

'Setting' the tabloids

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Next year's AQA GCSE Media Studies 'set test' topic is 'tabloid' newspapers. I've been looking this term at student attempts to reproduce a tabloid front page in practical work in GNVQ. I saw some very good work, but also quite a few attempts to grasp the concept that just fell short. This concurs with the report on AS practical work on OCR's website that comments on students' failure to grasp layout conventions for print products.

Shape

'Tabloid' refers to a paper size in the UK that is half a broadsheet. This works out at roughly 375mm x 290mm – 'roughly' because there will be slight variations in how the paper is cut on various printing presses.

Unfortunately, this size doesn't quite work out on paper that most schools and colleges will use. It is a squarish format that most corresponds to A3 (420mm x 297mm). Some media courses now have access to good quality colour inkjet or laser A3 printers. To make the most of the opportunity an A3 printer offers, students need to be working with a template for a 'custom page' set at 375mm x 290mm. The printed page can then be cut to give a true tabloid shape. (Don't use the templates that DTP software sometimes provides – on PageMaker, 'Tabloid' is given as 280 x 432, an American page shape?)

If students are working on A4, they should halve the tabloid dimensions (188 x 145) and cut accordingly to produce a 'half size' page. On the page opposite, I have laid out two tabloid pages at one quarter size.

Laying out the page

If you want to explore how a tabloid page is constructed, typography and 'typesetting' is a crucial factor. To reproduce the layout of a typical UK tabloid is actually quite difficult. What is certain is that you will need to know your way round a DTP package. It's

important to be able to adjust 'tracking' (the width of text) and 'leading' (the distance between lines expressed as a percentage of the height of the text – 120% means that if the type size is 10 points, the space between lines will be 12 points).

Facing up to type

The national market for tabloids is split between the so-called 'red tops' (or 'pops') and the 'middle market'. The two types are distinguished both by the use of red mastheads by the 'bottom market' papers and by selection of typefaces.

The red tops use a sanserif face for main headlines and a serif face for body text. The mid market papers tend to use serif headlines as well as serif body text. Both sets of papers use upper case bold faces for main headlines and lower case for second leads. A further convention is to use a bold sans serif face for the by-line (the reporter's name), and the opening paragraph of most stories. In general, serif faces are held to be easiest to read for blocks of text and sanserif works best for text that will be 'displayed'. In many ways, this is a 'conservative' convention and many magazines aimed at younger readers will use sanserif faces throughout.

Type size

Type is measured in 'points'. A standard size for text in novels is 10 points, in most newspapers and magazines, it is smaller at 8 or 9. A rough guide to larger type sizes is that 72 points is the equivalent of about 1 inch. The *Sun* headline opposite uses characters 1.5 inches high – approx. 108 points. Headlines over 2 inches, or more than 144 points are not unknown.

Leading

Newspapers also reduce leading so that it is much less than in books. In the *Sun* headline, one line is immediately above the next with virtually no leading. This is called 'solid setting' and is also found in the body text. Students could be given an exercise in measuring text sizes and leading:

Here is a block of text set at '8 on 10'. Photocopy this block and cut it out and then slide it alongside a tabloid page. It should be possible to estimate the type size and leading used in different parts of the paper through comparison (the rest of this article is set in 9 on 11.3)

Typefaces

The most popular typefaces found in newspapers are related to the default 'fonts' on most computers – 'Times' and 'Helvetica'. 'Times' was originally designed for the newspaper of that title and is a serif face. It is a medium weight face with quite large lower case characters and a pronounced almost wedge-shaped serif. Here you can compare Times with three other serif faces. 'Minion' is the serif face used in this magazine, Bodoni and Goudy are older faces named after their designers. Look carefully at the '1' character and notice the difference between the thickness of the stem and the shape of the serif in each case:

Times 1, Minion 1, — 'stem'
Bodoni 1, Goudy 1 > 'serif'

Most computers use a variant of 'Helvetica', which is available in various weights and widths. 'Humanist Light' is the sans serif face used in *itp*. 'Swiss' is our version of Helvetica. 'Arial Narrow Bold' is what I used in the *Sun* mock-up:

Helvetica 8,
Humanist Light 8,
Swiss 8,
Arial Narrow Bold 8,

There is less scope for 'difference' in design without serifs. Focus shifts to the 'weight' (thickness) of the stem. Check the 'comma' character and the number '8' – in this comparison, Humanist looks a more 'modern' face, with a lighter, 'cleaner' feel. I hope it gives that kind of feel to the magazine.

Comparing tabloid layouts

The two front pages are taken from random copies of the *Daily Mail* (26/6/01) and the *Sun* (25/06/01) in order to explore the difference between a 'middle market' and a 'red top' tabloid. In 'mocking up' these pages, I've left out much of the detail indecipherable at one quarter size, but I've tried to maintain proportions and to use typefaces which correspond as closely as possible. I went through the mock up process, partly to discover for myself what the layout problems were and partly to reproduce the student's experience.

Content

The striking feature about the two pages is that they include virtually the same kinds of material. Both have one main story and a large image that leads to an inside story. Both carry large 'puffs' or promotions under the masthead. Both main stories are continued over the page. The only content issue that separates the two is the 'serious' *Mail* story versus the 'frivolous' *Sun* story. The *Mail* story carries much more text on the front page and the *Mail* also carries a 'menu' for the inside pages, in the form of a block running across the bottom of the page. The *Mail* also includes the award of 'Newspaper of the Year' in its masthead, but unlike the *Sun* and many other newspapers, it doesn't show a website – are *Mail* readers less likely to be internet users?

Typography

The difference here is clear – in the choice of face for the masthead (and for the main headline). The *Mail*, like the *Telegraph*, uses an old, almost medieval style face, whereas the *Sun* has a rather brutal and simple italicised bold sanserif. An interesting exercise is to compare the mastheads of several national and local papers. What do the *Guardian* and the *Sun* have in common? Students shouldn't have much problem identifying the *Mail*'s appeal to older and more 'conservative' readers, as against the *Sun*'s more 'populist' appeal.

The second obvious visual point is that both papers use 'condensed, bold' faces for headlines in 'caps' – heavy narrow type, 'cramping in' a great weight of type in a small area. This is further emphasised by 'solid setting' – in fact, I had to go to 'negative leading' to achieve the effect. But, a big difference is the *Sun*'s decision to 'range' its sans serif text as against the *Mail*'s 'justification' of serif characters. Both papers follow the convention of 'straplines' under or over headlines with

The diagram shows the front page of the Daily Mail with various typographic elements labeled:

- Masthead** using an 'old style' serif face: Daily Mail, Newspaper of the Year, Tuesday, June 26, 2001.
- 'Puff'**: FREE Your home from the air – a unique souvenir photograph (aerial photo).
- Strapline or overline** in lower case serif: Blunkett out to axe chief constable in shooting scandal.
- Headline** – Serif 'Condensed' and set with 'Full Justification': POLICE CHIEF FACES SACK.
- Byline** in sans serif: (photo of Martina Hingis).
- 'Body text'** in serif, opening paragraph in bold. All fully justified: TEXT.
- 'Menu'**: INSIDE.
- Text on the right**: Martina misery as she gets the big KO.

This 'second lead' headline has its story on another page. Note the increased leading and ranging left and the sans serif face in lower case with 'rules' between the lines.

The diagram shows the front page of The Sun with various typographic elements labeled:

- Masthead** in bold italic sans serif displayed 'white on black' (or red in this case!): THE Sun.
- 'Puff'**: WIN £50,000 TODAY.
- Headline** in sans serif condensed and 'ranged left' (or 'ragged'): TRAVIS BRUV GUARDS QUEEN.
- Strapline** in lower case sans serif condensed: (photo of David Beckham).
- Headline acts as caption**, referring to inside story. Sans serif bold condensed 'caps' with 'centre alignment': But singer snubs him.
- 'Body text'** - first para. in sans serif bold condensed, remainder in serif. Byline in sans serif bold condensed: BECKS MOHICAN IS A NO-HICAN.
- Text**: TEXT.
- Image**: Image.

lower case and a 'rule'. Lower case is also used for the *Mail*'s 'second headline' (note that this is sans serif and ranged – a more modern approach for an image led story). Arguably, the overall effect is that the *Mail* looks fixed and rigid, whereas the *Sun*'s page has more vitality and punch. On the other hand, the *Mail* could claim a more elegant design. The *Sun*'s use of type is rough and ready, but then, newspapers are only for 'now', not for

gazing at over a long period. For a different approach, look carefully at the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, the two UK newspapers which have done most to modernise newspaper design and layout in the broadsheet market.

Resources

www.ronreason.com is a specialist site for an American newspaper designer with plenty of ideas for page layout.