

The best teaching comes from a distinctly personal perspective, using knowledge and understanding of a subject developed over years of study and practice. For a good teacher of typography, as for a teacher in any area, this personal approach becomes a guide through a thicket of complex material. A member of our faculty speaks constantly about the need to develop a "typographic voice," while another emphasizes the value of experimenting with an infinite variety of typographic choices and manipulations. One speaks passionately about typographic structures, while another never lets content slip away, always asking: "What is it you are trying to say?"

While each teacher develops his or her own personal perspective, one of the tricks of good teaching is to remember that this approach, or organizing principle for a course, is not the whole story. It is merely a compass in the wilderness. Along with a compass, one needs a good map and a thorough knowledge of the territory. Even the best typographers and teachers need a guide to the broad range of typographic knowledge that makes up a complete curriculum.

In the mid-1990s, a group of us at the Art Institute of Boston sat down to discuss guidelines for our typography program.¹ While we believed in and supported each other in our separate personal approaches to teaching, we felt the program itself would benefit from some common understanding of the breadth of the subject we were trying to teach. At the time, we were also concerned about a lack of differentiation between what was taught in typography classes versus what was taught in graphic design classes. We felt both areas of the curriculum could be strengthened by trying to understand and articulate their individual qualities.

The result of that discussion was a list of typographic subjects. We organized it as the "Preliminary Type Curriculum Outline," reproduced below.

Preliminary Type Curriculum Outline

- I. The Mechanics of Typography
 - A. Manipulation
 1. Moving and changing physical parameters (size, spacing, placement, angle, alignment, etc.)

2. Using tools (hand and computer)
3. Craft skills; seeing and working in smaller increments

B. Measurement and Structure

1. Typographic measurement
 - a. points and picas
 - b. leading and line spacing
 - c. line lengths
 - d. letter and word spacing
 - e. type sizes
2. Grids and structures
3. Grouping and alignment

C. Detail and Refinement (finer points)

1. Usage
 - a. traditions and history
 - b. rules and traditions: punctuation, small caps, old style figures, hyphenation, spacing conventions, etc.
 - c. ornamentation: rules, dingbats, etc.
2. Visual details and craft
 - a. kerning
 - b. letter and line relationships (length to leading, line endings, etc.)

D. Navigation and Reading

1. Legibility
2. Readability
3. Hierarchy and editorial structure
4. Pacing and sequence

E. Applied Usage (special knowledge or traditions for books, magazines, schedules, exhibits, Web, etc.)

II. Interpretation and Critical Thinking

- A. Understanding and Interpreting Content (in its broadest sense)
 1. Differing kinds of content: levels, types, uses
 2. Connecting with and understanding audiences

3. Developing your own content
 - a.* writing/designing
 - b.* self-expression
 - c.* self-authorship
 4. Determining appropriateness
- B.* Critical Thinking
1. Analysis (good, bad, ugly)
 2. Reading, looking, interpreting
 3. Presentation
 - a.* spoken
 - b.* written
 - c.* visual
- C.* Visual Ideas
1. Conceptual and symbolic
 2. Concrete
 3. Puns and visual/verbal language
- III. Learning to See
- A.* Appreciation and Comprehension
1. Connecting different kinds of work (art and media) to typography
 2. Connecting human and physical experience to typography (perception)
 3. Developing aesthetic tastes and distinctions
 - a.* seeing and knowing the differences between things
 - b.* being able to describe the differences between things
- B.* Understanding and Using Visual Relationships
1. Foundation issues (form, counterform, balance, gesture, etc.)
 2. Typographic relationships (contrast, scale, hierarchy, typographic palettes, etc.)
 3. Spatial, structural, and proportional relationships (borders, columns, forms and voids, layering, etc.)
- C.* Understanding Letterforms
1. Structure
 2. Style

3. Fonts and families
4. Classifications and groupings
5. Uses and abuses

- IV. Type History (Context for Use)
- A.* From Writing to Typography
 - B.* Tools and Media, and Their Effect on Letterforms
 - C.* Cultural Connections
 - D.* Type Design and Designers
 - E.* Classifications (historical connections)
 - F.* Connecting Type History with Art History and General History (styles, movements, technologies, etc.)

This very basic outline was not intended to be a curriculum by itself. Rather, it was intended to serve as an organized list of typographic subjects we all needed to be aware of. Regardless of the level you were teaching at, you could look at the list and gauge how broadly or how narrowly you were covering the field. And, by picking and choosing from different areas of the list—by drawing from this common well of understanding—you could enhance or enrich your own particular approach.

The list also was not meant to be presented in any specific order of importance, nor with each section being a guide to a particular class. The individual elements mix and reinforce one another. For example, our *Typography 1* course focuses heavily on understanding letterforms (III, C), and the beginning mechanics of typography (I, A, and B). Learning letterforms not only involves craft skills (I, A, 3), but also enhances seeing and making distinctions (III, A, 3), while presenting historical material (IV, A, B, and E), as well.

Several years later, we still find the list to be a valuable reference tool. We now use a few more detailed curriculum guidelines (such as class goals and objectives, lists of appropriate levels of projects, and technology competencies) to keep multiple course sections on track. But the list reminds us of shared values and knowledge, as we each develop our own personal way of teaching and communicating what is important to us.

Notes

1. Participants in the discussion were: Geoffrey Fried, Lucinda Hitchcock, Jim Hood, John Kane, and Mary Ann Frye.