What does a typical brief for a new typeface look like?

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I keep on seeing this question unanswered, and hoping somebody else would answer it, as the answer is ... long. :)

I'm not sure there is a single "typical brief." One of the things that makes typeface design interesting is the diversity within a seemingly narrow specialty.

As one of my colleagues points out, many of the same questions one considers in designing a new typeface, also apply simply to selecting a typeface, or customizing an existing typeface.

I am a bit unclear on what you mean by "what does it look like"? I am kind of assuming this is a question of content rather than format. If you are looking for formatting advice, please say so. :)

For that matter, the design brief is sometimes never actually written down, nor clearly developed. I do encourage both aspiring type designers, and clients of custom type design, to go through this process and write it all down. I expect that it will be helpful almost all the time, and often immensely helpful, to articulate questions and goals clearly. It sets everyone's expectations and creates reasonable limits.

Many clients won't even know what questions to ask, so the design brief is something that usually gets developed in collaboration between the type designer and the client. Or, if there is no specific client, it can be a matter of asking the questions of oneself, to better focus the design. Being more specific and more seemingly restrictive is likely to result in a more successful work — even if the final fonts are used in ways beyond what the designer originally expected.

A design brief can potentially be a living document, revised over time during the early stages of the project as it is defined. There may be a first round of design brief written in the early exploratory stages, and it may be developed further in one or more additional iterations.

In any case, when taking on a new typeface design, the questions I would be asking the client (or myself) to create the design brief would be these:

1. Who is the client, or target customer?

2. Is it replacing a current typeface? If so, what does the client like and dislike about the current typeface? What is motivating the change?

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Figure 1: Fontlab logo.

3. If they considered off-the-shelf options, what did they consider and what did they like about each of them? What did they dislike about each of them? Why did they not go with any of them?

I found this part incredibly helpful in the process of creating a new logotype recently for my company, Extensis (see fig. 1). We looked at a bunch of specific typefaces and rejected them for a variety of reasons. In the end I took an existing typeface and modified it quite heavily. But I used the knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of these other typefaces, in terms of what I and my (internal) customers wanted, and that guided what I did to the pre-existing typeface.

4. What is the typeface a vehicle for? What is to be communicated with it? In what way should it flavor the message? Is it intended for a particular project or product?

In the same case I mention above, we wanted it to feel modern and somewhat techno, yet warm and approachable. Moreover, we had a very playful graphic for the logo — it was almost wacky in how playful it was. We needed to have the type treatment for the logotype be playful enough to not just clash with the graphic, but still a bit more serious, to ground it a bit. It was a careful balancing act.

5. Is there a specific target usage, such as "advertising headlines" or "body text in all publications and online." Even if not... What sizes will it be used at? In what media? How will the type be reproduced (imaged, rasterized)? On screen? For web pages? In print?

Again by way of example, the logo needed to function at pretty small sizes, as logos often do. Some of the typefaces we had entertained were eliminated in part because their weight got too spindly at small sizes on screen; it just wasn't holding up well enough.

6. What else is known about the desired design category?

In my logo example, we had decided we wanted something in the line of a slab serif typeface, something in a realm defined by typefaces such as Archer, Donnerstag, Vista Slab, and Adelle.

HYPATIA SANS EXTRALIGHT
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

HYPATIA SANS LIGHT
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

HYPATIA SANS REGULAR
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

HYPATIA SANS SEMIBOLD
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

HYPATIA SANS BOLD
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

HYPATIA SANS BLACK
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Figure 2: Some of the Hypatia Sans variants.

My first typeface, Hypatia Sans (see fig. 2), started out with me as a designer coming in thinking I wanted to do a geometric sans serif — but still needing to figure out how to focus it beyond that.

7. How many styles (individual fonts) are desired? Regular, italic, bold and bold italic are four fonts right there (and no, you can't get reasonable quality results by just using algorithmic slanting and bolding). More weights, more widths, or variants intended for different sizes can all add to this total. Families of 8–20 fonts are not unusual today. The largest family I know of is Kepler, comprising 168 (!) fonts.

8. What kind of language coverage is required? Any other particular character set needs (e.g. particular symbols, math capability, whatever). There are a variety of semi-standard character sets and language groupings, but the whole matter is a bit fuzzy around the edges.

9. What kind of typographic extras are required, or might be desirable? For example, these days I consider support for arbitrary fractions and both lining and oldstyle figures (in both tabular and proportional widths) pretty much "basic." Plus at least the five f-ligatures. But other people might think of these as extras. I think of small caps as extra, however, especially with the large language coverage I tend to go for. How about superscript and subscript numbers? A full set of letters for ordinals? Many other possibilities here.

Many of these things essentially multiply together. For example, if you need real small caps, you should probably have them for all the supported languages, and in all the fonts in the family — I would hope it would be (reasonably) assumed, but best to be explicit about it.

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Editor's note: Thomas Phinney is one of the regular teachers of the Crafting Type workshop, an intensive three-day class in type design. It is aimed at anyone with an interest in type and typography, not only professional type designers. It has been given in many cities around the world, and new workshops are actively scheduled. TUG is happy to be able to provide some administrative support for Crafting Type, and we heartily recommend looking into it.

The web site is http://craftingtype.com.