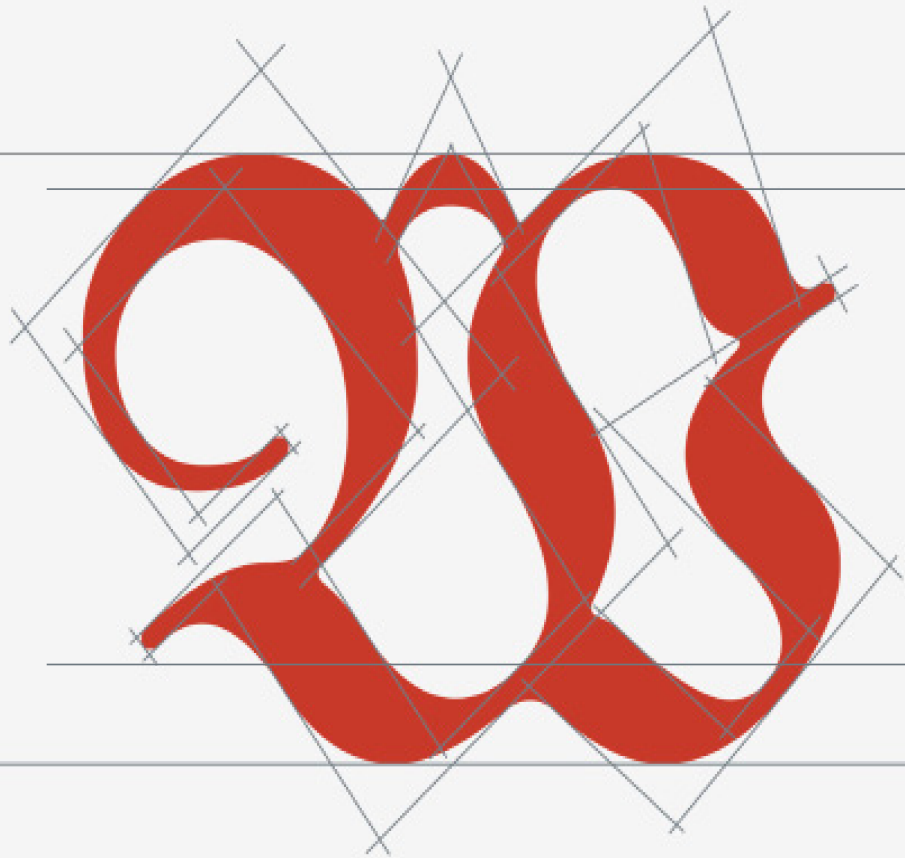


# Typesetting Blackletter Fonts

Typographical Rules & Techniques for An Almost Forgotten Font  
A Presentation by Tobias Berndt



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**B**lackletter typefaces had been ruling the occidental world of printing for more than five hundred years. Who wonders, that we still find blackletter fonts in names of streets, pubs, newspapers and in many other contexts, connected with tradition? And although all those Gothic, Schwabacher & Fraktur fonts are gone forever, from time to time we have to deal with them. Usually as readers of old books, and sometimes as a typographical challenge.

### First Things First

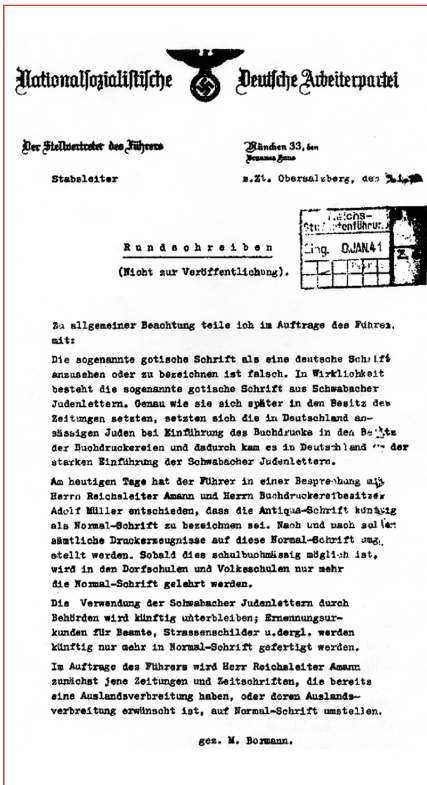
Nowadays, rumours going round, taken as facts by too many people: Blackletter types are old, German, nazi-related fonts. And so, let us have a deeper look at that gothic first.

**Blackletter Typefaces Old.** Old? Compared to what? Compared to an iPad... yes, they are! Even compared to automobiles they are freaking old. But reasonably, we should compare them to fonts, we are using today in our Western world. And then we will notice very quickly: We are using Latin fonts again! And as we know, these fonts come from Roman times; and this brings us way back to a time around 500 A.C. at least. Blackletter fonts, however, have their roots when Carolingian minuscules were introduced round about 800 A.C. and were not written before 12<sup>th</sup> Century and not printed before 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Hence blackletter types cannot be old. Compared to our fonts today, they are even especially young.

**Blackletter Typefaces Old German.** Although I like this rumour most, and even it is true that blackletter fonts were massively used within German language related areas, and Germany had been using these fonts officially as last in Europe until 20<sup>th</sup> Century... the English were first, followed by the French (and that's the bitter part) and only then blackletter typefaces finally came to Teutonic lands. But the fonts were printed first, there.

**Blackletter Typefaces Old Nazi-Related.** Even today, many people think there is a relation between blackletter fonts and the German National Socialist Movement or some Germanic cult &c. That's so wonderfully stupid that I'll leave it at that and just translate an edict of the Fuehrer from January 1941:

CIRCULAR (Not for publication).  
On behalf of the Fuehrer I notify for common attention that: Regarding and calling the so called gothic typeface as a German typeface is wrong. In fact, the gothic typeface consists of Jew-letters from Schwabach. Like they later gained control of the newspapers, the Jews living in Germany had seized control over the printing shops at introduction of the printing press, so that the Schwabacher Jew-letters were heavily introduced in Germany.



Today the Fuehrer decided in a meeting with Reichsleiter Max Amann and book printing shop owner Adolf Müller, that the Antiqua typeface is to be called the normal typeface in future. Step by step all printing products have to be changed to this normal typeface. As soon as this is possible for school books, in schools only the normal typeface will be taught.

Authorities will refrain from using the Schwabacher Jew-letters in future; certificates of appointment, road signs and similar will only be produced in normal typeface in future. On behalf of the Fuehrer, Mr. Amann will change those papers and magazines to normal typeface, that are already spread abroad or are wanted to be.

Signed M. Bormann

...which means nothing other than that the Nazi government has stopped using blackletter fonts. It is an ironic quirk of fate that right wing movements all over the world are using blackletter types, simply because they're thinking it is a Nazi type.

So, blackletter types are not old, neither German nor nazi-related. They were created in times, as the few educated people - mostly monks - had written with goose feathers. Those feathers were diagonally cut with a knife, dipped into ink and used as a writing tool. Hence the characteristic edges came on parchment and paper; letters therefore looked "broken" in the same way, printing types did because they were re-created of that goose feather handwriting.

last word's letter. For compound words, a smoothly way to distinguish.

**Kreischen vs Kreischen:** A Kreischen is a very small circle; Kreischen simply means to jereech.

**Versendung vs Verendung:** A Versendung is the end of a verse; a Verendung is the noun of to fend. As you can see: It matters! So, do not misinterpret the s with the f.

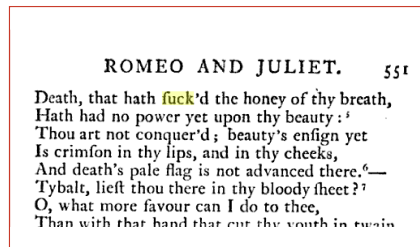
## Reading Perspective

Most of us were introduced to blackletter types as readers. It is not a secret: In former times, book makers spent much more effort in making books. Hence book lovers prefer old books to the mostly cheap made new ones. However, these old books often come with blackletter types and readers, not used to these fonts, have to deal with some pitfalls lurking at them, because there are some similarities of types they better know before they start reading:

the r: **r** and the x: **x**

the k: **k** and the c: **c**

the f: **f** and the long f: **f**



Especially the long-s and f-confusion is a case of its own; we'll see it at the typesetters perspective later on. Here, it will be enough to know, look carefully at the score: the lowercase f has a longer one, across the letter; the long-s has its score just on the left side. This long-s actually came from French Antiqua fonts at some point in the Renaissance. It was just adopted by the blackletter font cutters. With the French Revolution the long-s disappeared, along with many aristocratic heads. But why did we use the long-s at all? Just to make clear compound words; there are some popular German language examples:

**Wachstube vs Wachstube:** A Wachstube is a service room for soldiers; on the other hand a Wachstube is a tube of war. Without context, you simply could not know the meaning of the word at all, under today's spelling ... but using the long-s makes the whole thing very clear. Not rushing into the typographical context too early: the s is an ending s and the last letter of a word, s had to set as the

## Editing Perspective

Usually, to edit and to typeset texts are two completely different things. Dealing with blackletter fonts, however, will mix these roles. The reason is simple: Someone gives you a script, and if you have to typeset this script in blackletter fonts, you have to decide which types have to be exchanged to play by the typographical rules of traditional blackletter typesetting.

Hence we jump into the ...

## Typesetting Perspective

A typesetter's perspective in digital times to blackletter fonts is a bit more difficult than just trying to read the stuff. If you should come into in the situation to typeset any extensive quantity of texts in blackletter fonts, do not expect the same effort you're used to have. You must plan extra time finding a font, learning the rules and making all that micro typographic fine tuning; especially in terms of kerning the fonts.

**Finding The Right Font:** There is something to do before you can even start your actual work. And I'm not talking about not finding any blackletter fonts. No, there are hundreds to find in the Internet. But: Most of them are crap! Unfortunately, even those fonts which are not crap are often useless for any serious work. One font has no ligatures, another one comes without brackets, punctuation characters &c., and even the so important long-s is missing very often that one cannot believe it. And although there are many free fonts out there, it's better to buy. If you have decided to buy a font, which font family is to use? For small texts, headlines and stuff like this it does not matter. For higher quantities of texts, you should avoid Gothic or Schwabacher types. These are children of the middle ages and people will have a tough time to read it. With no need to use them, go for an elegant, not too dark Fraktur. There are well cut and digitalized fonts like Reichsbrief, Kleist or Zentner - take your time and try to be patient. It may take a while, finding the right one. Because I do not use blackletter fonts anymore, I did select Proclamate Light free font for this paper and it was a compromise. I wouldn't use these fonts anymore and definitely not doing jobs for customers with it.

**Learning The Rules.** Yes, there are lots of rules, typesetting blackletter types. Rules to handle the long-s even differ from one country to another. Since you do not have italic cuts or small caps, you will need to find a way to markup text portions. You have to consider ligatures, hyphenation rules, foreign words &c.pp, which differ from Antiqua typesetting rules. And even although the graphics sector more and more runs away from these regulations: If you think of yourself as an font aesthete, a typographer, a typesetting expert, learn the damn rules, before typesetting blackletter fonts! And if you do not feel bad, seeing substitute instead of the correct substitute, go, and find yourself another job.

**Doing The Finetuning.** Eventually you will have finished your work of exchanging all those little ligatures, long-s and types. But if you look at your work, you will quickly see: you are not finished, the whole thing looks strange if not ugly. That is because the turning of digital blackletter fonts has been made so poorly, that there is a need to correct it by hand. Go, have a coffee, smoke a cigarette and than start again. This will be the most annoying part of the job. Check all the long-s, it will probably have too much space to the next type. The ch and ck ligatures are troublemakers as well - not to mention the justification as a whole. You hopefully get adequately rewarded for this.

### Blackletter Font Rules

The following rule set for typesetting blackletter fonts won't be complete but comprehensive enough, not to get blamed by any freelancing layouter.

**Printing The Correct S.** Since you, who is reading this paper right now, are most probably Dutch or German, lets have a deeper look into the Dutch-German-regulations of long- and end-s. Use the long-s:

1. At the begin of syllables: surfing, person
2. For letter connections: shine, speed, steel
3. In compound words, last word begins with f: feastic, typejet, folksong.

As said before: The English, French, Italians, Spaniards and Firms have another, a more graphical, way of using the long-s. But following the rules above, you will get quite similar results. Using the end-s are more or less the same:

1. At the end of syllables: downstairs, mosquito
2. For foreign words: grotesque, masquerade
3. In compound words, first word ends with s: marsrover, tennismatch

Sometimes, the ss collide, usually ff but also sf. But there is a little rule to solve such situations, too:

1. For normal doubling: croffing, blossom
2. In compound words, first word ends with s & last word begins with f: dissolve, misspelled

That is it. Poots easy, is a lot of work. Even with a good Search & Replace support, you have to be very carefully exchanging all the ss within only ten pages of text. No computer will have a solution.

**Printing The Correct Ligature.** In blackletter fonts, treat ligatures like standard types. That means:

1. You have to use ch, ck, ff, sch, ch, ck, fz and fj ligatures in any case. Even if you think you have a choice, you have not. Take for example c and f. There is no knoef in blackletter typesetting. It has to be knoef.
2. Never break these ligatures ch, ck, ff, sch, ch, ck, fz and fj of blackletter fonts. Again, treat them as types. No hyphenations, and if you have markup text, do not break them anyway: not blackletter but blackletter

You do have a choice for all the other ligatures. But at least for historic texts, you should follow the rules above, anyway.

**Printing Antiqua within Blackletter Texts.** All foreign words with Roman roots have to be typed in Latin fonts. So, if you write common phrases like a priori or de facto or ad hoc, you change to Antiqua. The same applies to other foreign texts, depending of the language the blackletter document has been written in. Also very modern words and terms should be written in modern letters: "Microsoft Windows" would look a bit silly, typed in blackletter fonts. Hence you better use Microsoft Windows instead. If there are words in the language to typeset with blackletter fonts, containing a single foreign type, this type has to be set as a Roman letter, e.g. Deshabille.

These are the rules one should know for typesetting blackletter fonts. Maybe a last tip: Uppercase set blackletter types look just **UGLY UGLY UGLY!**

### Epilogue

One could argue: Why should I care about some rules from long time ago? Lets use blackletter fonts applying the present rules of Western typography. The Roman alphabet did not know an U or even an J and we all are using Latin fonts nevertheless. True. But these Latin fonts were developed over the centuries; we adjusted them, have been creating rules to use them until the present days. Rule making for blackletter fonts were stopped in 1941. So, the rule set above is the most current we have. In just the same way we are using today's spelling and typesetting rules for today's font usage, shouldn't we use the last rules for blackletter typesetting purposes?

As in many other respects, in our modern world, we pay less and less attention to language, grammar, linguistic expressions. It must be at least 20 years ago, that the last book was called "world literature". The last book shops in our towns are closing. Typography does not play a major role in digital document engineering anymore; book printing has to be cheap, first and foremost. We're getting profane, reading paperbacks about: "How to get rich within six months", becoming dumb WhatsApp and facebook zombies with short message abilities. Some fids on youtube having more influence to people than the editor in chief of the New York Times, and American newspapers are thinking deeply for



another word, because "newspaper" sounds too old. Really? Why should we care about typesetting rules for blackletter fonts?

Um, because it has something to do with craft & art?

If the last printer closed his officina to get retired earlier, the last young author prefers to become a superstar at some stupid television show, the last painter planned to become a Digital-B2B-Inter-

net service consultant, the last pupil has a vocabulary less than 500 words and the last parents give a shit about that fact ... what will then have become of us? The planet of the apes?

Yes, it is important to have people writing novels, playing music, painting pictures ... and typesetting texts - this is about culture.

and culture does matter!

