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# Initial Letters: Classifying the Unclassifiable

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## Initial Letters: Classifying the Unclassifiable

Since initial letters have been around for such a long time, they come in more shapes and sizes than can be imagined. And while no one has attempted a systematic classification, they can be categorized into three basic groups: Big Letters, Fancy Caps and Wow!

### Big Letters

“Big Letters” are single fonts specially designed to be used as initial letters, the titling fonts from text typeface families, or just great looking capital letters from regular fonts.

Perhaps the most traditional titling font currently available is Trajan, which is based on the monumental letters of the ancient Trajan Column, this two-weight family pays homage to what many consider the quintessential Roman alphabet. Other titling fonts are Perpetua Titling and Bembo Titling. (The design differences between the three are subtle.)



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**M**ost people think TYPOGRAPHY is about fonts. Most designers think typography is about fonts. Typography is more than that, it's expressing language through type. placement, composition and typeface choice.

Mark Boulton

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*Titling Fonts*

## **Fancy Caps**

Fancy Caps are just that: fancier than simple Roman capitals. Like “Big Letters,” they were initially elaborate letters cut in wood or cast as fonts of metal type.

Gill Floriated and Lombardic Capitals are two, very different, revivals of initial alphabets that grew out of hand lettering. Neither was intended to be used as a font, but both made the transition remarkably well.



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**G**eometry can produce legible letters, but art alone makes them beautiful. Art begins where geometry ends, and imparts to letters a character transcending mere measurement.

Paul Standard

**C**omic Sans - If you love it, you don't know much about typography. If you hate it, you really don't know much about typography either.

Vincent Connare

*Gill Floriated and Lombardic Capitals are two, very different, initial letters*

Castellar and Special Alphabets 6, originally called Schoeffer Initials, are digital revivals of fonts first cast in metal. The slightly funky Schoeffer Initials, first released in the latter part of the nineteenth century, falls at one end of the stylistic spectrum, while Castellar, with its elegant letterforms, falls at the other.



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**O**f all the achievements of the human mind, the birth of the alphabet is the most momentous.

Frederic Goudy


**P**erfect typography is certainly the most elusive of all arts. Sculpture in stone alone comes near it in obstinacy.


Jan Tschichold

*Castellar and Special Alphabets 6 are revivals of metal type initials*

Not all Fancy Caps, however, need to be scholarly studies of ancient letterforms. There are times when it is more appropriate to be playful than erudite. Initial letters such as those found in *Buccaneer* or *Stemple Two* can be perfect for these occasions.



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Jan Tschichold

*Buccaneer and ITC Kendo are more playful than erudite*

**Wow!**

Wow!, as the name implies, are letters that are just too cool, too outrageous or too illustrative to be called merely “big” or “fancy.” They can be swash characters from script typefaces. Some, like Gentle Whisper Floral or are garnished with flowers. Some, like Stempel™, may be almost intelligible, while others, like ITC Stained Glass™, are almost illustrations rather than fonts of type.



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**T**he better people communicate, the greater will be the need for better typography - expressive typography.  
Herb Lubalin

**F**rom all these experiences the most important thing I have learned is that legibility and beauty stand close together and that type design, in its restraint, should be only felt but not perceived by the reader.  
Adrian Frutiger

**W**riting allows even a stupid person to seem halfway intelligent; if only that person will write down the same thought over and over again, improving it just a little bit each time. It is a lot like inflating a blimp with a bicycle pump. Anybody can do it. All it takes is time.  
Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

**I** discovered that I never really used Helvetica but I like to look at it. I like the VW beetle, too, although I've never driven one.  
Stefan Sagmeister

*Too cool, too outrageous or too illustrative to be called merely "big" or "fancy"*



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Wow! initials can be great typographic fun. Just be sure to use them sparingly. A little Wow! goes a long way.

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## Typefaces used in this article

[Bembo Titling](#)  
[Buccaneer](#)  
[Castellar](#)  
[Daylilies](#)  
[ITC Kendo](#)  
[Lombardic Capitals](#)  
[Perpetua Titling](#)  
[Special Alphabets 6](#)  
[Stempel One](#)  
[ITC Stained Glass](#)  
[Trajan](#)