

THE MANUAL

A guide to typographic knowledge and solutions

Black White & Red

Black, white and red are the three most powerful colors for typographic communication:

White, that's your background

Black, always the best for type

Red, the proven winner for emphasis and drama

White is the brightest, and can be the perfect backdrop for any other color put on top of it. All other colors stand out from, and contrast with, white. It is the ideal foundation for graphic communication.

Sage Counsel

The aim of typography must not be expression, least of all self-expression, but perfect communication achieved by skill. Taking over working principles from previous times or other typographers is not wrong but sensible. Typography is a servant and nothing more.

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White is the best background

Because black holds the greatest contrast against white, it is the best, most logical choice for type set on a white background. Type can be set in other colors but every step away from black is a step away from the perfect contrast – and the best shot at readability and comprehension. Gutenberg, Garamond, Caslon, Bodoni, and Baskerville could all have chosen to set their text in a color other than black – but didn't. Hundreds of years later, we still revere their work as some of the best typography ever produced.

And then there is red. Yellow on white is difficult to read. Red on white isn't. Blue type fades against a black background. Red won't.

The Elements of Typographic Style

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Colors, like blue, do not read well set on a black background. Red, however, does.

If you are considering third color for typographic communication, think of red first. It is the third most powerful color for type. Although it is powerful, it should not be used to replace black. Too much red type can easily become overpowering.

Timeless Advice

Plenty of white space and generous line spacing, and don't make the type size too miserly. Then you will be assured of a product fit for a king."

– Giambattista Bodoni.

Too much red type can be overpowering

Typefaces used in this article

ITC American Typewriter®

Avenir® Next

ITC Bodoni™ Seventy Two

Carter Sans

Miller Text

Neue Frutiger®