

Univers

A Journey Through Space

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Adrian Frutiger

Universal Designer

Adrian Frutiger is one of the most important type designers to emerge since World War II. He is the designer of many notable faces—the best known being the sans serifs Univers and Frutiger—and was one of the first designers to create type for film.

Breughel
Centennial
Iridium
OCR-B
Breughel
Centennial
Iridium
OCR-B
Breughel

Frutiger has created a broad range of typefaces including OCR-B, a type for optical character recognition. His 1982 Breughel is an original face almost wholly comprised of curves and fitting into no existing type category. He has embraced new technology and used it to advantage in faces such

as Centennial, a modern whose fine serifs are made possible by recent improvements in definition. More than ten years earlier his Iridium had demonstrated that the classical modern face was neither outdated nor necessarily caused

legibility problems. Frutiger himself is skeptical about theories of legibility. He learned to read with gothic characters without difficulty and says legibility is solely a matter of habit.¹

Qualities

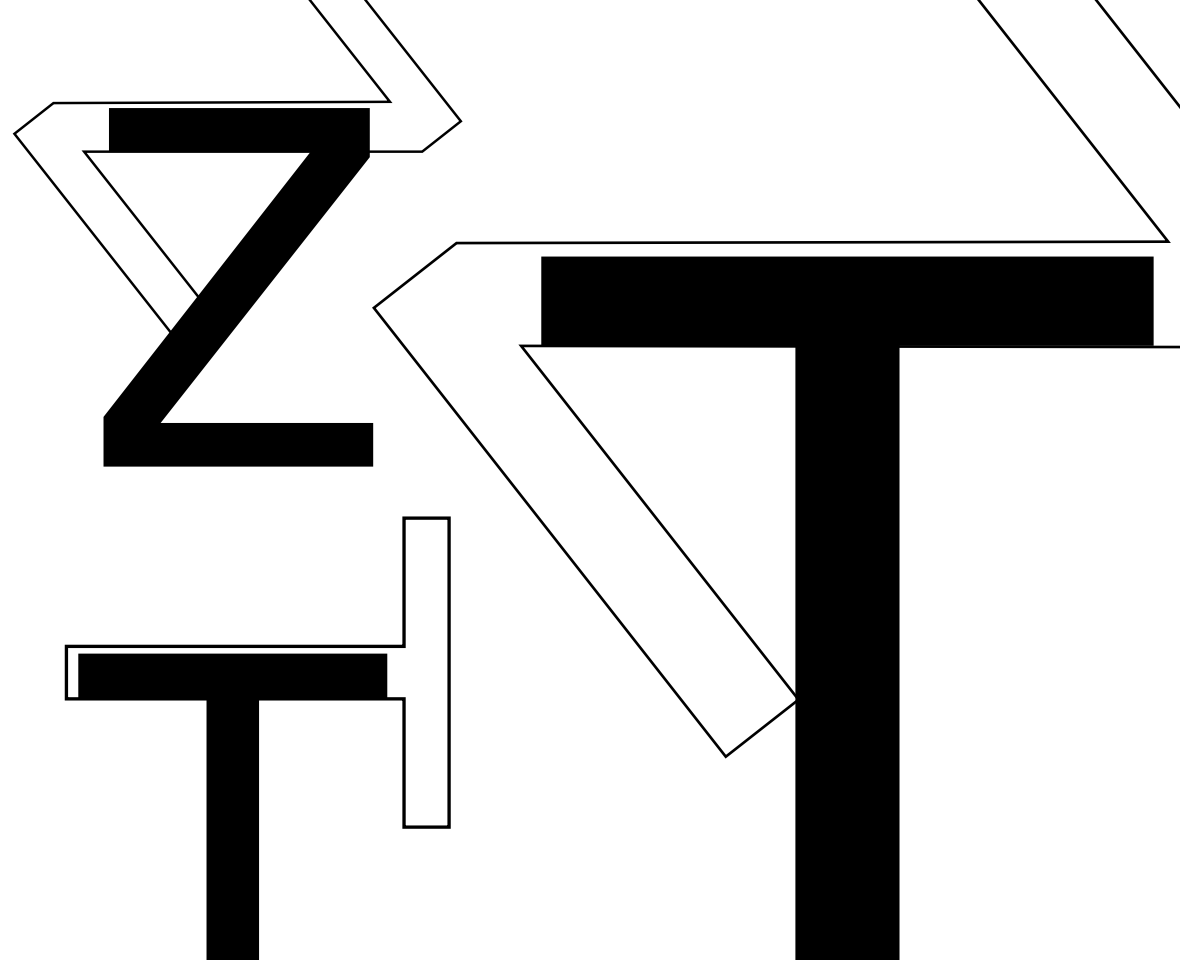
Of the Universal Typeface

To achieve the goal of an expansive, integrated type family, designers must be sensitive to the nuances of each letterform while simultaneously considering the overall system.

In the case of Univers, this sophisticated approach to type-family design is supported by a carefully considered set of typographical characters. Inspired by his study of the limitations of existing sans serifs, Frutiger began with the assumption that “a purely geometric character is unacceptable in the long run, for the vertical ones; an O represented by a perfect circle strikes

us as shapeless and has a disturbing effect on the word as a whole.”² By overlapping a Z and a T of the same point size, variation in stroke thickness becomes apparent. Frutiger’s decision to use different stroke thicknesses for the horizontal, diagonal, and verticals was a response to his assessment of visual discrepancies in other typefaces.

It is also no coincidence that Frutiger’s interest in creating a functional and efficient type family followed well-documented scientific research done in the 1930s and ‘40s on the mechanics of eye movement during reading.³



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In place of the naming system used in standard typography, Frutiger developed a numerical system to describe the weight of his fonts. The first number indicates the expansion or condensation, the second shows the weight.

While Frutiger's goal was to make letters that fit together so flawlessly that the assemblage formed a new satisfying gestalt, he also deemed it important that individual letterforms remain distinct from one another. "Built up from a geometric basis, the

lines must play freely," Frutiger wrote, "so that the individuals find their own expression and join together in a cohesive structure in word, line, and page." To maintain the integrity of each letterform, careful optical adjustments were made, based on the current knowledge of the principles of perception.

CAP HEIGHT
x-height

The c is smaller than the o because in open letters the white space achieves greater penetration into the form, thereby appearing larger. The n is slightly larger than the u because white entering a letterform from the top appears more active than white entering from the bottom. Ascenders and descenders were shortened in comparison with existing typographic

norms, and x-heights were increased. Larger x-heights also provided greater legibility, addressing the concern that sans-serif type was more difficult to read than serif type. All of these innovations contributed to the overall harmony among letters, allowing for a smooth line flow.⁴

Comparisons

To Alternate Universes

Univers font was created in 1957, almost simultaneously with two other, also successful alphabets: Helvetica in the same year and Optima one year later. Whereas Helvetica, for example, had a general clarity and a modern, timeless and neutral effect without any conspicuous attributes (leading to its great success), Univers expressed a factual and cool elegance, a rational competence.⁵

Compared to Univers, Optima displays a varied stroke weight more typical of serif faces. Helvetica, on the other hand, forgoes the attention to proportion found in Frutiger's faces, causing letters to appear either too tall or too wide.

Helvetica

a

The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over the Lazy
The Quick Brown Fox Jumps O
The Quick Brown Fox J

Univers

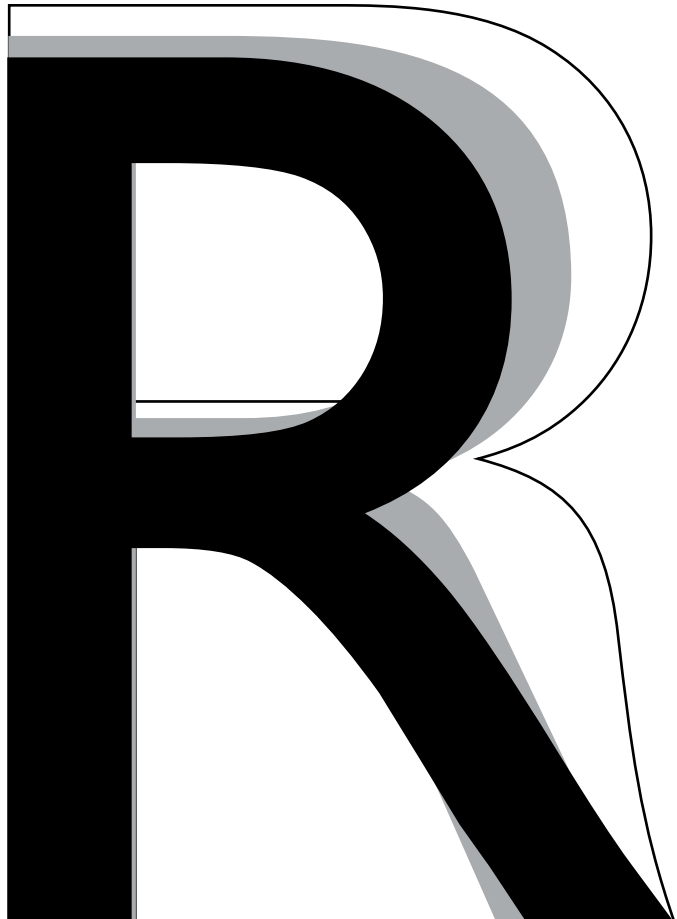
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The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over the Laz
The Quick Brown Fox Jumps
The Quick Brown Fox J

Optima

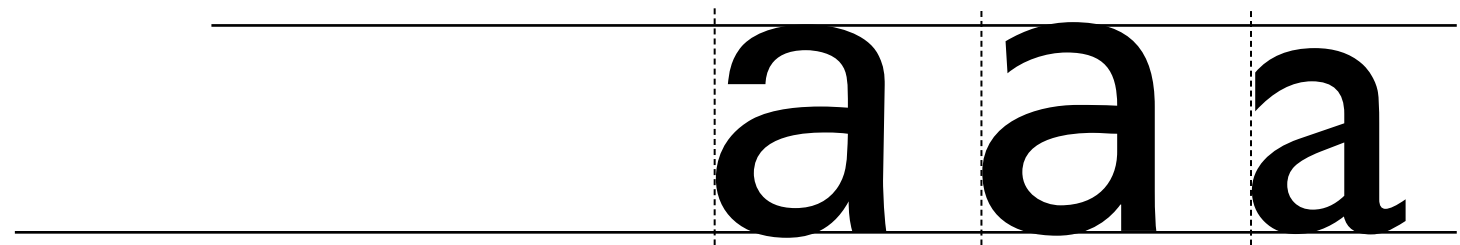
a

The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over the Lazy D
The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Ov
The Quick Brown Fox Ju



Realist
Realist
Realist

Frutiger was created as a balance between Frutiger's own Univers and the more whimsical Gill Sans. The letterforms of Frutiger are generally more rounded than those of Univers, but less exaggerated than those of Gill Sans. The tails of the Frutiger letterforms stop short of Gill's, giving the typeface a greater sense of balance.



Although Frutiger has said that all his types have Univers as their skeleton he felt, when he came to design a face for the Charles de Gaulle Airport at Roissy, that Univers seemed dated, with a

1960s feel. His airport face, originally known as Roissy but renamed Frutiger for its issue to the trade by Mergenthaler Linotype in 1976, is a humanistic sans serif that has been compared to Gill and Johnston types.

References

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2 Alexander S. Lawson, *Anatomy of a Typeface* (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1990), 304.

3 Jennifer Gibson. *Revival of the Fittest: Digital Versions of Classic Typefaces* (New York: RC Publications), 171.

4 *Ibid*, 173.

5 Linotype Library GmbH, Available at <http://www.linotype.com/7-267-7-13347/univers.html> Accessed November 1, 2005

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Bibliography

This book was designed by Christine Board
in the year 2007 at Washington University in St. Louis.
Typefaces used include Univers, Hypatia Sans, and Nobel at ⅓.