

ACCESSIBILITY & DIGITAL SIGNS

Designing Digital Signage for Everyone

PART 2: Typography

As designers, it's important to know who we are designing for. Who is our audience? Most importantly, who is our client's audience? When thinking about typography and accessibility, think about how it may look to someone with a disability, whether they are visually impaired or dyslexic or any other disability, and how you can use your design skills to make your design more accessible.

WHAT FONT SHOULD YOU USE? KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE IS KEY

There's really only one rule when selecting a typeface to use - know your audience. If you have a brand guide, then someone has determined the font you should use, and they've done that by doing the research into your brand's audience and messaging and determining the font that best aligns with your audience. So stick with your style guide's font.

If you are able to select a font, or trying to determine what font to use, then where do you start? The ADA does not offer a list of compliant fonts, but rather offers guidelines. Fonts used in signs should be sans-serif, with limited styles - no italics or obliques. Script and decorative typefaces are also not recommended.

Choose something like:

Arial
Century Gothic
Helvetica
Tahoma
Verdana

Do not choose something like:

Monotype Corsiva
LuckyFellas
CUBICFIVE
Typewriter
BATTERY PARK

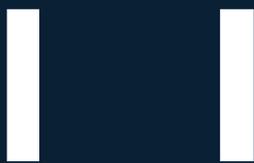
Decorative fonts can be fun, and they can be great to use in ads for events or products - again, know your audience. If you are creating a sign that communicates information to the public, such as directions, wayfinding, regulations, etc., then it's best to choose a font that meets accessibility requirements.

WHAT MAKES A FONT ACCESSIBLE? IT'S MORE THAN JUST A TYPE

You've probably heard this piece of advice before (we've already said it above, in fact) - when designing for accessibility, it's best to use a sans-serif font. And it's sound advice. ADA standards state that public-facing signs should use a sans-serif font. But what makes sans-serif fonts more accessible? And are all serif fonts equal when it comes to accessibility?

INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER RECOGNITION

It's not as simple as just choosing a sans-serif typeface over a serif typeface. That's important, but choosing the right sans-serif typeface helps. The design of characters in a typeface go a long way in determining a font's accessibility. Take a look at the characters below. Can you tell which is the number one and which is the lowercase L?



If we apply a different sans-serif font, such as Brandon Grotesque, it becomes much easier to tell the characters apart. The one has a unique identifier - selecting a font that has strong and unique characters will help make your design more accessible.



Avoid typefaces that use mirror opposites for some characters as well - lowercase letters d and b tend to mirror, as do lowercase p and q letters. Typefaces that have distinguishing characteristics in these letters are more accessible.



Notice how the b and d in the example above look like mirror images. This could be difficult for someone with dyslexia to distinguish.

This example, however, a sans-serif font called Agenda, gives the lowercase d a bit of unique, making it visually different than the lowercase b.

ASCENDERS & DESCENDERS AND WHY THEY'RE IMPORTANT

If you're a typography geek, you know what ascenders and descenders are. But if you're not, ascenders are the parts of lowercase letters that extend beyond the x-height of a font. Descenders are parts of characters that descend below the baseline.



For people with disabilities, some letters can be confusing. Properly designed characters with prominent ascenders and descenders aid in legibility, as they help make their characters easily identifiable. Selecting a font family with distinct ascenders and descenders is a great place to start.

KERNING FOR ACCESSIBILITY ADJUSTING THE SPACE BETWEEN

We can't talk about the importance of unique character design without also talking about the space between letters in a font. Kerning is the space between your letters and, just like uniquely designed characters, can help a great deal with your design's legibility.

To illustrate the importance of kerning, take a look at the two words below:

modern bam

With the kerning set the way it is, you probably think they say "modern" and "bam". With proper kerning, however...

modern barn

Tight kerning typically results in a lower legibility. Letters lose their uniqueness and the separate letter shapes become harder to visualize and distinguish. In extreme examples, such as the one above, people without disabilities would experience reduced readability.

Font designers spend a lot of time designing their characters, but when deciding on a font, check the natural spacing between the letters, and look at how some letters naturally line up with each other.

LINE HEIGHT AND LINE WIDTH, FOR THAT MATTER

In addition to the space between letters being important, the space between line in a paragraph is also important. Try to use line spacing of at least 1.5 times the font size. While paragraphs of news are not common in most digital signage applications, they do exist, especially in news story feeds and some types of announcements. Also, try to keep the width of your lines between 40 and 55 characters when laying out.

KEEP IT SIMPLE SIMPLER IS ALWAYS BETTER

There's a lot to think about when it comes to accessibility, but when selecting a font, try to keep accessibility in mind. A properly designed typeface makes designing for accessibility effortless.

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