Points & Picas

by Ilene Strizver

IN THE PRINT REALM, THE TWO UNITS OF MEASUREMENT most commonly used for typesetting and design are points and picas. While their exact "sizes" have evolved slightly over the centuries, the following explanations clarify the current accepted definitions and representations. It's simple to convert either measurement to the other unit.

Points
A point is equal to 1/72 inch. To be extremely precise, 1 point is equal to .013836 inch, so 72 points are actually .996264 inch. For practical purposes, this is rounded up. Points are the measurement most commonly used in print to indicate the size of type, as well as the space between lines, referred to as line spacing or leading. In some instances, points are also used to measure the width and depth of a column. Points are routinely abbreviated as 'pt'; typographers and typesetters have traditionally specified a given type setting as 12/16, to indicate 12 point type with 16 point leading.

Pica
A pica is a hair less than 1/6 inch, and contains 12 points. Picas are typically used to represent fixed horizontal measurements, most often column width. They are commonly used when designing 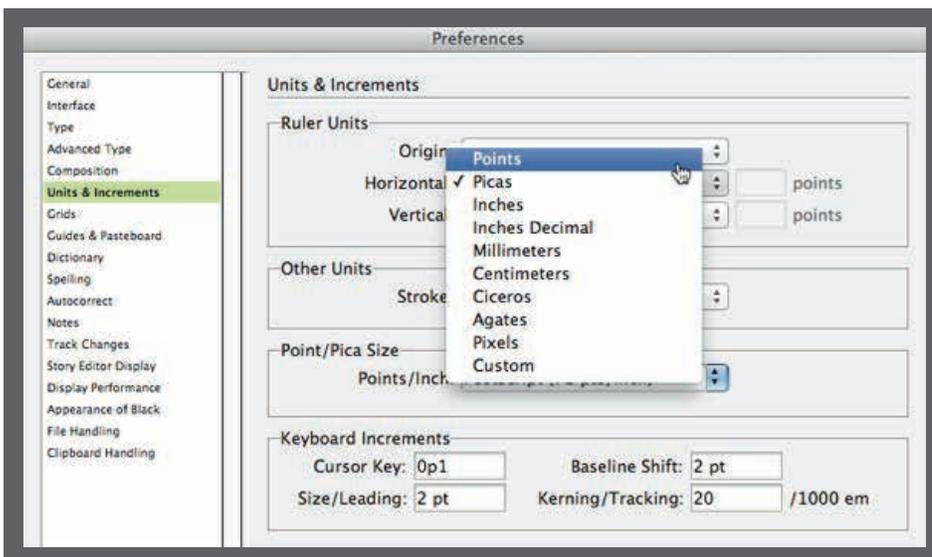newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and ads. Picas are designated with the letter *p*, such as 16p. For instance, the standard width for one column of text on a three-column grid
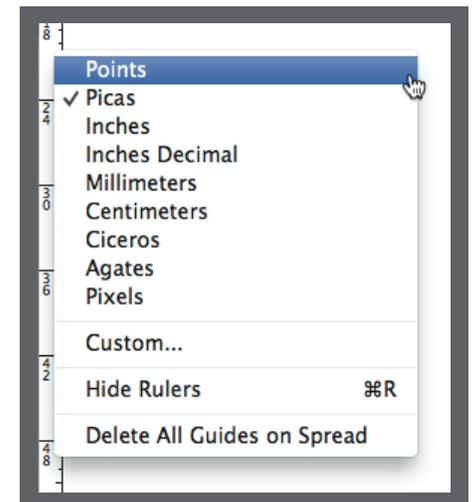
POINTS & PICAS

1 inch = 72 points
1 inch = 6 picas
1 pica = 12 points

In InDesign, select measurement and ruler units in Preferences.

A shortcut for changing ruler units when working in InDesign is to Control-click (Mac) or right-click (Windows) on a ruler. To change both horizontal and vertical units at once, click in the upper left intersection.

on an 8.5" x 11" document is 14 picas and 4 points, or 14p4.

So which should you use? Unless your client or publication has a specific requirement, it is more a question of personal preference. All of the commonly used design applications support both points and picas (and various other units), and it is easy to convert from one unit to another. ■

Point and pica rulers are still available.