

You're a what?

Font designer

We all know that words convey information. But did you know that the appearance of the letters can also speak?

The way letters look can change how we perceive words. It can convey an emotion, add formality, or even elicit a cultural response. “The words on traffic signs, for example, always look the same to help you recognize them quicker,” says font designer Rich Roat of Yorklyn, Delaware. “If they looked different, traffic signs would seem strange to us.”

Letters with a consistent aesthetic use the same font or typeface. But a font is more than letters. It's a collection of all text characters, known as glyphs. Glyphs include numbers, symbols, and punctuation marks, as well as letters. Font designers package these glyphs into a cohesive font.

What they do

Font designers create fonts to meet a client's needs or their own. Working at font design companies or for themselves, designers can approach a project in different ways. For example, they may work off an existing font or develop one from scratch. “Font design is a very independent type of trade,” Rich says. “Everyone can do it differently.”

Design. Font designers develop a font's aesthetic based on its intended use. Designers consider the font's message, whether it will serve as a headline or body text, and where it typically will be presented. For example, a movie poster might need a more casual, eye-grabbing font than one for an academic journal.

But designers must think about more than a font's intended use. Fonts must be appealing and easy to read in different sizes and media, such as mobile devices and computer

monitors. They must also stand out from the competition, which increasingly includes free fonts online.

Font design requires a lot of trial and error. Most font designers draw directly on a computer using a pen tablet and a font design program. Font designers who prefer to draw by hand must later scan and trace their drawings on a computer. Computers help designers experiment, manage different versions, and maintain a database of relevant glyphs.

The font design process can take one month to several years, depending on a font's complexity. The more variations—such as bold or italics—and languages the font must support, the more complex it is, and the more glyphs a designer must create. A simple font might need 256 glyphs, but a complex one, such as Arial, might need more than 6,000 glyphs.

After completing a font's design, designers package the glyphs into a standard format that computers can read. They then sell it or distribute it for free.

Client interaction. Font designers, particularly those doing freelance or commission work, often interact with clients. Talking to clients helps designers determine the font's requirements from the outset. Early design decisions, like the spacing between glyphs, are particularly important because they're difficult and time consuming to change later on.

Designers also receive feedback from the client during the font design process. They use this feedback to better tailor the font to the client's needs.

Other. Some font designers perform additional duties, such as researching fonts for ideas. Other designers, especially those who are self-employed, may need to promote

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their services, handle billing, and purchase supplies.

How they prepare

Font designers typically need a combination of education and experience. Fast drawing skills and a design aesthetic are also important. Self-employed designers need some administrative and marketing skills.

Education. Most font design companies hire graduates of art or design school programs. Some of these programs offer courses in font design. But specialized font design programs are rare. Cooper Union, a nonprofit university in New York, offers the only such program—a postgraduate certificate—in the United States.

Another education option for aspiring font designers is apprenticeship. Apprentices learn the trade working alongside experienced font designers. But apprenticeships usually are available only at some small companies.

Experience. Aspiring font designers who forgo school or an apprenticeship can still gain experience on their own. With inexpensive technology, would-be font designers can create fonts on their home computer and share them online.

Networking can provide another important resource for gaining experience. “Who you know can expand your knowledge of tools, develop your design aesthetic, and help you find work,” Rich says.

What it’s like

There are many factors that every aspiring font designer should consider. These factors include the work environment, employment and wages, and the occupation’s challenges and rewards.

Work environment. Font designers generally work alone. But work hours vary by employer. Some, like Rich, work during regular business hours. Others work irregular hours, which may include weekends or overtime, to complete a project. Self-employed designers often set their own schedule.

Employment and wages. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) does not

collect employment and wage data specifically for font designers. Instead, BLS counts these workers among graphic designers. In May 2012, according to BLS, there were 191,440 graphic designers employed in the United States. Their median annual wage was \$44,150. Data are for wage and salary workers only and do not include the self-employed.

Challenges and rewards. Designing fonts is challenging, both technically and artistically. “You must have a balance of right and left brain skills,” Rich says. For example, font designers might need to program their own computer tools or determine a consistent spacing between each glyph.

Sometimes, font design is repetitive and time consuming. To make a font work in another language, for example, a designer needs to create many glyphs to present new characters, such as the accented vowels and inverted question marks required for Spanish. And even when doing repetitive tasks, designers still have to make aesthetic decisions. “We can’t turn over the grunt work to someone else,” says Rich.

But the technical and artistic challenges of the work also bring rewards. “Font design is always interesting,” Rich says. “There’s always a new way to do something because there are always new ideas and new media to present them in.”

And when their work is done, font designers enjoy producing something tangible that many people may see. Some people never realize that there was a designer behind every letter they read, but that’s OK with Rich. For him, font design is more than a job: “It’s a passion.”

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