Abstract

This thesis contains a typeface designed and created over the course of a semester. As a creative project for my Visual Communications senior thesis, it contains documentation of the steps and processes I went through to develop the typeface and eventually turn it into a digital font available for download. It briefly covers the visual history of typography and my experiences while researching. My work methods and choices along the design process are covered as well. The rich history of typography now contains a new font, and this thesis serves to showcase and explain the development of Centra, a typeface.

Acknowledgements

– I want to thank Fred Bower for advising me throughout the process. He has been extremely helpful to me throughout my time at Ball State. His guidance and input has strengthened my love of design.

– I thank the Art Department for furnishing me with the software to complete my thesis, and approving my thesis topic.

– I want to thank Ellen Lupton and Robert Bringhurst for writing and publishing two incredible books about type and design. Their resources proved invaluable throughout the project.

– I also want to thank Dr. Barb Stedman for helping me get started and sorting out the paperwork for the Honors College at the outset.
CENTRA

+

CENTRA

= CENTRA

A Typeface by Aaron Thesing
An Exaggerated and Accelerated Portrait of Type since the Renaissance

Garamond
Jenson
Caslon
Bodoni
Baskerville
ROSEWOOD
POPLAR
bauhaus
FUTURA
Gill Sans
Helvetica
News Gothic
Officina Sans
Centra Heavy
TYPE HISTORY

"Typography is what language looks like."

Ellen Lupton in Thinking With Type

I chose to make a typeface as my final project at Ball State to explore the history and principles of typography, something I use on a daily basis. As a graphic designer, I deal in the currency of type and image. The value of typography cannot be overstated. In my years learning about type, growing more familiar with the range of visual effects it can achieve, I yearned to know even more. I still desire to learn more about typography, and this thesis project has been a wonderful exploration deeper into the realm of typography.

The first place to start was at the beginning, with the history of type. I researched this to expose myself to the widest possible range of letterforms. As in all design, typographic elements of the past can be alluded to or reused. Deeply held conventions can also be challenged or abandoned. Knowing more of the rules of typography and how, when, and why they were broken gives me a better understanding of the typographic universe where all typefaces, including my own, exist. For instance, observe the disappearance of text figures. Text figures are numerals that are shown as 2008. They fit more in line with lowercase letters. Their alternative, and now dominant brother, is the titling figure: 2008. A subtle difference like this is a brief sampling of typography's rich history. This initial research was integral to sustaining me throughout the project.
"The essential elements of style have more to do with the goals typographers set for themselves than with the mutable eccentricities of their tools."

Robert Bringhurst in The Elements of Typographic Style

My two main sources of information and influence were Ellen Lupton’s “Thinking With Type” and Robert Bringhurst’s “The Elements of Typographic Style.” These two texts offered great perspectives into typography; Bringhurst’s book being an exhaustive and definitive manual and Lupton’s being an up-to-date and savvy volume on the essentials of type and its application. Two other major sources included the August 2008 issue of “Print” magazine and the blog “I Love Typography” (ilovetypography.com). A “Print” article features type designers sharing stories about good and bad uses of their fonts, and how they take on their own life after they leave the designer’s hand. The blog always has at least weekly updates on up and coming fonts and type-related news.

These sources comprised the bulk of my research and focus as I began to make my own font. They all gave me a better understanding of technical and formal considerations as I started this project. The blog has a very informative section on which software to use, and I chose TypeTool among a handful of other programs because it is touted as the beginner’s font creation software.

In addition to technical information, these sources exposed me to a wide array of new and old trends in typography. Seeing more type was always good.
DIGITIZATION

“Typography is an ancient craft and an old profession as well as a constant technological frontier.”

Robert Bringhurst in The Elements of Typographic Style

Once I had created my last paper draft, I began the process of creating the font digitally. I started this process in Adobe Illustrator, a common graphic design program. The structure of the typeface is most apparent in the circle and line image. Sides of circles create the curves and rounded parts of letters, and lines simply connect the curves. The underlying structure of circles gave me a framework that was not rigid, but rather focused me into following stylistic rules when creating a letterform. Notice the N in the last paper draft. It differs in the final font because I found as I developed the typeface that alternating between a wide space and a narrow space achieved an effect similar to a diagonal line, without actually using a diagonal line, which none of Centra’s letters do.

This structure also makes all the letters inextricably linked to each other in the typeface. The consistency and pervasiveness of the style and structure is what in fact lifts these letters to the status of typeface.

I decided on this circular structure because the font has a very geometric and structured feel, but that is softened by the curves. Comparisons could be drawn between Centra and Bauhaus, but my font uses more circles and circles of varying sizes. This makes for more complex and interesting letterforms.
CENTRA is a typeface, it has two weights:

**SERIF**

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 _ $ % ^ & * ( ) [ ] { } < > ?

**SANS**

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 _ $ % ^ & * ( ) [ ] { } < > ?

Get the font at a+thesing, iweb, bsu, edu/centra

Created by Aaron Thesing, Fall/Winter 2008
“Typography manipulates the silent dimensions of the alphabet, employing habits, and techniques . . . that are seen but not heard.”

Ellen Lupton in Thinking With Type

Once I spent enough time thinking about and researching type, I began to sketch my own. I did not begin with a precise vision, I merely started experimenting with forms. Sketch 1 shows some of my first ideas. I tried distorting parts of letterforms, making the rounded harshly flat, or making the thin extremely thin. After this I wondered what a more standardized version of my own handwriting would look like. Although I didn’t precisely replicate letters, Sketch 2 is a good example of my writing. What struck me about it was the linear quality. It is made of fairly even strokes. After this I focused entirely on the serif (or foot) of the type. Sketch 3 shows the variations I devised before I settled on the half circle design. That circle motif became the basis for Centra, acting as the main element, and eventually inspiring its name.

My process for creating these sketches involved the grid. I use the grid is the vast majority of my design work because it helps structure and organize elements. It was essential to developing a typeface with systematically calculated letters. It also offers ease in measuring and comparing sizes.

It is most obvious in Sketch 1 how during the process I would consider something new and begin sketching it. The letters eventually became smaller as I tried to fit more on the page to compare the different forms I had designed.
"Typefaces are essential resources for the graphic designer, just as glass, stone, steel, and other materials are employed by the architect."

Ellen Lupton in Thinking With Type

My goal was not to recreate a font, but develop one within my own system. Rather than reduce a font totally down to as few circles and lines as possible, I found places to add circles to enhance the curvy nature of the letters while maintaining its structure.

After creating all the characters in Illustrator, I brought them into the TypeTool program to generate an actual digital font file. TypeTool allowed me to adjust the spacing in the font and easily organize all the letters. The resulting typeface can be seen on a type specimen poster, showing all the different characters within the typeface.

Now the font exists for the entire world to download and use. I have hosted the font files on my own site, at atthesing.iweb.bsu.edu/centra.

This project has made me a stronger designer, and I have a better understanding of a major component of visual communications. My development and exploration of typography will serve me throughout my career, and this project stands as the culmination of my design studies at Ball State University. I have learned much and will continue to learn more as I continue to use, make, examine, disassemble, love, hate, bend, break, stretch, research, sketch, organize, and design typography.