

tutorials

OUR GUIDE TO ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS FOR EVERY DESIGNER

METHOD: Perfectly justified: how to create easy-to-read text

Justified text looks neater, but there are pitfalls – distracting ‘rivers’ made from the gaps between words, for example. Here’s how to nail it every time.



Steve Caplin is a designer and illustrator working for a range of national newspapers. His best-selling *How to Cheat in Photoshop*, now in its sixth edition, is published by Focal Press.

In the previous edition of *MacUser*, we looked at how to use hyphenation correctly. Nowhere is hyphenation more important than when using justified type, so in this edition we’ll explore how to justify text. ‘Justified’ is the term used to describe text that forms an even edge on both the right and left sides, as opposed to ‘ragged’ or ‘left-aligned’ text, where the right margin varies according to the length of the words on the line.

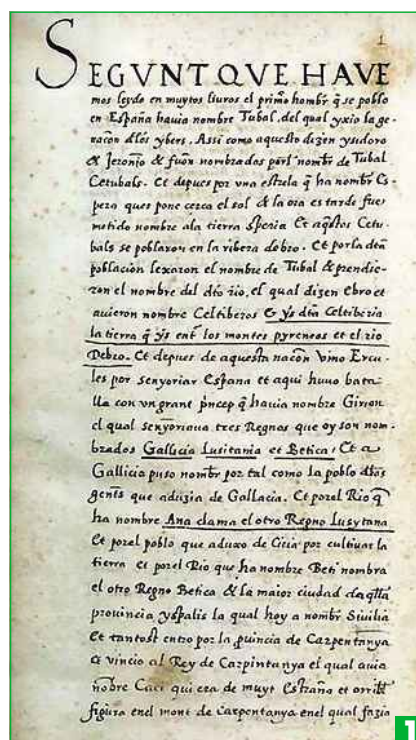
For Gutenberg, Caxton and their successors, all the way up to the invention of phototypesetting, justifying lines of printed type meant inserting thin slivers of lead between each word in order to

space them out to fill the full width of the line – a laborious, painstaking process. If the characters weren’t tight enough, letters could fall out during printing; adding the lead spacers called for precision and experience.

So why did they bother? They had no choice. By the time Caxton set up shop, handwritten manuscripts had already been set in justified calligraphy for a thousand years [1], and stone carving had been justified for a thousand more years before that [2]. The style may have originally been chosen to make the best use of costly materials, be they papyrus or granite, but for whatever reason the look caught on. On a sufficiently wide span of text, justification just looks right.

There are two good reasons to justify printed text: to make it neater and to save space. When text is left-aligned, especially when set in multiple columns, the raggedness of the edge can be distracting [3]. You can turn on hyphenation, which saves some space, but this always looks uncomfortable on left-aligned text [4]. When you then justify the text, you can fit more words into the same space and produce a more coherent-looking result [5].

Although most justified text is set with the last line aligned left, when you set decorative text panels, you may choose to centre the final line of the type for a more elegant



In the previous edition of *MacUser*, we looked at how to use hyphenation correctly. Nowhere is hyphenation more important than when using justified type, so in this edition we'll explore how and when to justify text. 'Justified' is the term used to describe text which forms an even edge on both the right and left sides—as opposed to 'ragged' or 'left-aligned' text, in which the right hand margin varies according to the length of the words on the line. For Caston and his followers, all the way up to the invention of phototypesetting, justifying lines of printed type meant inserting thin slivers of lead between words in order to space them out to fill the full line—a laborious, painstaking process. If the lines weren't tight enough, letters could fall out; adding

3

the lead spaces called for precision and experience. So why did they bother? They had no choice. By the time Caston set up shop, manuscripts had been set in justified calligraphy for a thousand years; stone carving had been justified for a thousand years before that. The style may have been chosen to make the best use of costly materials, be they paper or granite; for whatever reason, the look caught on. On a wide span of text, according to the length of the words on the line. For Caston and his followers, all the way up to the invention of phototypesetting, justifying lines of printed type meant inserting thin slivers of lead between words in order to space them out to fill the full line—a laborious, painstaking process. If the lines weren't tight enough, letters could fall out; adding the lead spaces called for precision and experience. So why did they bother? They had no choice. By the time Caston set up shop, manuscripts had been set in justified calligraphy for a thousand years before that. The style may have been chosen to make the best use of costly materials, be they paper or granite; for whatever reason, the look caught on. On a wide span of text,

4

In the previous edition of *MacUser*, we looked at how to use hyphenation correctly. Nowhere is hyphenation more important than when using justified type, so in this edition we'll explore how and when to justify text. 'Justified' is the term used to describe text which forms an even edge on both the right and left sides—as opposed to 'ragged' or 'left-aligned' text, in which the right hand margin varies according to the length of the words on the line. For Caston and his followers, all the way up to the invention of phototypesetting, justifying lines of printed type meant inserting thin slivers of lead between words in order to space them out to fill the full line—a laborious, painstaking process. If the lines weren't tight enough, letters could fall out; adding the lead spaces called for precision and experience. So why did they bother? They had no choice. By the time Caston set up shop, manuscripts had been set in justified calligraphy for a thousand years; stone carving had been justified for a thousand years before that. The style may have been chosen to make the best use of costly materials, be they paper or granite; for whatever reason, the look caught on. On a wide span of text, justification just looks right.

5

ALTHOUGH MOST justified text is set with the last line aligned left, when we set decorative text panels we may choose to centre the final line of the type for a more elegant appearance.

6

When we attempt to justify text set in narrow columns we start to run into difficulty.

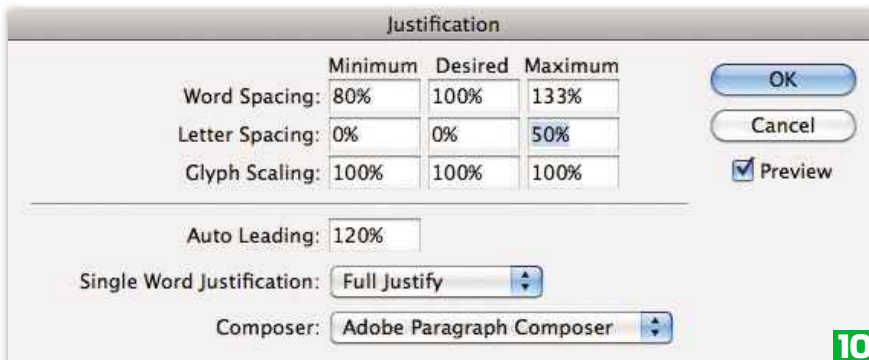
7

When we attempt to justify text set in narrow columns we start to run into difficulty.

8

When we attempt to justify text set in narrow columns we start to run into difficulty.

9



10

appearance [6]. This is a standard option in most page layout and some word processing applications, but it's an unusual justification method and one you'd be unlikely to use for everyday work.

When you attempt to justify text set in narrow columns, you start to run into difficulty. In this extreme example [7], a very narrow column of text looks absurd when justified: those huge gaps between words, referred to as 'rivers', break up the flow of the content so much as to make it virtually unreadable. The standard solution would be to hyphenate the text, as this allows words to split across lines in order to minimise the river appearance. But on this narrow column, the hyphenation makes the matter worse rather than better [8]. Splitting the words across lines makes the text even harder to decipher.

The solution lies in word and letter spacing. By default, most page layout programs have the default letter spacing set to zero – in other words, the program isn't allowed to add any space at all between the characters, so the space is added between the words instead. Once you adjust the letter spacing, the result is much more pleasing on the eye even at this unfeasibly narrow column size [9].

In InDesign, the spacing is set by the Justification dialog box, which is activated by choosing it from the pop-up menu on the Paragraph panel or using the shortcut option Shift-Command-J [10]. Here, you can set the minimum spacing, which would allow the characters and words to be bunched

together to save space; the desired spacing, which determines how you'd normally like to see your type displayed; and the maximum spacing, which tells the program by how much it's allowed to expand the words or letters when the need arises.

The default settings are for minimum word spacing of 80% so that spaces can be squeezed when necessary; a desired setting of 100% – in other words, as the typographer intended the words to be set; and a maximum spacing of 133%, allowing the words to be tracked out. However, the letter spacing is set to zero for all three conditions. In this example, changing the maximum letter spacing to 50% allows the letters to be spaced apart, so filling the horizontal space more efficiently and more clearly.

Even though the letter spacing was set to zero, when only one word appears on a line, it's still, by default, spaced out to fill the entire line. Usefully, then, this behaviour can be modified by the Single Word Justification pop-up menu at the bottom of the Justification dialog box: you could, instead,

Adobe InDesign has a special trick which makes justified text look better, in the form of the Paragraph Composer.

11

choose to have single lines words not spaced out but centred, or aligned left or right.

InDesign has a special trick that makes justified text look better, in the form of the Paragraph Composer. Normally, each line of type is adjusted in turn before moving onto the next. So in this example, the words 'Adobe InDesign has a' all fit onto the first line, so that's the way the text is set [11]. However, that means in the following line, the words 'special trick which' are spaced out to a greater degree than is comfortable. Similarly, because the final word of the paragraph is so long (and because hyphenation has been turned off for this paragraph), the penultimate line has the words 'of the paragraph' over-spaced.

When we switch from the Single-Line Composer – the standard, old-fashioned way of setting text – to the Adobe Paragraph Composer, we get a much more pleasing composition [12]. Even though the single-letter word 'a' can fit perfectly well on the first line, InDesign knocks it down to the next line to improve the spacing there. By spacing out the first line and tightening the second, the result is greater harmony between the two. A similar process takes place further down: where the line 'look better, in the form' previously looked bunched up when followed by the much more spaced out 'of the Paragraph', a better look is achieved by knocking the word 'form' down onto the next line.

Justifying text correctly is a little more involved than simply choosing Justify from the menu, but tweaking these settings can make all the difference between type that trips up the reader and type that flows smoothly.

Adobe InDesign has a special trick which makes justified text look better, in the form of the Paragraph Composer.

12