Medieval manuscripts were meticulously constructed. They had gridlines that defined where all the various parts (initial letters, illuminations, text, etc.) were to be placed. Scribes would draw two lines to delineate where a column of text would go, and then would fill the space between the lines with words. When Gutenberg produced his Bible, he copied the format established by the scribes—and justified typography was born.

The Standard Was Set

Over the years, justified typography (also called “quad left and right” and “blocked type”) became the standard for most text typesetting. Like most standards, however, somewhere along the line, the practice was challenged. Designers argued that justified typography was not only distasteful but caused serious readability problems. Their view was that unjustified (or rag-right) typography was much more attractive and easier to read.

Truth is, justified and unjustified composition can be good—or typography, depending on how they are handled.

Justified Typography

The major problem with setting justified copy is the risk of creating excessive inter-word spacing. Word processing, or design software, often has to contend with remaining space on a line, but not enough to set the next word, or a hyphenation of it. The word ends up on the next line causing the previous line to be filled out with additional white space. In some cases, the result can be excessive.

This can cause two problems. The first is cosmetic. Many people, especially when a short line measure is used, tend to “pace” newly justified copy. This looks bad and creates visual unrest. The second problem is one of readability. The eye does not read individual words, one at a time, but groups of three or four words, then jumps to another set of words. Too much inter-word spacing forces the eye to read individual words—slowing down the reading process, inhibiting reader comprehension and retention.

Designing a typeface family is an accomplishment on the order of a novel, a feature film screenplay, a computer language design and implementation, a major musical composition, a monumental sculpture, or other artistic or technical endeavors that consume a year, or more, of intensive creative effort.

Unjustified Typography

The potential downside of unjustified typesetting is that uneven line-breaks can create distracting column silhouettes. Very long lines followed by very short ones can cause uneven white space to the left or right of the column, and a hyphenation scheme should produce a soft ripple down the right-hand side of the column. Justification and design software can also provide control to ensure that line length is sufficient to ensure good word spacing.

A Few Hints

There are a couple of guidelines to help set-up optimum columns of type. One is that the column length in picas should be about twice the point size of the type: if you are using 12-point type, the minimum line length you should try to justify is 24 picas. Another is that you shouldn’t try to justify when less than nine words fit in the column width.

Word processing, and design applications, allow for automatic control to ensure that minimal and maximum amounts of space to be removed or inserted when Justifying the text. For the best typography, experiment a little. Minimums and maximums that work for one column width, or typeface, may not be the best for another.

Typeface proportions also have an influence on word spacing. Typefaces with condensed proportions have a smaller height, which generally needs tighter word spacing than designs with normal proportions. Conversely, expanded or bold designs might call for a little additional baseline.

Bottom line is that eyes work to see whole things at a glance. Too much or too little inter-word space, then, must be fine-tuned carefully.

Typographic logic and good design sense are usually the key. Base your decision on what looks—and works—best.