

CAP HEIGHT
X-HEIGHT
BASELINE

Fancy

STEM BOWL SERIF DESCENDER

LIGATURE ASCENDER

flesh

FINIAL

TERMINAL ASCENDER

fresh

SPINE

UPPERCASE SMALL CAPITAL

Blood

CROSS BAR COUNTER LOWERCASE

Some elements may extend slightly above the cap height.

CAP HEIGHT

is the distance from the baseline to the top of capital letter. The cap height of a typeface determines its point size.

skin, Bones

X-HEIGHT is the height of the main body of the lowercase letter (or the height of a lowercase x), excluding its ascenders and descenders.

THE BASELINE is where all the letters sit. This is the most stable axis along a line of text, and it is a crucial edge for aligning text with images or with other text.

The curves at the bottom of letters such as o or e hang slightly below the baseline. Commas and semicolons also cross the baseline. If a typeface were not positioned this way, it would appear to teeter precariously, lacking a sense of physical grounding.

body

Although kids learn to write using ruled paper that divides letters exactly in half, most typefaces are not designed that way. The x-height usually occupies slightly more than half of the cap height. The bigger the x-height is in relation to the cap height, the bigger the letters will look. In a field of text, the greatest density occurs between the baseline and the top of the x-height.

Hey, look!
They supersized
my x-height.

Two blocks of text are often aligned along a shared baseline. Here, 14/18 Scala (14-pt type with 18 pts of line spacing) is paired with 7/9 Scala.

12 points
equal 1 pica

6 picas
(72 points)
equal 1 inch



60-POINT SCALE

A typeface is measured from the top of the capital letter to the bottom of the lowest descender, plus a small buffer space.



In metal type, the point size is the height of the type slug.

WIDE LOAD

INTERSTATE BLACK

The set width is the body of the letter plus the space beside it.

TIGHT WAD

INTERSTATE BLACK COMPRESSED

The letters in the condensed version of the typeface have a narrower set width.

WIDE LOAD

TIGHT WAD

TYPE CRIME:

HORIZONTAL & VERTICAL SCALING

The proportions of the letters have been digitally distorted in order to create wider or narrower letters.

HEIGHT Attempts to standardize the measurement of type began in the eighteenth century. The *point* system, used to measure the height of a letter as well as the distance between lines (*leading*), is the standard used today. One *point* equals 1/72 inch or .35 millimeters. Twelve points equal one *pica*, the unit commonly used to measure column widths.

Typography also can be measured in inches, millimeters, or pixels. Most software applications let the designer choose a preferred unit of measure; picas and points are a standard default.

ABBREVIATING PICAS AND POINTS

8 picas = 8p

8 points = p8, 8 pts

8 picas, 4 points = 8p4

8-point Helvetica with 9 points of line spacing = 8/9 Helvetica

WIDTH A letter also has a horizontal measure, called its *set width*. The set width is the body of the letter plus a sliver of space that protects it from other letters. The width of a letter is intrinsic to the proportion of the typeface. Some typefaces have a narrow set width, and some have a wide one.

You can change the set width of a typeface by fiddling with its horizontal or vertical scale. This distorts the proportion of the letters, forcing heavy elements to become thin, and thin elements to become thick. Instead of torturing a letterform, choose a typeface with the proportions you need, such as condensed, compressed, or extended.

32-PT SCALA

32-PT INTERSTATE REGULAR

32-PT BODONI

32-PT MRS EAVES

Do I look fat in this paragraph?

These letters are all the same point size, but they have different x-heights, line weights, and proportions.

When two typefaces are set in the same point size, one often looks bigger than the other. Differences in x-height, line weight, and character width affect the letters' apparent scale.

Mrs Eaves, designed by Zuzana Licko in 1996, rejects the twentieth-century appetite for supersized x-heights. The font, inspired by the eighteenth-century designs of John Baskerville, is named after Sarah Eaves, Baskerville's mistress, housekeeper, and collaborator. The couple lived together for sixteen years before marrying in 1764.

nice x-height

48-PT HELVETICA

48-PT MRS EAVES

Bigger x-heights, introduced in the twentieth century, make fonts look larger by maximizing the area within the overall point size.

Every typeface wants to know, "Do I look fat in this paragraph?" It's all a matter of context. A font could look perfectly sleek on screen, yet appear bulky and out of shape in print. Some typefaces are drawn with heavier lines than others, or they have taller x-heights. Helvetica isn't fat. She has big bones.

9/12 HELVETICA

Every typeface wants to know, "Do I look fat in this paragraph?" It's all a matter of context. A font could look perfectly sleek on screen, yet appear bulky and out of shape in print.

12/14 HELVETICA

Every typeface wants to know, "Do I look fat in this paragraph?" It's all a matter of context. A font could look perfectly sleek on screen, yet appear bulky and out of shape in print. Some typefaces are drawn with heavier lines than others or have taller x-heights. Mrs Eaves has a low waist and a small body.

9/12 MRS EAVES

Every typeface wants to know: "Do I look fat in this paragraph?" It's all a matter of context. A font could look perfectly sleek on screen, yet appear bulky and out of shape in print. Mrs. Eaves has a low waist and a small body.

12/14 MRS EAVES

The default type size in many software applications is 12 pts. Although this generally creates readable type on screen displays, 12-pt text type usually looks big and horsey on a printed page. (12 pts is a good size for children's books.) Sizes between 9 and 11 pts are common for printed text. This caption is 7.5 pts.