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Why Johnny Can't Read

This landmark article from The National Review argues that sans serif type makes text unreadable. Could "the most impossible typeface ever invented" also keep customers from ordering?

BY VREST ORTON

EDITOR'S NOTE: Direct mail is not traditional advertising. Unlike a space ad, it is not limited by the size of the page. Unlike broadcast, it is not limited by time. When you receive a direct mail piece or catalog, it is the hope of the writer and designer that it will invite you to settle down and read it—as you would a good book. Yet many catalogs—from IBM and Xerox to Neiman Marcus, as well as brochures and even some letters—are literally unreadable. This landmark article from *The National Review* of September 2, 1977 by the late Vrest Orton, a catalog industry pioneer, is reprinted with permission. Had it been written for a direct marketing publication, it might well have been titled: “Why Johnny Doesn’t Order.”

One more thing. As Vrest Orton points out, sans serif is horrible type for reading in on the printed page, but it is preferred in the digital world. Check out Sarah Dickenson Quinn’s classic column on [The Best Online Reading Experience](#). — Denny Hatch

<http://www.poynter.org/uncategorized/32363/in-search-of-the-best-online-reading-experience/>

MANY LEARNED books and papers have been written these last several years on the appalling inability of our public-education system to teach our children to read their own language. It seems that the more we spend building bigger and more luxurious schools and paying higher and higher salaries to teachers and administrators, the less Johnny can read.

Parents are disgusted with this puzzle and are voting down, all over the nation, requests for more money for schools. Yet they are seldom aware of a major reason why youngsters can pass through the primary system, and even graduate from high school, without the ability to read.

This reason has to do with printing. In the last ten years, American book and magazine publishers, ignorant of tradition and the true purpose of printing, have introduced into the printed

page the most impossible type ever invented since movable type was first used over 525 years ago.

I refer to a bold, blunt, hard, stark, rigid style of type called sans serif. The best definition is given by the Oxford English Dictionary, which succinctly declares that sans serif is "a form of type without serifs, also called grotesque." Grotesque it certainly is.

This paragraph is set in a sans serif typeface. A paragraph later in this article is set in Caslon type so that the reader may instantly get the point. And what is the point? It's simple. Type is a medium; it is not an end in itself. The purpose of printing, whether a book, magazine, or newspaper, is to make the text easy, pleasant and inviting to read. Years ago I was associated with one of America's most distinguished printers, Daniel Berkeley Updike, who wrote the modern history of printing in America. Mr. Updike expressed most concisely the aim of arranging type on a page by saying: "Typography should be invisible." If you pick up a book or a magazine and exclaim, "Oh, isn't this beautiful type!" the designer has failed. Any type that gets between the reader and the author is not doing its job.

Any type that makes the message difficult to read, that makes the printed page strident, brazen, and uncomfortable to the eye, is wrong, except for one purpose for which sans serif was designed by the Germans: advertising. For generations, sans serif was kept where it belonged: in display advertisements whose function was to shout at the reader.

The man who first sold the printers this type for use in anything but advertising should be accorded his proper place in history, which is a place of infamy. Thanks to him, many textbooks and a number of magazines are now printed in this style of type, which not only repels and insults the eye, but actually makes printed matter almost impossible to read. And I can think of only one reason why magazine designers would use sans serif. They don't want Johnny to read the text, they want him to read the advertisements. So by using a Look-Ma-no-hands type for both text and advertising, they have achieved the advertising man's fondest dream: you can't tell what is text and what is advertising.

So, by contrast, why are types such as Garamond (the type you are now reading) the best and most legible? It was designed by Claude Garamond (c. 1480-1561). During the next two centuries, other similar typefaces were being designed: Baskerville, Bell, Janson and Caslon, to mention a few. All these performed the two proper functions of a typeface: 1) to make the printed page easy, agreeable and pleasant to read; 2) to create, by the harmonious relationship of type, a comfortable, inviting page of printing—all without the reader's knowing why! These classic types achieve that purpose because of their perfect proportions between thin and heavy lines, thin and heavy curves and the height and width of each letter. The letters fit together in such a way that the reader is never conscious of each letter, but only of word and sentence.

Sans serif type does just the opposite. Each letter stands alone and yells for attention. Each letter is the same width in all its parts; there are no contrasts. A page of sans serif type is like a landscape with two hundred hills in the distance, all exactly the same shape, size and height. The words for both are monotonous and unnatural.

Caslon and other historic types exude character and charm-while remaining always unobtrusive. And they have survived the test of time. The eye, for two centuries, has found these types agreeable, just as the eye of knowledgeable and educated people finds the aesthetic character of Georgian architecture comfortable and agreeable. In contrast, modern architects (who derive their inspiration from German masters) build cold, stark, impressive skyscrapers and cold, sterile, modern furniture, chromed and slick. We look at these and exclaim in awe at their boldness. But no one ever fell in love with them. They shout and startle, but they do not welcome the eye.

Same way with sans serif type.

It's a mongrel. It has no history, and it's there only to say: "Look at me!"

It's why Johnny can't read: The sheer effort of trying to read a crude type that was never, even by the Germans, made for reading is too much, and Johnny says the hell with it.

Johnny can't read, in large part, because printers and designers have kept him from reading.

Vrest Orton, author of many books and articles, was born September 3, 1897, in Hardwick, VT He founded The Vermont Country Store in 1946; that year he began publishing its catalog, The Voice of the Mountains. Orton died in 1986, at age 89, but his son, Lyman Orton, carries on both The Vermont Country Store and The Voice of the Mountains catalog, which is still set, as it was from the beginning, in Times Roman type.

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