

TYPE as Story

How Fonts Can Make (or Break) the Feeling of Your Message



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Type *Type* Type

Most fundraising professionals don't realize that their font choices are *telling a story too*. And if your typeface is telling a different story than your words, donors feel the mismatch. It's subtle—but powerful. The brain registers the emotional *incongruence*, and that weakens trust and connection.

Think of it like this:

If you saw a homeless person holding a perfectly printed, glossy sign that read “HUNGRY – PLEASE HELP,” you'd feel a disconnect. The polished sign clashes with the rawness of the situation. You'd probably feel skeptical.

The same thing happens in fundraising appeals. If the font doesn't match the feeling of the story, something gets lost. But when your typography supports the emotion—you create **coherence, clarity, and connection**.

A Bit of Brain Science

When we read text, we don't just decode words—we process **form and feeling** at the same time. According to a 2008 MIT study on typography and cognition, poorly chosen fonts can reduce comprehension and trust. In contrast, typography that matches the tone of the message can actually **improve memory and perceived credibility**.

As famed designer Erik Spiekermann puts it:

“Typography is what language looks like.”

In other words, your typeface isn't neutral. It's part of the emotional delivery system.

Swipeable Font-Tone Pairings

Here are some starting points for matching fonts with the emotional tone of your message. These are web-safe or commonly available fonts for easy use:

1. Warm & Personal

Use for: Gratitude notes, donor quotes, legacy stories
→ *Fonts*: Georgia, Baskerville, Palatino, Playfair Display

2. Urgent & Serious

Use for: Appeals, crisis stories, timely updates
→ *Fonts*: Arial Black, Impact, Helvetica Neue Bold

3. Gentle & Reflective

Use for: Memorial stories, reflection letters, newsletters
→ *Fonts*: Garamond, EB Garamond, Times New Roman Italic

4. Youthful & Handwritten

Use for: Quotes from kids, story openings, handwritten-style notes
→ *Fonts*: Comic Neue, Patrick Hand, Sacramento, Indie Flower

5. Typewriter / Historic

Use for: First-person history, interviews, stories from decades past
→ *Fonts*: Courier, Courier New, Special Elite

6. Bold & Gritty

Use for: Recovery stories, transformation arcs, resilience themes
→ *Fonts*: Oswald, Bebas Neue, Anton

Tip: Never use more than 2 font families in a single document. One for body, one for emotional punch or variation.

TRY IT: Let Your Font *Tell* the Story

Use this section like a creative lab. No risk—just play.

1. Change the font for quotes or dialogue.

Quotes are little bursts of personality. Let the type reflect that:

Example:

“I just want my mom back.”
(Set in Patrick Hand for a child’s voice)

2. Use a font change to mark a turning point.

A small shift in font can mirror a shift in mood.

Example:

The hospital said she wouldn't make it. But she did.
(Use a grittier font like *Oswald* to emphasize resilience)

3. Match tone, not just legibility.

Don't default to 'professional-looking.' Aim for emotionally right.

Example:

Legacy donors give because they care about what comes after.
(Try *Playfair Display Italic*—classic with a gentle finish)

4. Whisper, don't shout.

Font changes should serve the story—not upstage it. If it feels gimmicky, pull back.

The Fast Fix

If a story *feels flat*, don't rewrite yet. Try:

- Changing the font of the opening line
- Italicizing a short, emotional sentence
- Switching the quote to a different font
- Making your call to action bold in both message *and* typeface

One-Page Layout Suggestion

Use this as a starting layout for any story-driven appeal or update:

- **Headline** (*Oswald* or *Playfair Display*)
- **Body Copy** (*Georgia* or *Helvetica Neue*)
- **Quote** (*Patrick Hand* or *Courier New*)
- **Closing / P.S.** (*Italic version of your body font*)

A quick rule of thumb to keep in mind:

- **Print prefers serifs** – Serif fonts like *Garamond* or *Georgia* are easier to read in printed materials because the little strokes on each letter help guide the eye from word to word.

- **Screens prefer sans serifs** – Sans serif fonts like Helvetica or Arial are cleaner and more legible on screens, especially at smaller sizes.

This isn't a hard rule, but it's a smart starting point—especially when you're designing a donor appeal that might live in both print and email formats.

Font size matters too.

Small fonts—even beautiful ones—can strain the eyes and kill your message.

For printed materials, stick to 12–14pt for body copy. For emails and screens, go slightly larger: 14–16px is usually best. And always test it on the device your donors will likely use.

Readability still rules.

No matter how emotional or expressive a font is, it must be easy to read.

Overly stylized fonts—like ultra-thin serifs, extreme script fonts, or quirky decorative type—can sabotage your message if the eye has to work too hard. Donors won't squint to understand how generous you are.

When in doubt: **clarity beats cleverness**.

Great storytelling isn't just what you say. It's how it feels on the page. Let your typography carry the emotion *with* your words—not against them.

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