By Nigel French

# Breaking (or just not being too uptight about) The Rules

In 2006, Paul Felton published a provocative little book called *Type Heresy: Breaking the Ten Commandments of Typography*. It spells out the dos and don'ts of good—or at least conventional—typography. For example, Commandment VII states: "Thou shalt not use only capitals when setting vast body copy." Then, each rule is accompanied with carefully crafted examples, illustrating the whys and why nots. Nice, but here's the great part: Turn the book over, flip it upside-down, and start reading the other way, and you have ten equally compelling examples of why the rules are there to be broken. For this issue of InType I thought it might be interesting to flout (or at least challenge) the "commandments." Let's ruffle some feathers…


**Figure 1:** Designers of Victorian circus posters often took the "kitchen sink" approach to typography.

**Rule Number 1: Use no more than three typefaces per page.**

The reasons for this are obvious—too many typefaces and your document can look like a visual cacophony of clashing and contradictory styles. But is that always a bad thing? After all, the Victorians made a virtue of cluttered type. Take a look at the poster in Figure 1, a typical example of the Victorian circus poster genre. The typesetter through in every font from type case—and that's what makes it fun.

**Rule Number 2: Make your headlines big and put them at the top of the page.** Makes perfect sense, right? Things that are bigger are more important, and we instinctively start reading from the top of the page. But sometimes understatement and unpredictability can trump hierarchy, in the same way as a whispered lyric can sometimes been more impactful than a scream. (Figure 2).

**Rule Number 3: Type sizes between 8–11 points work best for body copy.** True perhaps if you're working in print—unless of course your reader is older, or very young. But who among us can afford to ignore the Web and Digital Publishing Intents offered every time we start a new document? Today's reality—as demonstrated by the flexible layout features of InDesign CS6—is about publishing on screen and tablet as well as in print. And if you're working with screen type, you'll want to significantly increase the point size of your body text to as much as 16 point. If you don't believe me, the size of type you're reading now is 16 point. Comfortable, isn't it? Any less and you'd probably be cursing the designer.


**Figure 2:** Unusual placement and sizing of headlines can be a real attention grabber.

**Rule Number 4: Your type should always be legible.** After all type is meant to be read. Our type should serve as a "crystal goblet" to facilitate comprehension of the text in the most effortless way. Following this line of thought, if no one notices your type, you're doing a good job. At the opposite extreme, in 1994 David Carson, (one of Felton's "Type Heretics") (in)famously set a whole article about the singer Bryan Ferry in Zapf Dingbats, rendering it illegible. Around the same time, I was producing a lot of highly legible documents (in PageMaker and QuarkXPress). Nearly twenty years on,

nobody remembers my "crystal goblets" while Carson's Raygun and in particular the Bryan Ferry article is cited as a landmark in typographic design. As Carson says, Don't mistake legibility for communication.

**Rule Number 5: Kerning should equalize the space between letters.**

There's nothing that distracts more from a good meal than a badly kerned restaurant menu. And yet even here, in the right hands, varying the space between the letters can give certain words an added level of meaning, adding unexpected stress to certain syllables, causing you to look at the words in a whole new way, perhaps even reevaluate their meaning (Figure 3).

**Rule Number 6: When giving emphasis, do so discretely.**

If you want to CALL SOMETHING OUT, there's no need to make it all-singing, all-dancing. It doesn't need to be bold *and* underlined *and* a different face—one change is enough. Except when it's not—sometimes you need to go for it.

**Rule Number 7: Don't use ALL CAPS for body copy.**

We've all received enough emails in ALL CAPS to know how annoying this can be. Do we pay any more attention? Of course not! We're more likely to question the sanity of the sender. And yet, ALL CAPS have their place. I can't quite go the whole hog and embrace the idea of ALL CAPS for body copy, but the text on the spine of a book is one example of where the type is better served by ALL CAPS than upper- and lowercase (Figure 4).

**Rule Number 8: Align your type to a grid.**

Grids give order and credibility to your pages and the constraints they impose take the guess work out of positioning items in a layout. This makes for designs that come together more quickly and where every element inhabits its space intentionally and


**Figure 3:** David Carson's unorthodox kerning makes a good point.


**Figure 4:** Book spines are a great place to use ALL CAPS.

with purpose. But that doesn't mean that your page has to look like it was conceived from a framework of grid fields (Figure 5). The grid is your servant, not the other way around. I'm not ready to throw away the grid, but I happily embrace the objective of having the end product look random and spontaneous. (I just prefer a little planning to the spontaneity.)

Break the grid
when it suits you — either because
its constraints no longer serve the design,
or as a way to draw attention
*to* the design.

**Figure 5:** Breaking the grid (with a clear goal in mind) can enliven a layout.

**Rule Number 9: Left aligned (ragged right) type is easier to read.**

With left alignment your word spaces are consistent, so your type color is even. Centered text, with its symmetrical white space either side looks static, right alignment is counter-intuitive to text intended to be read from left to right because each line starts at a different position. As for justified type, well we all know the problem there—spaces between our words big enough to drive a bus through.

These are all true statements, but they are not the whole truth. Any variety of alignment, treated with care, can look good (Figure 6). This paragraph is justified (carefully) and I doubt it's caused you any trouble. Just using left aligned type is no guarantee of a successful page. In fact, if that's all you use, you run the risk of your designs looking boring. With so many crayons in the box, why use only one?

**Rule Number 10: Your lines shouldn't be too long or too short.**

Different designers have different standards, but somewhere between 40–60 characters per line is a good length, leaning towards

**Right alignment**
**can create tension**
**with your type.**

Especially
when combined
with left aligned type.

**Figure 6:** Mixing alignments can bring energy and contrast to your page.

the higher number if you're working with justified type so that you have enough word spaces for the justification to happen discretely. Long lines *might be harder to read, but they can also be used to illustrate a point.*

We frequently read shorter lines—especially in newspapers. Does this make the type harder to read? Do our eyes tire more quickly? Or do we pay *more* attention? Is this pushing the envelope, or is it just bad typography?

Breaking the rules just for the sake of breaking them is an orthodoxy as bad as following the rules unquestioningly. Transgressing every once in a while, on the other hand can give a freshness and unpredictability to your type. Learn the rules first, follow them for as long as they serve, and when they become tiresome break them, KNOWINGLY AND BOLDLY.

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