally, adding a decorative element to the type. *Stylistic swashes* include anything from a simple stroke extension to a sweeping, extravagant descender.



Wedding Singer includes several very simple swash characters that might also be referred to as alternates.

Generally speaking, swash characters are available as optional characters. But on occasion, the regular caps will be swash characters (such as ITC Zapf Chancery Italic). Regardless of where you find them, use them sparingly and appropriately. A single swash character can add grace, elegance, and visual focus to a page, but a scattering of them can clutter the design and reduce readability.

## Swash & Alternate Characters (con't)

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### Alternate Characters

An alternate character is an optional design for a standard character. It is a separate and distinct version that can be as subtly different as a slightly longer descender or a slightly raised crossbar, or as dramatically different as a highly decorated cap, or a one-story, single bowl *a* or *g* to complement a two-



Classic Grotesque comes with several alternate lowercase characters – some with different finishing details, such as the *l*, others with totally different designs, such as the *a* and *g*.



Alternate characters can range from initial treatments to extended ascenders and descenders, as shown in this example, set in ITC Highlander.

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storied standard character (or vice versa). Some alternate characters can even be simplified versions of their more decorative counterparts.

As with swashes, alternate characters have become more widely available. Unfortunately, many go unnoticed,

and therefore unused, by designers who are unaware of their existence in a font.

In order to get the most out of your existing fonts, or when considering a new acquisition, be sure to explore the complete character set in order to take advantage of all of the typographic possibilities. ■



Some alternate characters are much more traditional than the standard characters, such as the *S* and *G* in ITC Vintage.