



Text Emphasis

by Ilene Strizver

CREATING EMPHASIS WITH TYPE – PARTICULARLY IN TEXT SETTINGS – is a valuable technique for getting a message across. It helps guide the reader to take note of special words and key phrases. Before you decide which form of emphasis is appropriate for a specific usage, consider whether you want to create a soft emphasis (noticeable, but not too disturbing to the color and texture of the type) or a stronger one (deliberately, and more prominently, calling attention to itself).

Once you are sure of this, you can narrow down your choices considerably, making the selection faster and easier.

The most common treatments for achieving emphasis in text are:

- **Italics & obliques** This technique offers a popular form of typographic emphasis. It creates a soft emphasis that will attract the reader's attention without causing a significant change in the color of the text. It can be used as often as necessary in running text, drawing the eye while blending nicely

'What *can* all that green stuff be?' said Alice. 'And where *have* my shoulders got to? And oh, my poor hands, how is it I can't see you?' She was moving them about as she spoke, but no result seemed to follow, except a little shaking among the distant green leaves.

Italics can create a soft emphasis and can be used repeatedly without disturbing the overall rhythm of the text, as shown in this excerpt from *Alice In Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll.

with the surrounding text. When using italics for emphasis, be sure to select the same weight as the roman (straight up and down) version being used – unless a double emphasis is desired, in which case you can use a bold italic. Italics are the typographic convention for book, magazine, and newspaper titles, as well as certain other proper names.

Xenois™ Sans Pro

Light
Regular
Medium
Bold
Heavy

When choosing a bold for emphasis from a type family with subtle weight progressions, go up two or even three weights.

- **Bold (weight contrast)** This approach creates more assertive emphasis. The technique of weight contrast should be used sparingly within text, because it presents a somewhat stark visual interruption in the color of the type.

This can create a checkerboard effect if overused. When using a boldface from a type family with subtle progressions in weight, it is usually best to jump at least two weights; a nominal weight contrast risks being ineffective at best and, at worst, causing a visual disturbance or distraction.

- **All caps** This treatment is only appropriate when a very dramatic emphasis is desired, as it disrupts the rhythm and flow of running text. That said, it can be an effective technique for important call-out words and phrases that need to stand out, as well as for stand-alone text in charts and graphs. Conversely, all caps are not a good

SIZE	CHEST	WAIST	HIP
XS	31–32	23–24	33–34
S	33–34	25–26	35–36
M	35–36	27–28	37–38
L	37–39	29–31	39–41

Using all caps for emphasis is too jarring for most running text, but it can be effective for chart headings and similar uses. It can help create typographic hierarchy, especially when combined with a color change.

Text Emphasis (cont.)

choice for running text requiring a soft or moderate emphasis, as the abrupt change in cap height interrupts the text in a jarring way.

- **Type size** Changing the size of type within running text is an illustrative technique that should only be considered for expressive, playful text, to emphasize the meaning of a word. In a children's story, for example,

After a while she remembered that she still held the pieces of mushroom in her hands, and she set to work very carefully, nibbling first at one and then at the other, and growing sometimes **taller** and sometimes **shorter**, until she had succeeded in bringing herself down to her usual height.

Changing type size for emphasis should be reserved for text that warrants a more graphic, illustrative treatment. Excerpt from *Alice In Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll.

setting the words tall and small reinforces understanding.

- **Type style** Changing type style creates a very pronounced effect that should be reserved for instances where a word or phrase needs to stand out. This can be effective for flyers and for brochures with charts, listings, and diagrams, helping to establish a strong information hierarchy by differentiating several levels of information.

Type Style Changing type style for emphasis creates a very pronounced effect that should be reserved for cases where a word or phrase needs to be extremely noticeable.

Emphasizing text subheadings or lead-ins with a change in typestyle as well as weight can be very effective.

- **Color or tint** Introducing color or tints for words or phrases can provide very noticeable yet harmonious emphasis. This approach allows text to stand out without changing typestyle or any other formatting, while enlivening the piece with added visual interest.

Less is more

A little emphasis can go a long way. In running text (as opposed to callouts in charts, maps, or instructional usages), emphasizing too many words or phrases can dilute their importance. Similarly, using too many techniques in one piece creates a typographic hodgepodge, which can cause visual confusion. Stick with one or two techniques, and use them sparingly.

One more caveat: Avoid using an underscore for emphasis in anything other than a hyperlink. Underlining was the only option available in the days of typewritten text. Today, it is considered amateurish and unprofessional for typesetting and design. ■