

Typographers' Inn

Peter Flynn

Identifying a typeface

I see lots of queries posted to various platforms asking, in effect, ‘What font is this?’ (usually meaning typeface rather than font). There are several very good typeface recognition web sites such as *What The Font?*¹ where you can upload an image of some text, and the rather more accurate question-and-answer interface of *Identifont*,² which matches ‘characteristics’ (aspects of the letter-forms which make the typeface you want distinct from others).

However, I was interested to see if something similar could be done for matches in the L^AT_EX Font Catalogue. In personal cases you might be able find a typeface in the Catalogue which is ‘close enough’, whereas an exact match might mean a normal commercial typeface, which can be expensive.

To find a typeface you need to know something about its distinguishing characteristics. There are many sets of classifications which could be considered, but I wanted to avoid the historical approach (black-letter, humanist, antiqua, transitional, grotesque, geometric, modern, etc.) because it is dense with pitfalls, and requires too much explanation. The first distinction is usually much simpler: between serif faces (with tail-pieces on the uprights) and sans-serif faces (without the tails), because this is usually visually obvious. Sometimes you’re not matching a sample, though: you just want a typeface that has certain characteristics, one that looks a certain way; and this means that information has to be collected before you can start searching.

For the L^AT_EX Font Catalogue I put together a few characteristics to test:

- the form of the lowercase ‘a’: hooked (as here [Computer Modern]) or round (as in *Almendra* [a]);
- the form of the lowercase ‘e’: horizontal (as here) or sloped (as in *Accanthis ADF Standard No.2* [e]);
- the form of the lowercase ‘g’: fish-hook (as in *DejaVu Serif* [g]) or double-loop (as here);
- the height of the ascenders: above the cap-height (as in *QT Agate (The)*), at cap-height (as in *Berenis ADF Pro [The]*), or below cap height (as in *GFS Neohellenic [The]*);
- the type of serif: many different types, often not mutually exclusive (bracketed, slab, flared, spurred, square, or hairline);

¹ www.myfonts.com/pages/whatthefont

² www.identifont.com/

- the form of the uppercase ‘R’: s-shaped (as here), straight (as in *Almendra* [R]), or curved (as in *QT Agate (R)*) (with variants);
- the form of the lowercase ‘c’: a bulb (as here) or a serif (*Alegreya* [c]).

These characteristics were derived from queries I had received in 2022 and early 2023, and I spent some time applying them to the contents of the L^AT_EX Font Catalogue to see if this scheme was feasible. It is, and I got far enough to let me answer the queries about fonts, but it clearly needs more work to finish the list and apply other characteristics. Ideally this should be done in parallel with the L^AT_EX Font Catalogue, so if anyone has strong feelings about specific characteristics that distinguish one face from another *in a way that will help beginners*, please get in touch.

Dashing it off II (em rules revisited)

In this column in *TUGboat* 37:3 I mentioned the differences between publishers’ ‘house rules’ on spaced and unspaced en and em rules, and the discussion in `comp.text.tex` which revealed some inconsistencies [3], so now some confirmations!

This came up again earlier this year, this time in TYP0–L, where Yateendra Joshi sought confirmation that unspaced em dashes were standard in US publishing, noting

In the UK and Europe, I often see spaced en dashes when they occur in pairs but an unspaced em dash when it occurs singly.

Leila Singleton confirmed the US practice, deriving it from the MLA Handbook conventions [5] used by book and journal publishers, but noting that the Associated Press Stylebook (used by newspapers and sometimes magazines) instead calls for spaces [1].

Finally, Chris Maden pointed out that Jan Tschichold’s influential design for Penguin Books included spaced en dashes instead of em dashes, and that directive (and a few others) saw wide uptake throughout British typography.

So now we know.

Discord for the L^AT_EX community

Discord is a messaging system handling text, video, and voice, originally set up for online gaming communities but now used by all kinds of groups. Topic-based discussions are supported by persistent ‘servers’ a little like chatrooms. Discord is available on all platforms and in-browser. There has been a L^AT_EX support server since April 2019.³

³ Named “LaTeX Support”: disboard.org/server/570670498309210112

It has been illuminating reading. Some of the queries are short and simple: ‘Hi, I can’t figure out how to make [description]’ (often homework, as the same problems reoccur) and only need pointing in the direction of the right package. Some are much more complex, where the user has gotten themselves and their thesis formatting tangled deep in a nest of irrelevant complexities suggested by Googling the perceived problem.

I have learned some useful lessons:

- New migrants from Word lack the vocabulary to express their difficulty; this is especially a problem with STEM students referring to packages, environments, and macros alike as ‘functions’;
- Users of the in-browser T_EX editor *Overleaf* call classes ‘templates’, and find difficulty distinguishing *Overleaf* features from L^AT_EX;
- Many newcomers have been misled by the expectations of their peers, who have taught them incorrectly (see ‘sitting by Nellie’ in [4, p. 71] as a teaching method);
- Many are baffled by the idea of reading documentation, which is an alien activity to them.

I’ll be campaigning for a pinned post with a succinct one-para explanation of L^AT_EX and links to CTAN and MWES.

Afterthought

A user on Discord asked why his embedded image (using `wrapfig`) wasn’t working. It turned out to be a conflict with `lipsum`, but I noticed that he was trying to place a circular logo on the (uncommon) *right-hand* side of the paragraph.

Sure enough, the next day a former colleague commented on the image in Figure 1 (posted on what’s left of Twitter/X) with a roundel embedded at the right-hand side of each paragraph, with a figure number for each one, outlined in red.

Elsewhere I have previously used a page from Vesalius from 1543 as an example of a formal figure [2, p. 38], with all the modern paraphernalia of caption, number, cross-references, and legend;⁴ but it was interesting to see the beginnings of this in the manuscript era.

I’m hoping to get a transcription of the page to make a typographic reconstruction with `wrapfig`, bringing 21st century formatting to 15th century scholarship.

⁴ He was by no means the earliest, but he was notoriously picky about how and where his figures should be placed.



Figure 1: 15th century astrological treatise [By kind permission of The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. MS. Rawl. D. 1220, f. 7v]

References

- [1] Associated Press. *Associated Press Stylebook 2022–2024*. Associated Press, New York, NY, 56th ed., Aug. 2022.
- [2] P. Flynn. *Human interfaces to structured documents: The usability of software for authoring and editing*. Ph.D. thesis, University College Cork, Aug. 2014. cora.ucc.ie/bitstream/handle/10468/1690/Human-Interfaces-to-Structured-Documents.pdf#page=38
- [3] P. Flynn. Typographers’ Inn: Dashing it off. *TUGboat*, 37(3):264, 2016. tug.org/TUGboat/tb37-3/tb117inn.pdf
- [4] P. Flynn. Typographers’ Inn: No time to learn. *TUGboat*, 41(1):71, 2020. tug.org/TUGboat/tb41-1/tb127inn.pdf
- [5] Modern Language Association of America. *The MLA Handbook*. Modern Language Association of America, New York, NY, 9th ed., May 2021.

◇ Peter Flynn
Textual Therapy Division,
Silmaril Consultants
Cork, Ireland
[peter \(at\) silmaril dot ie](mailto:peter(at)silmaril.ie)
blogs.silmaril.ie/peter