Spacing Display Type

by Ilene Strizver

WHEN YOU PURCHASE OR WORK WITH A PROFESSIONAL QUALITY FONT, your assumption might be that the spacing won't require manual adjusting. However, display settings occasionally need a bit of tweaking to look their best, as built-in spacing and kerning cannot be flawless over a wide range of large sizes. Small adjustments can make a big difference. Here are some important factors to consider when setting type at larger sizes.

### Using fonts intended for display

Display typefaces are spaced for use at larger sizes. But since 'large' can refer to anything from 36 point to over a foot tall, display settings might still benefit from some adjusting that takes into account where and how they will be used. For instance, when type is set really large – as on billboards, signage, and trade show booths – spacing may well start to look too open. Tightening it will help maintain good overall color and balance. Conversely, when the type is set in reverse or in low-resolution environments – both of which tend to make type appear tighter – the spacing might need to be opened up.

Using fonts intended for text

Text typefaces have more open spacing than those intended for display. Consequently, when using a text face for larger settings, consider tightening up the spacing via tracking. How much to tighten will depend on: the built-in spacing of the font; how large the type is being set; color and contrast, including background; and the medium (print, the Web, etc.). Any of these variables can affect how open or tight type looks.

The spacing of Rockwell Bold looks just right when typeset at 72 point (upper), but can use a bit of tightening when set much larger, as shown in the lower setting with a tracking value of -20.
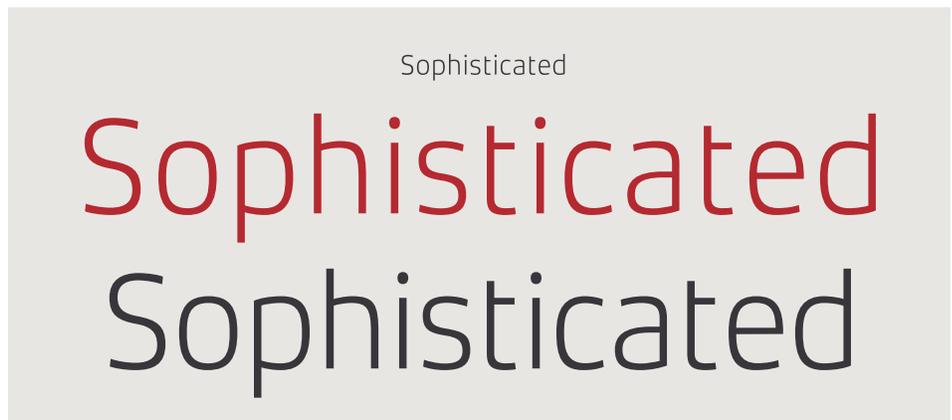
Xenois Sans Light was spaced for use as a text face, but works well for display settings when the tracking is reduced. The lower setting is much improved with a tracking value of -30.

Tweaking the kerning The relationships between characters can optically change as the type size changes. For this reason, even in a font that has been properly kerned for 'general' use, some pairs may appear too open or too tight when set larger or smaller than the intended size range. When this occurs, a bit of custom kerning can correct the imbalance. Just remember that less is more when it comes to custom kerning, so kern conservatively. Many a headline has been over-kerned in an attempt to even up the spacing.

Connecting scripts These decorative typestyles are designed and spaced to have perfectly connecting letterforms, whether the design contains only a few connecting pairs or many. Because of this, the overall letterspacing of a connecting script should not be altered as this can either open up or overlap connections that are designed and spaced to look natural and fluid. (The exception is when type is being set on a curve, causing connections to separate or overlap.) When non-connecting glyphs need a bit of kerning, do so judiciously and with care. ■

Even a classic such as Modern No. 20 can use a bit of kerning to balance out the spacing.

Resist tampering with the spacing of a connecting script such as ITC Edwardian Script as shown in the two upper settings, or you will disturb its perfectly joined glyphs.