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OpenType Features

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For Your Typographic Information

by Ilene Strizver

Given their potential for greatly-expanded character sets, OpenType fonts often contain a multitude of typographic options, many of which are overlooked or misunderstood. Here is an explanation of some of the most frequently-seen options:

Discretionary Ligatures
A ligature is created when two or more letters are joined together to create one glyph. Whereas standard ligatures such as fi and fl are created to improve the appearance of letters that crash, discretionary ligatures are decorative in nature, and should be used sparingly. They are designed to add elegance and refinement to your work. Common discretionary ligatures are ck, sp, st and rt.

Ordinals
In common (rather than mathematical) usage, ordinals are superscripted letters following a number, such as in 1st, 2nd and 3rd. They are used in other languages as well, for example, the Spanish and Portuguese "a" and "o" ordinals, as in 1o / 1a.

Swashes
These are decorative characters that have a flourish or extended stroke, usually at the beginning or end of the character. Often available in addition to regular characters, swashes can add elegance, emphasis and flair to your type.

DISCRETIONARY LIGATURES

a spectacular starburst

a spectacular starburst

ORDINALS

1st 2nd 3rd

1st 2nd 3rd

SWASHES

Julius Caesar

Julius Caesar

TITLING ALTERNATES

Othello

OTHELLO

CONTEXTUAL ALTERNATES

Queen

Queen

STYLISTIC SETS

Mother & Child

Mother & Child

Titling Alternates

These are specially-designed capitals that are intended for display usage. Titling characters differ from their text counterparts in that their scale, proportion and design details have been altered to look best at larger sizes.

Contextual Alternates

These are alternate characters that are intended for use in special situations; for example, next to specific characters to improve spacing or connections. They are often found in script typefaces to provide a more natural link between two characters to better imitate handwriting. Contextual alternates are also used in some non-Latin scripts, such as Arabic.

Stylistic sets

Some OpenType fonts with numerous alternate characters organize these alternates into stylistic sets, which can then be easily accessed from the OpenType menu, palette or style sheet. This eliminates the time-consuming task of selecting each alternate character individually to find which ones look best with which others. While current design applications can accommodate up to 20 stylistic sets, very few fonts use more than three or four, if any at all.

Although all of the above features can be easily accessed and applied globally in most design software from the OpenType palette, you can always override and replace individual characters using the Glyph Palette.
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Before and after each OpenType feature has been turned on. Set in Centaur Pro, Soho Gothic Pro, ITC Bodoni Seventy-Two Pro, Dante Pro, Bembo Book Pro, Zapfino Extra Pro.