

By Nigel French



The Eye Has It: Optical Alignment and Hanging Punctuation

Sometimes little things can make a big difference. When it comes to typography this is especially true. One of the simplest enhancements you can make to your type—especially if you’re working with justified type—is to use **Optical Margin Alignment**.

“Farewell! I leave you, and in you the last of human kind whom these eyes will ever behold. Farewell, Frankenstein! If thou wert yet alive, and yet cherished a desire of revenge against me, it would be better satiated in my life than in my destruction. But it was not so; thou didst seek my extinction that I might not cause greater wretchedness; and if yet, in some mode unknown to me, thou hast not ceased to think and feel, thou wouldst not desire against me a vengeance greater than that which I feel. Blasted as thou wert, my agony was still superior to thine; for the bitter sting of remorse will not cease to rankle in my wounds until death shall close them for ever.”

No Optical Margin Alignment

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Optical Margin Alignment

Figure 1: The text is the same; the margin alignment is not.

What is Optical Margin Alignment?

Have you ever noticed how punctuation at the margin of a text frame can make the left or right sides of a column appear misaligned? When a line begins with punctuation, like an opening quotation mark, or ends with a comma, period, or hyphen, you get a visual hole. Once, this was regarded as the price of progress. We could do so much more with our page layout programs—did it matter that we had to forgo a few niceties?

But today, with InDesign’s Optical Margin Alignment, we can easily ensure that punctuation, as well as the edges of letters, hangs outside the text frame or column margins so that the column edge remains flush ([Figure 1](#)).

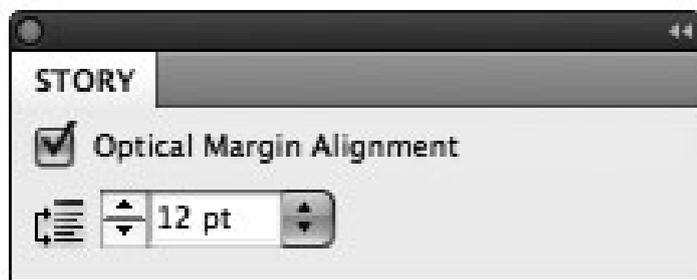
This makes Optical Margin Alignment especially beneficial when working with justified text, but even with left-aligned text, the first character of the line will “hang” outside the text frame.

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Optical margin alignment isn't to everyone's taste. Some consider the look of optically aligned text too fussy, preferring instead to have everything contained within the text frame. Perhaps they became accustomed to text columns that weren't optically aligned during the early days of desktop publishing because it wasn't possible, in the same way as some people have become so accustomed to the taste of instant coffee that they prefer it to the real thing.

How to Use It

Optical margin alignment is controlled through the Story panel, which is perhaps the simplest panel in InDesign (Figure 2). You select the story you want to align, either with the Selection tool or the Type



tool, choose Story from the Type menu, check the box and you're good to go. The only user-defined option is the font size, which determines the amount of overhang.

Theoretically, the amount of "hang" should be set to the same size as the text, but in practice you'll probably just want to eyeball it.

Optical Margin Alignment is technically a story-wide attribute (not paragraph- or frame-based). That's why it shows up in the Story panel, and you won't find it in your Paragraph Style Options. If you want to apply it globally (and consistently), you'll need to incorporate it into an Object Style definition, which you can then apply to

Figure 2 (left): To apply Optical Margin Alignment, just choose Type>Story and check the box. The point size should correspond to the size of your type, but 12pt works well for Align Left Edge.

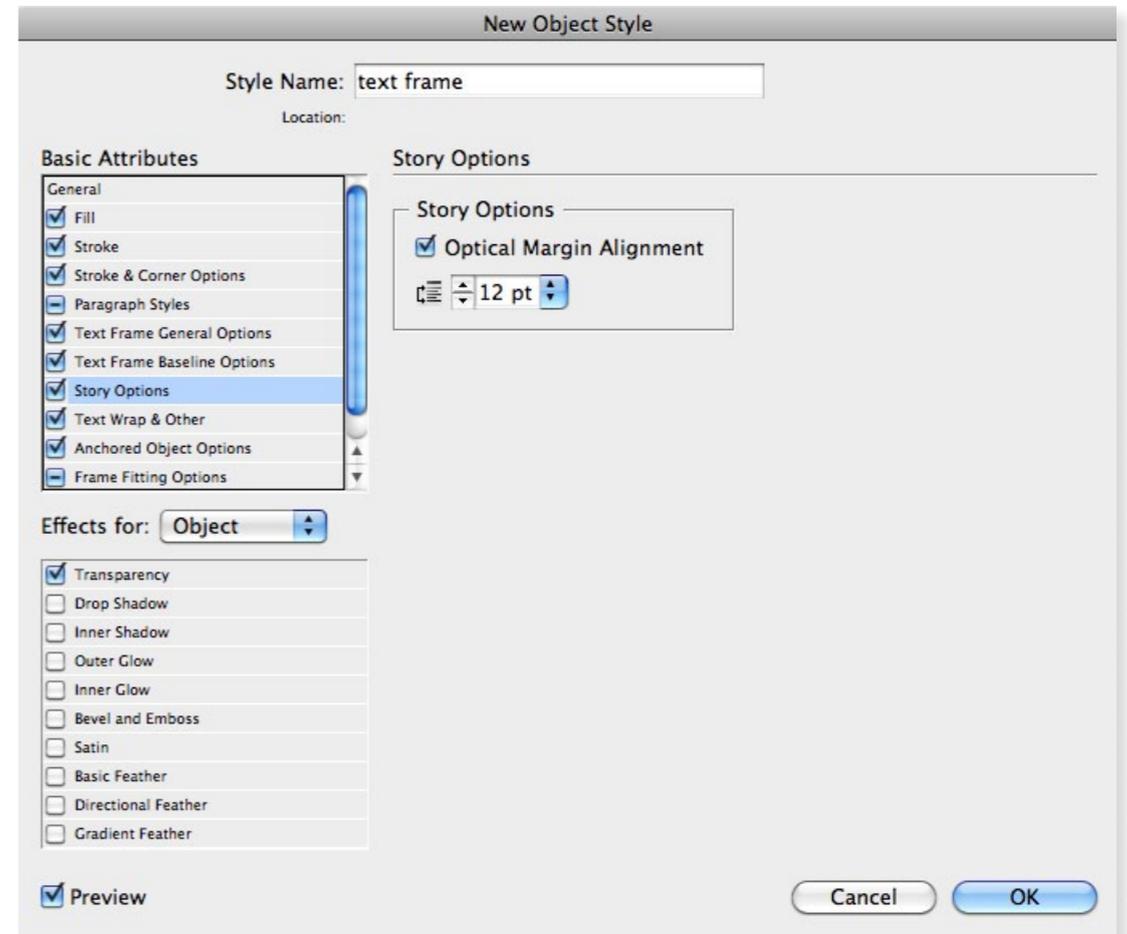


Figure 3: Incorporating Optical Margin Alignment into an Object Style.

your text frames (Figure 3). While you're defining an Object Style for your text frame, you may also want to incorporate additional specs, such as the number of columns in your text frame, a text wrap, or the Paragraph style that is applied to the content of the frame. If your text is very structured, you can even specify the Next style option, so that you apply a sequence

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of styles to your text. But I'm getting a bit off topic; that's another story...

When to Avoid Optical Margin Alignment

There are certain types of paragraph that won't benefit from optical margin alignment. The left edges of bullets and numbered lists, for example, should remain flush. To do this, choose the Ignore Optical Margin Alignment option in your Paragraph Style Options (Figure 4). Or, if you want to turn it off manually—as a local override to a particular paragraph—you can select

Ignore Optical Margin from the Control or Paragraph panel menu.

Hanging Punctuation

A couple other InDesign features are closely related to Optical Margin Alignment. The first is the Indent to Here character, which can be used to good effect on display text—especially pull quotes and callouts that begin with a quote mark—to create a hanging indent and thus maintain the flushed edge of the text (Figure 5). You can hang an opening quote mark using the Indent to

“Life is what happens while you’re making other plans.”

— John Lennon

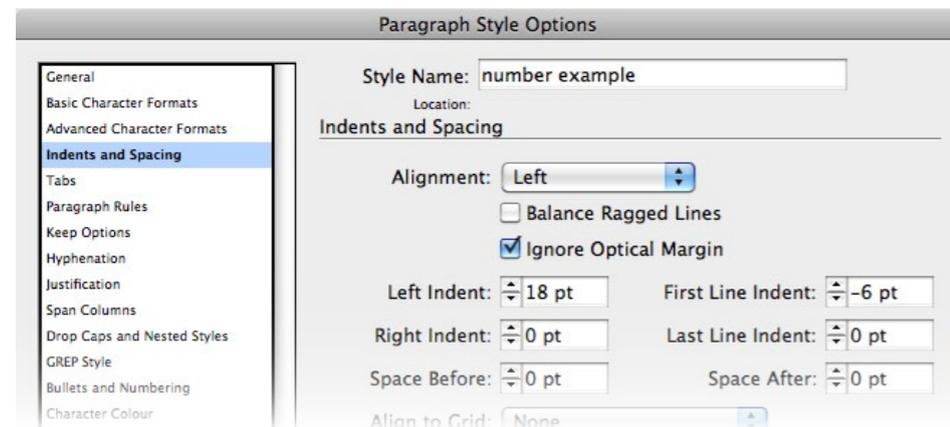
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Figure 5: A hanging quotation, before and after. The Indent to Here character is inserted after the opening quote mark.

Here character: Cmd+\ (Ctrl+\). This special character indents all subsequent lines in the paragraph to the point where you add the character, fixing the optical hole on the left edge of the text.

Figure 4: In both examples to the right, Optical Margin alignment is turned on for the story. But in the example on the far right, the numbered paragraphs ignore Optical Margin Alignment. Note how the “1”s align better.



Orrum velles ma quam rerum acit
 laut ommolorum sus si repropore
 rspelitiur?
 8 Pudam consed est, sintcis
 doluptatur, quiatem recabo
 9 Perspedisti res eatur, sequi
 dolores iumqui ani dolloreped
 10 Modiscimus di aut landae
 magnis ut elenihil in ped
 11 Anturehendam vella
 12 Voluptati consequenemquis
 de nes mo erorum ipit repudis
 doluptust ea sunt acia qui imet
 lam fuga

Orrum velles ma quam rerum acit
 laut ommolorum sus si repropore
 rspelitiur?
 8 Pudam consed est, sintcis
 doluptatur, quiatem recabo
 9 Perspedisti res eatur, sequi
 dolores iumqui ani dolloreped
 10 Modiscimus di aut landae
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 11 Anturehendam vella
 12 Voluptati consequenemquis
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The second related feature is the Align Left Edge checkbox that's part of the Drop Cap and Nested Style options. This ensures that your opening character is flush with the left edge of the text frame, again avoiding the problem of a visual hole (Figure 6). Anyone who remembers the workaround of adding a space before such characters and

then kerning back over the space to achieve an optically aligned look will appreciate the convenience of this feature.

They're small things, but Optical Margin Alignment, hanging punctuation, and its related features are quick and easy ways to add panache to your type. Doing so shows attention to detail and gives your text a

sophisticated look and, consequently, more credibility with its readers.

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Figure 6: Click the Align Left Edge checkbox to keep opening characters flush with the left edge of the text frame.

T WAS THE best of times, it was the times, it was the age of wisdom, it v of foolishness, it was the epoch of b the epoch of incredulity, it was the sea: it was the season of Darkness, it was tl

Non-aligned left edge

T WAS THE best of times, it was the v it was the age of wisdom, it was the : ishness, it was the epoch of belief, it of incredulity, it was the season of Ligl season of Darkness, it was the spring c

Align Left Edge

