RETHINKING FONTS
A step-by-step guide

Before you start testing fonts, create a prototype of a typical page that contains at least one example of all the following elements: headlines, decks, headers, liftout quotes, sidebars. That way, you can test-drive various font combinations until you're satisfied.

Headlines

☐ Choose a new font for your main headlines. (See attached examples.) The big question here is: do you want bold, punchy sans-serif headlines? Or lighter, more elegant serif headlines? You can make a strong argument either way; but your decision will have a major impact on your redesigned paper's new personality.

☐ Consider a variant of that typeface (using lightface or italic) for opinion pieces, columnists, or for light, bright features. In other words, decide whether you want to "brand" different types of stories by using recognizably different headlines.

Avoid using a random, grab-bag assortment of fonts on different stories, especially in features. Instead, choose one main face to do virtually all the headline work, and make exceptions in a disciplined, consistent way (as I said above, for columnists, say — or maybe you choose one fancier "power" typeface for big, bold centerpiece stories). The important thing is consistency, which helps readers navigate your paper smartly.

☐ Choose a deck style that complements your headline choice. And consider making your decks smaller and wordier (from 13- to 18-point); readers love informative, easily scan-able decks.

Headers

☐ Choose a font that will work for all your "signage" — everything from "Sports" (or SPORTS) to "Movie Review." Ideally, this font will look dramatically different from your headline font, which is why most papers run these headers all caps, or gray, etc. If you choose a sans serif font for headlines, for instance, you'll probably want a serif font for headers. Or vice versa. Aim for personality — these headers play a key role in defining your paper's character and style. Test them centered AND flush left; in gray; using all caps; with shadows.

Sidebars

☐ Find a sans-serif font you like for all your sidebar material (everything from calendars to fact boxes to news briefs). Ideally, it should have a nice, readable text weight and a bolder headline weight. Slightly condensed is good, too. My recommendations: Frutiger, Gotham, Interstate, Griffith Gothic.

☐ Once you find the font you like, run it as small as reasonably possible. And ragged right. You'll only be using this is small doses, so this is one opportunity to tighten things up and save space.

Liftout quotes

☐ Now you're ready to build a sample liftout quote. Want italic? Or something bolder? That'll depend on what you've chosen for your headlines and decks. (Make sure the liftout style doesn't look too much like the headlines or decks.) This can be a related font, or something entirely different; many papers use a separate italic font, say, for big quotes and front-page promos — and that's all they use it for.

Text

☐ Choose a text font that's handsome without being distractingly fancy: Charter, Utopia, Minion, Century, even Times or Nimrod work well. Test in quarter-point increments — with different leading, tracking and scaling — to determine how small you can go without upsetting readers with weak eyes. (In fact, find colleagues with bad eyes to be your preliminary text tester as you zero in on a decision.) Feel free to run live tests on obscure stories in the newspaper.

Other elements: bylines, jump lines, cutlines, credits

☐ These don't matter quite as much as the type elements above. So test out different styles and weights from the font families you've already selected. Test cutlines in both bold, italic, and bold italic -- it's really a question of taste. Just make sure each of these leftover elements contrasts markedly with your standard text.

RECOMMENDED HEADLINE FONTS

These all come in a variety of weights, some of which aren't shown here, but might be even better than these. (I don't own all weights of every font.) But these will at least give you a general idea of what they look like. This typeface, for instance, is Griffith Gothic.

Professors debate public access to reports
GRIFFITH GOTHIC

Professors debate public access to reports
BUREAU GROTESQUE

Professors debate public access to reports
AGENDA

Professors debate public access to reports
META BOLD

Professors debate public access to reports
GOTHAM CONDENSED

Professors debate public access to reports
CENTURY CONDENSED

Professors debate public access to reports
ELECTRA

Professors debate public access to reports
MINION

Professors debate public access to reports
GIOVANNI

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