

THE MANUAL

A guide to typographic knowledge and solutions

Initial Letters Tips & Tricks

Initial letters are double-edged typographic tools. They are a delight for the eye and handy road signs. They are not, however, something to be trifled with. There are a few guidelines for working with initial letters.

Alignment

With most dropped initials, lines of surrounding text copy are aligned vertically with just enough indent to provide snug spacing between the initial letter and the lines of copy it adjoins. (This is usually less than the line spacing.) Sometimes, however, letters like A, L, R, or even an E, may require some special handling. When using initial letters with irregular right sides, the first line of the paragraph is usually brought in close to the letter and the lines that follow are aligned with the right side of its body. The key to the best alignment of initials is the same as for all other typographic arrangements: it has to look good. What works for one letter in one font may not work for the same letter in another font. Make design decisions on how things look.

After these two noble fruits of friendship, (peace in the affections, and support of the judgment,) followeth the last fruit; which is like the pomegranate, full of may kernels; I mean aid and bearing a part in all actions and occasions. Here the best way to represent to life the manifold use of

Special handling may be required when using initial letters with irregular right sides.

Optics

Whether you are using them as dropped or raised initials, some capital letters should be set overhanging the left edge of the text block so that they align optically with the edge. For example, when the initial is a cap T the left-hand serif on the top bar and part of the bar should project into the left margin. Round letters like C and O should extend slightly into the left margin to create an optically aligned left-hand edge.

To be, or not to be: that is the question: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them?

Some capital letters should be set overhanging the left edge of the text block so that they align optically with the edge.

Transitions

Frequently, words that begin with initial letters are completed with capitals. While this isn't necessary, it makes the transition from large initial letter to text size lowercase characters smoother. When the first word has only one or two letters, it may facilitate the transition to use capitals for the second word as well.

When the initialed word is the proper name and you are using caps to create a text transition, the entire name should also be in capitals. The first letter of each word in the name should be set in capitals and the rest in small caps to distinguish it from the text.

KURT VONNEGUT, JR. once said, " Writing 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."

Capitals can make the transition from large initial letter to text size lowercase characters smoother.

Special Cases

Sometimes initial letters are housed in decorative boxes. In this case, the space to the right of the box should be optically the same as the text line space.

Kind souls, what, weep you when you but behold our Caesar's vesture wounded? Look you here, here is himself, marr'd as you see, with traitors. Spangled starlight sheen, but, they do square, all that their elves

The space to the right of the box should be optically the same as the text line space.

When using quotes, the opening quote should be sized somewhere between the initial size and the point size of the text copy – but its alignment should remain at the optical top of the letter.

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones;

Opening quotes should be sized somewhere between the initial size and the point size of the text copy.

Historically, initial letters have not been used with copy set in a sans serif type styles – but this is a rule based on tradition – and we all know what rules are made for.

Out, out brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Sans serif type can make great initial letters.

Typefaces used in this article

[ITC Bodoni™ Seventy-Two](#)

[Castellar®](#)

[Charlemagne™](#)

[Cotford™](#)

[Egyptian™ Slate](#)

[Frutiger® Serif](#)

[Helvetica® Now Text](#)

[Pastonchi™](#)

[Futura® Now](#)

[Special Alphabets 6](#)

[Sutro Initials](#)