SPECIMEN № 4 · AN ESSAY ON THE TEXT FACE

IBM Plex Mono

Being a short argument about the letters we read with — their shapes, their measure, their weights, and their daily work — composed and set entirely in IBM Plex Mono.

THE CLASSIC SHOWING · ONE WORD, MOST OF THE ALPHABET'S NEWS

Hamburgevons

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1. On the Shapes of Letters

A text face is a promise kept at small sizes. Nobody reads it one letter at a time, and yet everything a reader feels about a page — its warmth, its pace, its authority — is decided down there, in the quiet engineering of bowls and stems and joins. The letters of a good text face do not perform. They agree with one another, and then they disappear into the sentence they carry.

Look closely and the agreements become visible. The **double-storey a** keeps its eye open at nine points; the **binocular g** ties its loop without pinching; the **terminal** of the r ends in a small, decisive gesture that repeats, like a signature, across c and

f and j. Even the **tittle** — the dot over the i — is a design decision, set exactly as high as the face can afford.

A pangram is the polite way to interrogate all of it at once.

EVERY LETTER, ONCE OR BETTER

Sphinx of black quartz, judge my vow.

2. THE CHARACTER SET

An alphabet is a small city, and a specimen is its census. The capitals stand for the public architecture; the figures do the accounting; the punctuation directs the traffic. What follows is the working population of IBM Plex Mono, counted one inhabitant to a cell, so the eye can compare like with like — who is tall, who is wide, and who carries the neighbourhood.

THE CAPITALS AND THE FIGURES, ONE TO A CELL

A	B	C	D	E	F
G	H	I	J	K	L
M	N	O	P	Q	R
S	T	U	V	W	X
Y	Z	0	1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9

THE LOWERCASE, RUN TOGETHER

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

FIGURES AND MONEY

0123456789 £$%&

THE SMALL CAPITALS — DRAWN, NOT SHRUNK

True small capitals match the lowercase in colour and the capitals in manner; they are letters in their own right, not reductions.

3. THE WEIGHTS

A single cut is a voice; a family is an argument. Each weight exists to do a particular job at a particular size, and a specimen ought to say so plainly instead of parading the cuts like ornaments. Here are five duties a working family must cover, each line set in the cut that owns the duty, so that the difference is felt in the reading rather than described in the margin.

FIVE DUTIES, FIVE CUTS

CAPTION — Small sizes carry the footnotes.

TEXT — Comfort is the whole assignment.

EMPHASIS — *A slope that whispers, never shouts.*

DISPLAY — **At forty points, flaws become style.**

POSTER — **Scale is the cheapest drama.**

4. DISPLAY & LOCKUPS

Below the reading sizes the same face changes its trade. At poster scale the letters stop agreeing and begin to perform, and the specimen can afford a display trick the running text never would: a lockup, where two settings of the same words are pulled so deep into each other that they share a single silhouette. Three crossings, one manuscript — the ink alone decides what happens where the letters meet.

OVERPRINT · THE SERIF ECHO MULTIPLIES INTO THE DISPLAY

POSTER

scale is the drama

KNOCKOUT · THE ECHO CUTS A CLEAN CHANNEL THROUGH THE FACE

DISPLAY

where flaws turn to style

INTERLACE · AT EACH CROSSING THE ECHO THREADS OVER, THEN UNDER

LOCKUP

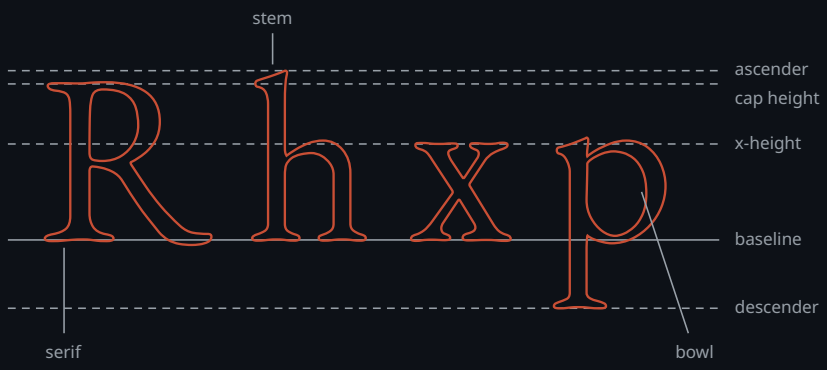
two voices, interwoven

5. THE MEASURE

Type is measured in ems, and the em is a country whose borders move with the design. Two faces at twelve points can differ by a full size in apparent height, because appearance is governed by the x-height, the width of the fit, and the length of the extenders — not by the number on the box. The vital statistics below are the honest ones, given as fractions of the em.

VITAL STATISTICS, IN FRACTIONS OF THE EM

x-height	0.492 em
Cap height	0.698 em
Ascender	0.741 em
Descender	0.221 em below the line
Stroke contrast	3.4 : 1
Alphabet length	13.1 ems



The anatomy of the text face.

The drawing above supplies the vocabulary, and two of its words matter more than the rest. The **aperture** — how far a c or an e opens its mouth — decides whether letters survive bad paper and small sizes; the **counter**, the air locked inside a bowl, decides whether a page reads grey or striped. Faces live and die by their air.

A measure is a choice and not a fate: a box may decline the full column, narrow itself to a fraction, and stand to the left, the centre, or the right of the page — the same statement in three positions, placed by the sheet and not the prose.

ONE STATEMENT, NARROWED AND SET THREE WAYS

Flush left, at a fraction of the measure.

Centred — the same width, poised at mid-column.

Set right, an aside pulled to the outer margin.

6. THE FACE AT WORK

No specimen setting ever proved a text face; only work does. So here is work: a passage set to the ordinary measure of an essay, and then the same face doing duty in the narrow measure of columns, where the fit is tested by hyphens and the colour is tested by rivers. If the paragraphs below read without effort, the face has passed the only examination that counts.

In columns the fit tightens and every pair of letters must close ranks. The word-space becomes the most important glyph in the font: too wide, and the column shreds into islands; too narrow, and the reading voice

runs out of breath.

Economy is the second test. A compact fit rescues syllables from the hyphen, and single saved lines compound into sentences of recovered space.

AT WORK BESIDE THE MACHINE

```
  def set_paragraph(words, measure=436):
      """Greedy breaking: the terminal's own idea of justification."""
      line, page = [], []
      for word in words:
          if width(line + [word]) > measure:
              page.append(" ".join(line))
              line = [word]
          else:
              line.append(word)
```

```
    page.append(" ".join(line))
    return page
```

Code is the one manuscript that never forgives a swapped glyph, which is why the machine asks its letters to be unmistakable before it asks them to be beautiful: a zero that cannot be an o, a one that is nobody's ell, brackets that pair at a glance.

7. A COLOPHON

Every specimen is a self-portrait, and this one admits it. The same essay has been set three times over — once as a classic book page, once as a poster with its sleeves rolled up, and once as a page of the terminal's own weather — without changing a word of the manuscript. Only the styles turned. That is the whole argument of the series: the text is the score, and the face conducts it.

THE DETAILS OF THIS COPY

Essay	**Specimen № 4, in three showings**
Manuscript	**one, unchanged**
Showings	**book leaf · poster · terminal**
Set	**MMXXVI, from a single manuscript**

Here ends the fourth specimen, set in IBM Plex Mono on a sheet of 612 × 792 points, dark. Turn the style, and the same words change their face.