



## Typography and Storytelling

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# Enhanced Reading: Exploring the Principles of Typographic Storytelling from Message to Narration

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### Abstract:

In a world saturated with information and messages, thoughtfully designed typography offers opportunities to capture the gaze and create meaningful connections. By merging type and image, even a few glyphs can tell a story, surpassing the potential of words alone. Brand identities, covers, and posters utilize type to create visual engagement along with story-like associations that go beyond the written content. Such typography slows down the reading process while enhancing the meaning of the literal content. This paper examines “type as image” storytelling through literature research and case analysis, exploring the interplay between content, media, and interpretation. It provides an illustrated, structured overview of elementary design principles for type-driven storytelling, and evaluates their potentials and limitations for both continuous texts and short messages.

**Key words:** *Type as Image, experimental typography, reading process, letterforms, visual perception, Latin type*

### 1. Introduction

In typographic communication, the conventional line-by-line grid-based typesetting that originated from letterpress persists in delivering textual information. However, the means of design have extended the scope beyond the constraints of aligning type to grids, and towards an invitation into the text (Kimberly, 2007, p.7). Unconventional typographic choices can enhance the reading experience by engaging visual perception in unexpected ways. Optical anomalies in typography can attract attention enhance reader focus, thereby facilitating the interpretation of meaning. Such typographic variations can enhance clarity, add enjoyment and convey information beyond the literal text (Hermanto, 2022). Content-driven, visually enhanced storytelling may slow down and even interrupt reading to articulate particular meaning through visual design (Sadokierski, 2013). Beyond the realm

of commercial design, “type as image” principles have been employed in the fine arts, literature, and particularly poetry, which have long utilized visual strategies to augment reading and construct narratives through typography. Typography as a means of expressive visual language has been a defining feature of artistic movements like Dada and Futurism since the early 20th century (Drucker, 1994. pp.10-11). Type in fine art has developed since, and as Christine Hartmann states, “(...) along with pure legibility, we now have visibility.” (Hartmann, 2012, p.5)

## 2. Code and Context

The use of letters can refer to a range of different semantic meanings beyond written text, as seen in mathematics, where they function as variables rather than words (Braun, 2017, p.9). Similarly, chemical formulae use letters symbolically, as in “O” and “2” representing a vowel and a number individually, but together and in the context of chemistry, denoting oxygen. When suitably formatted and provided the reader has prior knowledge of the code, the typographic symbol for oxygen “O<sub>2</sub>” is understood, without requiring further explanation. Such symbolism can be utilized, mixed and re-contextualized to create visual metaphors (Cinelli, 2024, p.36), which creates strong potential for their use in type-driven storytelling. The logo “Marianne Milani” and poster “Gaus in Freiburg” both illustrate these principles.



Figure 1 (Atelier Bundi, 1988, *Marianne Milani - Haute Couture*)

Figure 2 (Ott+Stein, 2007, *Gaus in Freiburg*): Numbers replacing alphabetic letters, grouped with other letters by color coding, contextualize the message in mathematics while maintaining readability.

A word or sign has a literal meaning, known as the denotation, and one or more connotations. Connotations are the cultural, social or personal interpretations associated with a sign, image or word (Noble and Bestley, 2005, p.98). These meanings and interpretations are understood to be socially constructed, shaped by cultural and historical contexts (Cinelli, 2024, p.14). The concept of a social construct emerges when a meaning is collectively agreed upon and reinforced over time (ibid., p.61). Successful decoding of messages requires familiarity with both visual and linguistic codes, including puns,

metaphors and multiple meanings (ibid., pp.13-14). Monika Braun argues that the visual appearance of a message provides clues to its meaning and social context, relying on shared “communicative knowledge”, which includes “graphic knowledge” of symbolic shapes. Graphic elements act as contextual cues that frame interpretation (Braun 2017, p.122). According to Mia Cinelli, typographic design is deeply influenced by cultural context, as preferences in typeface, color, and hierarchy are shaped by cultural norms, values, and expectations (Cinelli, 2024, p.14).



Figure 3 (Blount, 2020, *Blursday*)

Ben Blount’s *Blursday* (2020) illustrates how prior knowledge and context shape meaning. Bold, narrow capital letters form a partially obscured word. “W” and “E” appear on the left, while the sharply printed “DAY” on the right contrasts with a blurred mass of overprinted letters in the center. At first glance, it appears to spell out “WEDNESDAY”. Created during the COVID-19 lockdown, the piece reflects the indistinct passage of time: “During the trauma of the COVID pandemic, all of the days seemed to blur together” (Blount, 2020). The overprinted days emphasize repetition and evoke shared associations of blurred time. Like a logotype, it captures attention and triggers associations. Unlike most logos, however, that demand quick attention, *Blursday* invites deliberate engagement in galleries, art books, or online, where audiences can reflect on its layered meanings.

### 3. From “Word as Image” to “Text as Image”

Typography, when integrated with a message, can transform into a visual image, inviting readers to engage while enhancing the message’s meaning (Kimberly, 2007, p.9). Specific graphic shapes provide a framework for interpretation, requiring the reader to have prior knowledge and the ability to decode the intended symbolism. These artifacts add a metaphorical dimension to the literal message (Braun, 2017, p.122). A single letter rarely tells a story alone. However, an illustrated initial, a logo shaped by graphic elements, or a

letterform composed of recognizable objects can convey narratives. Wordmarks with just a few letters can communicate information otherwise requiring full sentences to express. Typography serves both, as code to convey letters and words, and as a visually impactful tool, combining form and function into a fusion of communication and design (Haley, 2012, p.236). Gestalt principles shape visual hierarchy, suggest motion, and introduce ambiguity, enabling typographic compositions to represent ideas, connections, and actions. The arrangement of letters within parameters like space, scale, and position effectively conveys meaning (Cinelli, 2024, p.42).



Figure 4 (Sakamoto, 1994, *PlayStation*), Figure 5 (Siegel & Gale, 2005, *Free Library of Philadelphia* logo), Figure 6 (Julia Volkmar, *Spatial Graphic Design*. <http://juliavolkmar.de>): Type is transformed into an image, ranging from single characters to scrollable text.

The visual impact of "type as image" need not be determined by the text length of the artifact. Whether a few characters form a picture-like shape or an entire passage appears as a graphic illustration, the pictorial impression is immediate and intuitive (Kok Cheow, 2011). While eye-catching typography is more prevalent in short, high-impact messages, its deliberate use in longer texts balances story-driven visual emphasis with functional readability. Text that deviates from traditional typesetting is often perceived for its visual nature, with its verbal meaning processed secondarily (ibid.). The arrangement of text in a particular form or configuration can result in its initial perception as an image, engaging the viewer's visual senses prior to reading. The perception of images evokes a sense of simultaneous, unstructured communication, where the "thousand words" of the image are experienced instinctively and emotionally, rather than in a linear or rational manner (Hillner, 2009, p.9). Instead of relying on rational interpretation, image perception is instinctive, emotional, and non-linear (Kok Cheow, 2011). Conversely, reading is a sequential process that follows a continuous line of text in a particular direction. Text as image creates an opportunity to merge the intuitive perception of pictorial features while supporting the viewer's linear, rational progression through the written words.

## THIS IS NOT PI

Nor is it an attempt at being odd or funny. It is simply a specimen of **STANDARD LINE TYPE**. Notice that all faces **line** at the **bottom**. Of course you would **not** use your type in *this manner*, but you can readily **see the advantage** of having it all **line**. All different *faces* on **one body** if **STANDARD LINE** will line with each other and **with leaders**, and they will line with all other sizes or **6-to-pica** brass *rule* by means of regular leads and slugs. **These** are but a few of *the advantages* which enable the printer to **make and save money** by using our type. . . . . If you wish to **keep abreast of the times** send for a copy of the **PRINTERS' QUARTERLY**. . . . .

INLAND TYPE FOUNDRY

217-219 OLIVE ST.  ST. LOUIS

Figure 7 (Inland Type Foundry, ca. 1909, *This Is Not Pi*, in Heller, 2017, p.13): “Pi” is printer slang for an unwanted jumble of letters that occurs during the transfer of movable type in letterpress workshops (Lieberman, 2003, pp.6-7).

An early 20th-century advertisement for a U.S. type foundry titled “This Is Not Pi” is an example of typographic storytelling that seamlessly integrates form and function. The advertisement highlights a key technical feature of the time, namely that all the fonts used align perfectly along the same baseline, a fact further emphasized by the dots placed between the words. The visual composition of the advertisement catches the viewer’s attention and evokes curiosity, while its abrupt, rhythmic reading experience still allows the linear progression of the text. In this way, the text itself, through its unique design, both justifies its materiality and advertises the technical innovation of the fonts it showcases. The integration of typographic elements with the literal message is fundamental to convey the intended content (Sadokierski, 2013).

#### 4. Space, Time and Attention

A key distinction between short and long messages lies in the nature of reader engagement. Expressive typography found in logotypes and wordmarks as well as brief messages in posters, advertisements, cover art, and brand design elements, are commonly designed to catch attention. In these contexts, the viewer’s interaction is rather passive and often brief, making it essential for the design to create an immediate impact. Given the constraints of space, time, and attention, such messages rely on visual appeal, surprise, ambiguity, or other concepts to convey meaning within a brief yet impactful reading experience.

The demands of extensive type-driven storytelling are different from typography designed for single sheets, such as posters or book titles (Hochuli and Kinross, 1996, p.35), and also

logotypes. Reading a book or navigating a website is a deliberate act, requiring sustained attention. As the text gets longer, visual distractions tend to become fewer and less intense. Typography can become a storytelling tool and a structural guide to enhance the relationship between content, form and reader experience, but typographic interventions in continuous text should also support progression through the written content (Kane, 2011, p.71).



Figure 8: Screenshots of a typographic online game (Zennyuan and Mikyokuyuji, 2023, *The Day I Couldn't Write a Poem.*)

In the platform game *The Day I Couldn't Write a Poem* (Zennyuan and Mikyokuyuji, 2023), the player controls a character who walks on words. Sentence fragments serve as platforms, obstacles, elevators, and traps while they make players simultaneously read the text. The horizontal scrolling in the game fosters continuous reading, while the interactive text elements enhance the narrative through movement and behavior, creating moments of amusement and surprise. For example, when walking over the sentence “Mulling over such things, my hopes soared impossibly high,” the words “my hopes” shoot up into the sky and leave a gap, reinforcing meaning through typographic play (Kane, 2011, p.70). The grouping of text into lines facilitates both its visual presentation and its meaning, which is crucial for reader comprehension and progression (Kimberly, 2007, p.11).

## 5.1 Design Principles

Figure 9 offers a concise summary of ten design principles for type-driven storytelling. While not exhaustive, it provides a thorough overview of fundamental typographic principles that enhance the reading experience and augment a message. Each column represents a design principle, and since some artifacts correspond to more than one of the design principles, they have been classified by prevalent features. The samples are ordered by their text lengths, increasing from few characters at the top downwards to longer text passages at the bottom of each column. To maintain the integrity of the samples, colors have been desaturated to ensure a uniform black-and-white appearance, thereby facilitating effective comparison.

	<p>1. TYPE BY NEGATIVE SPACE</p> <p>1.1 </p> <p>1.2 </p> <p>1.3 </p> <p>1.4 </p>	<p>2. LAYERED AND OVERLIED</p> <p>2.1 </p> <p>2.2 </p> <p>2.3 </p> <p>2.4 </p>	<p>3. SYMBOLS REPLACING TYPE</p> <p>3.1 </p> <p>3.2 </p> <p>3.3 </p> <p>3.4 </p> <p>3.5 </p>	<p>4. TYPE BY IMAGES AND MODULES</p> <p>4.1 </p> <p>4.2 </p> <p>4.3 </p> <p>4.4 </p> <p>4.5 </p>	<p>5. CLIPPED, COVERED UP, CROSSED OUT</p> <p>5.1 </p> <p>5.2 </p> <p>5.3 </p> <p>5.4 </p> <p>5.5 </p>	<p>CHARACTERS</p> <p>↓</p> <p>WORDS</p> <p>↓</p> <p>TEXT</p>
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	<p>6. ALTERED FONTS AND STYLES</p> <p>6.1 </p> <p>6.2 </p> <p>6.3 </p> <p>6.4 </p> <p>6.5 </p> <p>6.6 </p>	<p>7. TYPE CREATES SPATIAL PERCEPTION</p> <p>7.1 </p> <p>7.2 </p> <p>7.3 </p> <p>7.4 </p> <p>7.5 </p> <p>7.6 </p>	<p>8. TYPE CREATES IMAGE</p> <p>8.1 </p> <p>8.2 </p> <p>8.3 </p> <p>8.4 </p> <p>8.5 </p> <p>8.6 </p>	<p>9. DIRECTION AND PLACEMENT</p> <p>9.1 </p> <p>9.2 </p> <p>9.3 </p> <p>9.4 </p> <p>9.5 </p> <p>9.6 </p>	<p>10. KERNING, LEADING AND TRACKING</p> <p>10.1 </p> <p>10.2 </p> <p>10.3 </p> <p>10.4 </p> <p>10.5 </p> <p>10.6 </p>	<p>CHARACTERS</p> <p>↓</p> <p>WORDS</p> <p>↓</p> <p>TEXT</p>
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Figure 9: Design principles



## 5.2 Design Principles: Analysis

Design principles 1-4, such as positive-negative type, layered typography (see 1.1-2.4), and symbol-based characters (see 3.1-4.5), interrupt reading by requiring recognition and decoding of graphic forms. These techniques work best for short texts when they are prominently displayed, as in posters, logotypes, and other single-sheet media.

Principle 5, with fragmented, obscured, or crossed-out text (see 5.1, 5.2), attracts attention while partially supporting linear reading (see 5.3-5.5). However, it runs the risk of distracting the reader when used for longer texts.

Principles 6-10, which focus on altered fonts, spatial impressions, text as image, varied text directions, and unconventional spacing, slow reading to enrich the narrative while maintaining linearity. These are effective for short messages and selectively for longer texts. Some examples of principles 8-10 span the three categories (see 8.4-8.6, 9.2, 9.6, 10.3, 10.6), using basic typesetting techniques such as positioning, direction, and spacing to give text pictorial qualities or transform it into images.

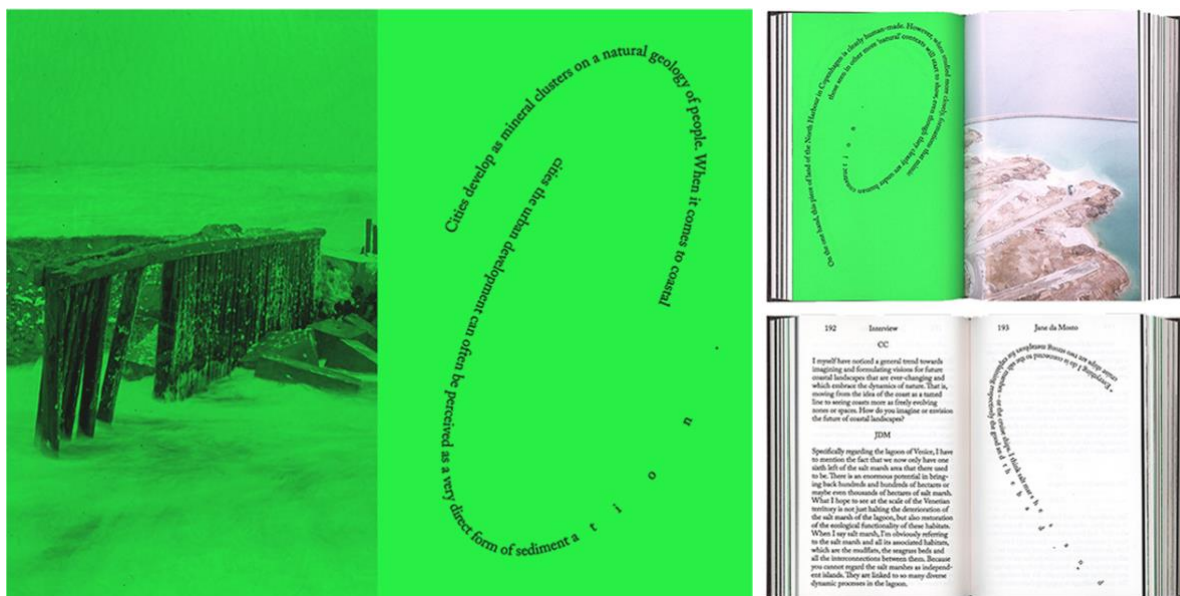


Figure 10 and Figure 11 (Mark and Bristow, 2023, *Critical Coast*): Text-as-image principles throughout the publication create a cognitive experience and metaphorically connect the body text, images, and book theme.

## 6 Conclusions

Typography is a dynamic storytelling tool that blends visual and linguistic elements to engage readers. Beyond the literal meaning of text, it evokes cultural, social, and personal connotations, allowing for the creation of visual metaphors. Images and graphic shapes act as contextual cues, framing meaning through shared graphic and communicative knowledge. Letters and words can be re-contextualized, mixed, and transformed to create compelling narratives.



Eye-catching typography is particularly effective in brief, high-impact formats such as single-page designs. Techniques such as layered type, positive-negative space, and pictorial symbols replacing characters force interpretation within concise text lengths. Such formats, with limited space and audience focus, demand immediate and impactful communication.

For longer texts, typography must balance intuitive visual appeal with functional readability. The concept of “text as image” integrates the emotional dimensions of imagery with the rational flow of written words to create immersive and engaging experiences. Typographic techniques such as unconventional positioning, altered text direction, and extreme spacing draw on basic typesetting principles. These approaches merge text and imagery while maintaining linear readability, supporting a cohesive narrative experience.

The design principles table in Figure 9 provides a structured overview of typographic techniques. It allows comparisons between approaches and highlights creative opportunities for effective storytelling. By presenting a range of design possibilities, the table serves as both a practical resource and a source of inspiration for designers and researchers. The inclusion of basic principles also makes it a starting point for further exploration of type-driven storytelling.

“Type as Image” conveys both literal and metaphorical meaning, fostering cognitive engagement across text lengths and media formats. Whether short or long, it challenges readers while rewarding them with a richer, more layered narrative experience.

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Figure 5 see Figure 9 : 7.4

Figure 6 see Figure 9 : 7.6

Figure 7 see Figure 9 : 6.5.

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Figure 8 see Figure 9 : 9.5

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Figure 11 see Figure 9 : 9.6