Bob's Leather Projects

Leather Tips and Projects by Bob Stelmack

Letterpress Type on Leather 2009

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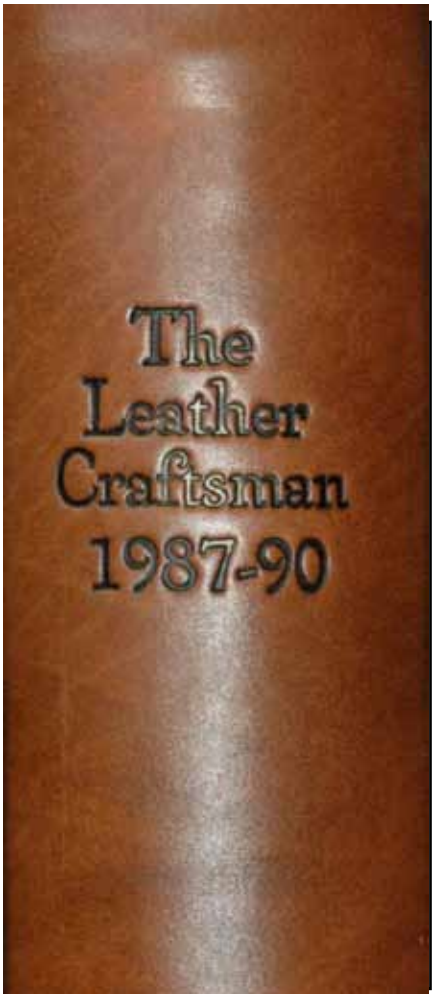
A brief Tutorial about Letterpress Type and the use to Emboss Leather Projects

Typography in Leather



Remember those **Tandy Leather Factory** leather stamp sets and how they were sometimes frustrating to get good results. You know how hard it was trying to line up each individual stamp and hitting it with the proper force to make the "I" character the same depth as the "W" character and to keep them from bouncing and causing a double image or avoiding the marks that the shoulder of the stamp would leave. Not to mention the non-proportional look that the all capital letters gave where each letter occupied the same space as every other letter. Attempts to "kern" (correct the white space between letters) was difficult because you couldn't see the previous letter for placement of the next letter.

Well, for me, the solution was found in the tools and trade of the old antique printing presses. Those moveable types invented by **Gutenberg** around 1439 and improved over the years and are now most recently made of lead, tin and antimony making a strong, non-brittle printing unit. Some are even used for "hot stamping" gold foil text on to leather bound books.

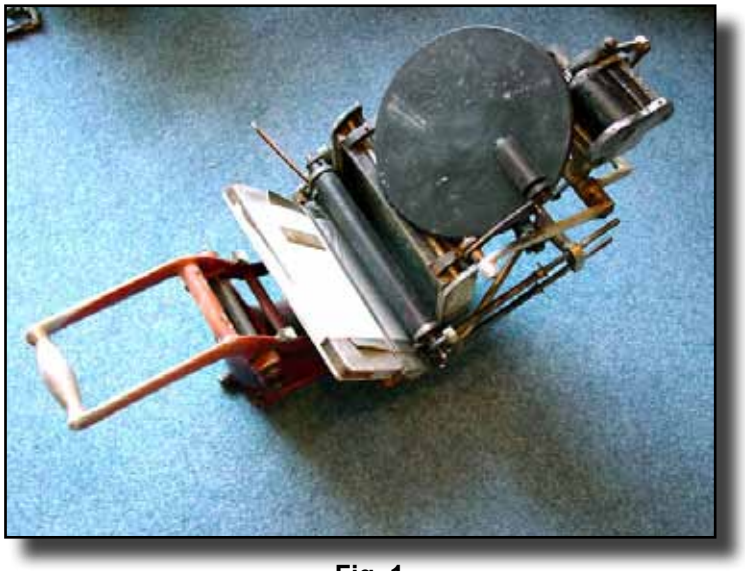


Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

I have always been attracted to character font styles—I see each of them as work of art. Those little alphabetical characters, like Times, Bookman, Rockwell, with their extra lines and swirls (serif) and the plain letters, like Arial, **Impact** (sans serif), without those extra lines and swirls. Most font sets come in different weights: regular, **bold** or *italic* or ***italic bold*** slopes, with condensed or expanded widths.

So, where did I get those antique letterpress type sets? And how do I use them to make embossed text images in leather?

Acquiring Letterpress Font Sets

The first sets of letterpress type I found were in England at an antique fair. A man was selling wooden trays of type, a small **Adana** 5x8 letterpress printing press (fig 1), and a bunch of printing equipment for £100 ($140). It even had a small chase (metal rectangle) holding the last printing job—a business card (fig. 2). I ran home, cased some leather and used a book press (fig. 4) that I had bought at another antique store and pressed the business card into the leather (fig. 3). A little antique dye and the printing turned out crisp and clear.

Fortunately, and unfortunately, I had a mix of fonts and I spent hours sorting the 8, 10, 12 and larger serif and sans serif sets. In the end, some sets were complete with uppercase, lowercase, numbers and punctuation in sufficient quantities to compose text blocks along with the spaces, leading and quads to align the text into paragraphs.

The number of each letter had a distribution to match a typical English language text block. That means that there were lots of "e", "a", "s" and "n", but very few "q", "j" and "z". Of course the larger fonts (e.g. 36, 48, & 72 points) had fewer numbers of each letter, but the larger fonts (fig. 5) are normally used for titles and heading which are usually shorter number of words than body text.

I had the letterpress collection bug! I found that eBay® is a good place to locate many styles of lead type (fig. 6). Just do searches with the two words: "letterpress" and "pt". If you use just "letterpress" alone, you will also get printers blocks (pictures), wooden cases and drawers, wooden type, and print-

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

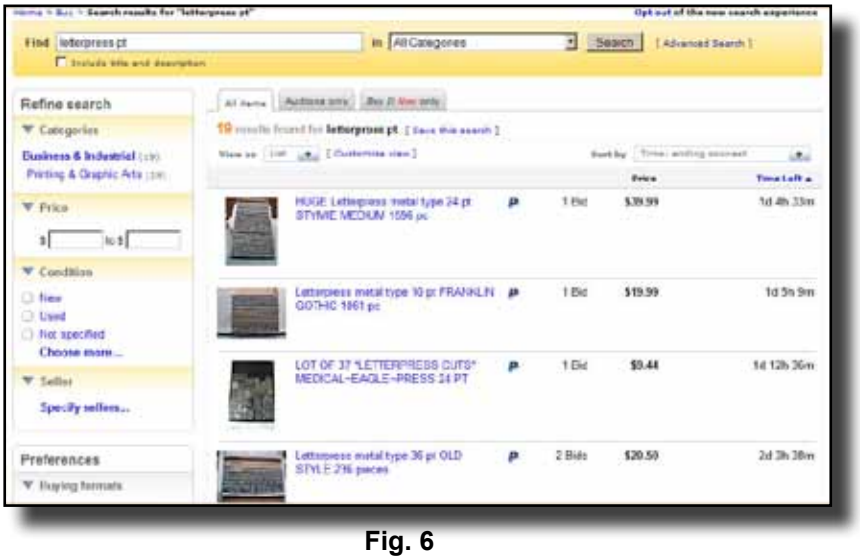


Fig. 6

ing equipment. I have paid as little as $20 and up to $130 for sets of letterpress type. Did I mention that the sets of type are heavy? One set of 96-point type was delivered to my oldest daughter's door while I was still in England, and it was too heavy for her to lift—it was over one-hundred pounds. I also discovered that the airline security checkpoints were very curious when I took any of the lead type through the scanners. My wife was not amused with the delays at the airports.

Process to Emboss Leather

The following is a process I used to make a name patch for a book cover:

First, think dyslexic. The type is placed face up and arranged right to left.

Get the spelling printed out for you and spell check it, grammar check it, check the punctuation then recheck it again, by someone else! As you can see I had the printed name "Suzanne", but relied on memory and spelled it "Susanne" (fig. 6 & 7). This resulted in a remake of the book cover at a later time.

Note: When selecting the letters and punctuation that each has only one right way to be used. You will note a groove or series of grooves that will line up if the type is right side up.

Set the letters on a flat surface facing right to left (fig. 7).

Clamp the Letters Together

Now if you have a short name or short quotation you can use some small clamps and some wood or metal combination to clamp the letters together. Be sure the height of the clamps, wood or metal are short enough that the letters stand proud and above the clamping set up. A good rule of thumb is to use clamping material approximately 3/4 inch tall. I cut a 4 foot by 4 foot piece of 1/8 inch hardboard into strips of 3/4 inch. These are cut or broken to length as needed.

Placing the clamps as shown, allows the clamped text to balance, ready to be impressed or embossed into the leather (fig. 8 & 9).

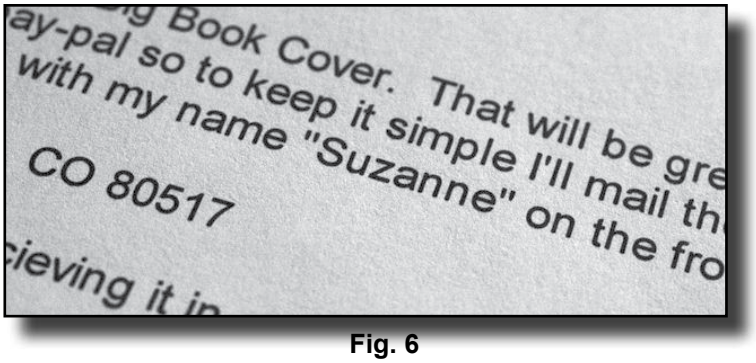


Fig. 6

Fig. 7

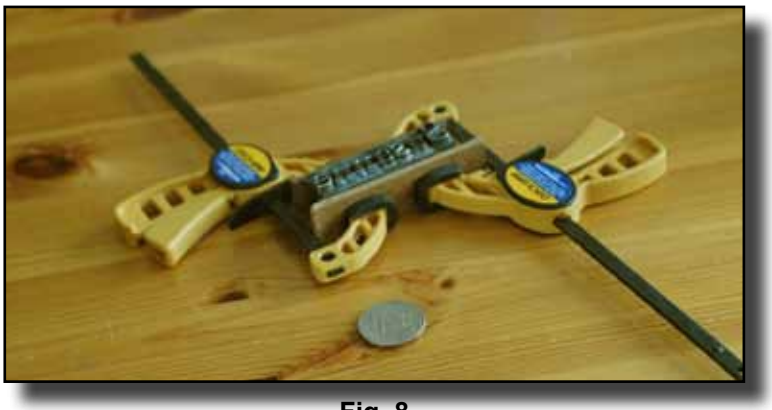


Fig. 8

Fig. 9

Case and Back the Leather with Matt Board

Place the cased leather on a piece of matt board (fig. 10). You can get scraps of matting from your local framing shop. I bought a big bag for $5 from the Craft Warehouse and still haven't used it up in two years. Using the matt board under the leather helps get a deeper impression, especially on thinner leather. Without the matt board there is a tendency to cut through the leather. I also place the leather and matt board on top of a piece of hardboard (fig. 10) to make it easier to slide the project under the book press, clicker or wood vice.

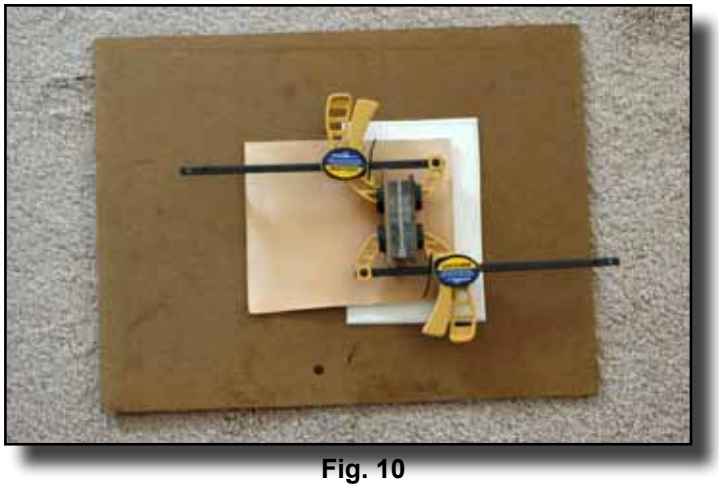


Fig. 10

Place the clamped text face down "the correct direction" and lined up where you want the embossed image (fig. 10).

Be sure to test on a scrap of leather the same thickness as the final project and perform a proof reading.

Emboss the Letters

To emboss—apply the pressure, release pressure, move the project up a little. Repeat moving down, left and right to get even pressure with a book press or wood vice (fig. 11). I think a clicker applies even pressure across the whole plate.

Fig. 11

A book press or wood vice has a central point of pressure and if the type is not exactly positioned correctly the top, bottom or the side letters will be pressed into the leather more than the rest. It takes practice to get even results. Using those little clamps (fig. 12), you can see and gauge the centering of the text by seeing equal sections of those clamps on both side of the book press.

Fig. 12

Trim the Leather

When you are satisfied with the results of the impression and while the leather is still cased, trim the leather and form the stitch line. Trimming the top and bottom are best done with clear ruler (www.cthruruler.com and search for item B-70) that allows you to align the lines accurately with the text. Then mark or cut along the edge of the ruler. This makes the top and bottom parallel with the text. The sides are marked or cut with a square or 90 degree triangle.

Fig. 13

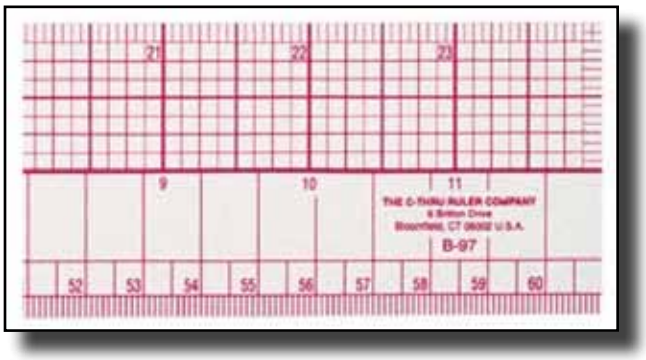


Fig. 14

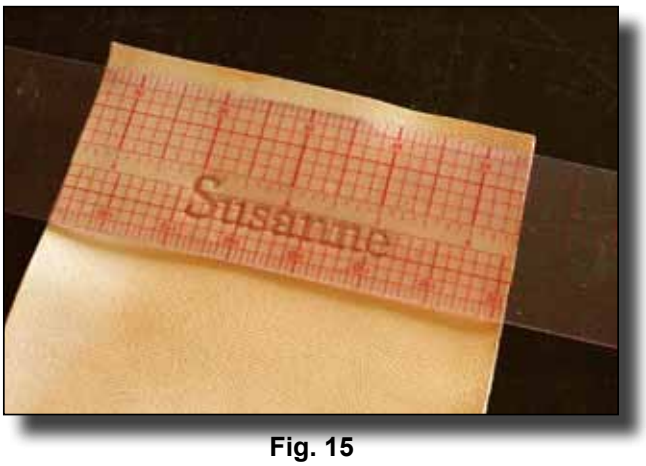


Fig. 15

Fig. 16

Fig. 17

Form a Stitch line and Round the Corners

To form the stitch line, a sharp pair of dividers (Fig, 17) are used to mark and impress a line. If the leather is thin or a bit floppy, use a straight edge and a scribe to mark the stitch line (Fig 18).

Corners are rounded, if desired, with a wood round gouge (Fig 19 & 20).

Fig. 18

Dye the Leather and Edge Coat

To bring out the embossed lettering, an antique leather dye is used. Tandy's new Eco-Flo High Lighter seems to work as well as the old Tandy Antique dye, especially the browns—the other colors, not so well.

The edges and the back near the edges are blackened with a permanent marker. This makes a nice finish to the label.

Fig. 19

Fig. 20

Seal the Leather

To seal and allow future treatment of the leather, a liberal coat of Aussie Leather Condition (Fig. 22) is applied, allowed to dry and buffed with a soft cloth. A second coat is applied and buffed again before stitching (Fig. 23).

Glue the Patch

Contact cement (Fig. 24) is applied to the patch with care not to get right up to the edge. The label is pressed on to the leather while the contact cement is still wet (Fig 25). This allows for a bit of fine tuning to be sure the label is square on the project. And this is why you don't glue all the way to the edge so none of the glue will show up if you have to slightly slide the label to make it square with the project.

The glue will not completely adhere to all different types of finished leather, but will stick enough to allow the label to stay in place while you sew the project.

A weight is placed on the label while the contact cement dries (Fig. 26).

Fig. 21

Fig. 22

Fig. 24

Fig. 23

Stitch the Leather

After the label's glue is dry, machine or hand stitch along the marked stitching line (Fig. 27 & 28). This patch was applied to a slip-on book cover. The cover was then laced to complete the cover (Fig. 29).

Now, here is the reason for double/triple checking the spelling. The customer wanted it spelled "Suzanne", but I spelled it "Susanne"—my error and a replacement cover was sent to her.

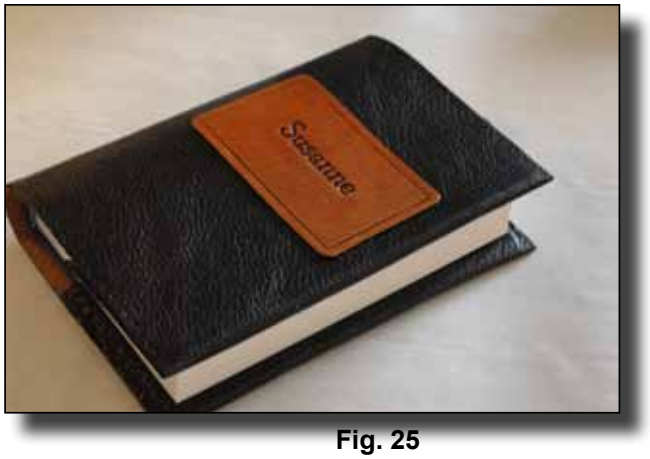


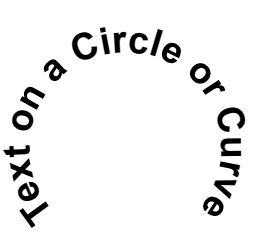
Fig. 25

Fig. 26

Fig. 27

Fig. 29

Fig. 28



How-to Create Curved Text

A neat trick to compose text is to use some cellophane tape to tape one side of the letters (Fig. 30) to allow centering and placement of the words and letters. The tape also allows curving the letters as shown here in the circle/triangle design. The outside letters are taped on the inner radius, but the letters that have their tops towards the circle have an additional lead spacer bent the same as the circle to space the letters properly (fig. 31). Otherwise the top of the letter would touch the circle. The whole unit was held together with rubber bands (Fig. 32). The unit was turned over (Fig. 33) and ready to emboss.

Once I find an embossing combination that I use over and over again, I contact Jeff Mosby, Grey Ghost Graphics (www.greyghostgraphics.com) and have an embossing stamp block made. It is easiest for Jeff to provide the image in vector format for the clearest results. Pictured here is the same information that was created with letterpress type, tape, lead spacers, a brass ring, some plastic strips and a few rubber bands that Jeff recreated in a laser cut high quality black Delrin (acetal) block (Fig. 34). And the final product is shown on a book cover (Fig. 35).

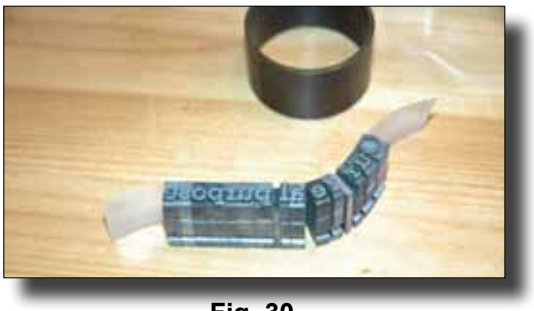


Fig. 30

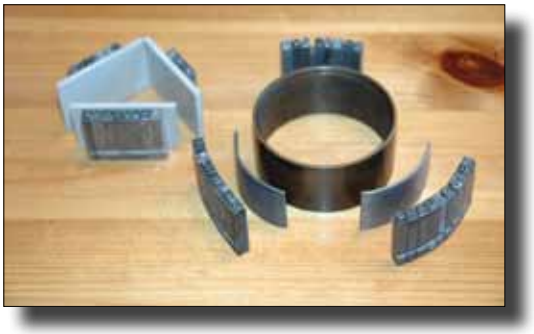


Fig. 31

Fig. 32

Fig. 33

Fig. 34

Fig. 35

Pointers to Remember

There are some pointers when using letterpress type on leather:

(1) The type should be cleaned with a toothbrush after soaking in mineral spirits overnight. This will avoid the old dried ink that may be left on a used set of type. Always test the cleaned type on a piece of cased, scrap leather before using on the project.

(2) Some type sets have ligatures (the little overhangs) of some letters (e.g. "f" and some italic letters) that need blank supports under the letter. I'd hate to tell you how many letters have been damaged that way.

(3) The type is "pressed" into the leather—not stamped with a striking motion.

(4) The more characters and the larger the characters, the more pressure will be needed to make a deep, clear impression.

(5) The amount of pressure to impress the letter and not include the shoulder of the type block is done with experience and testing on a similar piece of leather.

(6) Replacing the type to deepen the impression, must be done right away so as to not allow the leather time to change size as it dries, else it will appear as a double impression.

(7) Simple letters make the best impression: Times, Stymie, Helvetica, Spartan, etc. (Fig 36).

(8) Flowery letters are usually less proud (drive depth) of the type block in order to support the fine swirls and loops and therefore require just the right amount of pressure to get a good image. Fonts like Old English, Wedding, and Cloister are in this group. The "G" (Fig. 37) is an inverse intricate design that works well since the shoulder impression is part of the design.

Fig. 36

Fig. 37


Fig. 38


Fig. 41

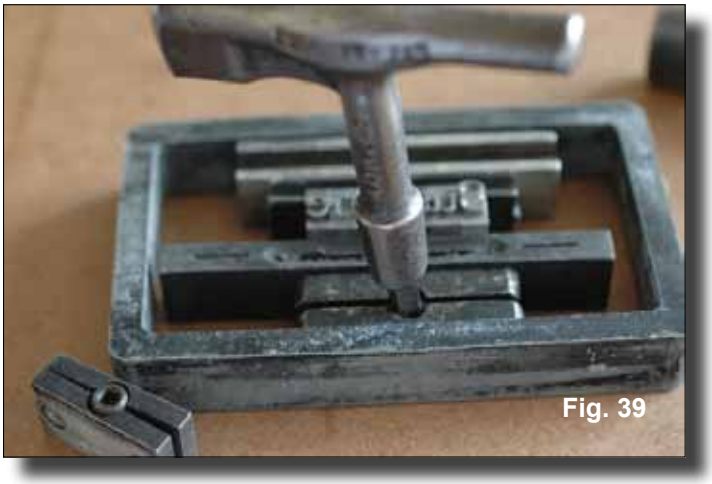


Fig. 39


Fig. 42


Fig. 40


Fig. 43

Methods of Composition in a Chase

A metal rectangle, called a chase (Fig. 38), can be used to allow the text blocks to be held together for the embossing. Here are shown two type if tightening or locking text in the chase. The tightening units are "quoins" (pronounced 'coins'). Pictured here is one disk cam quoin (Fig. 39 & 40), and the other a double wedge quoin (Fig. 41 & 42). The first uses a square key, the other uses a tool whose end look like a very large Phillips screw driver.

The quoins are the devices used to lock all your type, leading, and wooden furniture into the chase. The simplest quoins are nothing more than two wooden wedges that are slid across each other's face to exert pressure across your type form. A step more complex than that is cast metal wedges with toothed faces. A special key is turned in the teeth to slide the wedges. This provides a great deal more locking pressure. Finally, you can acquire mechanical cam quoins that greatly simplify locking up your forms and apply very even pressure across a much greater span (Fig. 43). The cam quoins are far better than either metal or wooden wedges.

Definitions:

- ▶Furniture (Wood/metal blocks of various widths/lengthens to fill in chase for lock up)
- ▶Leading/slugs/spaces/quads (Lead strips, or blocks of various widths/lengthens for final spacing in chase for lock up)
- ▶Quoins (Locks for tightening/locking up chase)
- ▶Key (T-shaped tool to tighten quoins)

Some Font Basics

There are several terms related to the letterpress and printing art that many more people are familiar with, due to the wide spead use of computers and word processing (Fig. 44).

►Point Sizes

In typography, a point is the smallest unit of measure, being a subdivision of the larger pica. It is commonly abbreviated as pt. The traditional printer's point, from the era of hot metal typesetting and presswork, varied between 0.18 and 0.4 mm depending on various definitions of the foot.

Today, the traditional point has been supplanted by the desktop publishing point *(also called the PostScript point)*, which has been rounded to an even 72 points to the inch (1 point = 127/360 mm = 352.7 µm). In either system, there are 12 points to the pica.

►Serif versus Sans Serif Styles

Simply—the plain fonts are sans serif and the fonts with extra lines and swirls are serif (Fig. 46).

►Kerning

The movement of the adjacent letters closerer of farther apart to create a combination of letters pleasing to the eye. This only applies to proportional letters and why those Tandy letters look so amaturish.

►Proportional versus Monospace

Each monospaced letter occupies the same width as every other letter. **`Courier`** text is an example of monospaced text. Whereas **Helvetica** is an example of proprtional text where the width spacing of each letter is adjusted to make the text pleasing to the eye (Fig. 45). The proportianal text can also be kerned to fine tune the look of the text on a character by character pair basis.

►Drive Depth

One term that we don't use in desktop publishing is "drive depth".

There is one term: "Drive Depth" that will determine how easy it will be to get a good image without getting the shoulder's imprint (Fig 47).

More current type foundries produce a drive depth *(the distance type face to the shoulder)* of .050 inches for smaller font sets (e.g. 6 to 24pt.) and .060 inches for larger font sizes (36 to 96pt.). Those .050 are best for paper printing, but can be used on leather with some practice and some finesse.

Fig. 44

Fig. 45

Most of the font sets I have acquired from the eBay and other places have had the longer drive depths (.060 or greater). These have allowed greater depth and less finesse to keep from getting a shoulder image on the leather. Minor shoulder images can be removed by smoothing with a modeling spoon.

Normally a composing stick was used to assemble pieces of metal type into words and lines which are later bound and printed. I have found for the less lengthty text bocks that the use of Sellotape or Scotch® Tape, taped to one side of a line of text allows the movement and composition of the text block. The taped together lines are clamped together with small clamps and two pieces of wood. The best tape to use is the Scotch® Magic™ Tape 811 (Matte Finish, Removable) because it leaves no residue when you remove it and that keeps the type from getting sticky.

Fig. 46

The diagram on the lower right illustrates a cast metal sort: (a) face, (b) body or shank, (c) point size, (1) shoulder, (2) nick, (3) groove, (4) foot. *(A "sort" is the term for a letter and was the origin of the "out-of-sorts" saying. The saying that a person is "out-of-sorts" when they are upset is thought to have evolved from this term. A printer who ran out of, say lower case e, before finishing a page would tend to be upset.)*

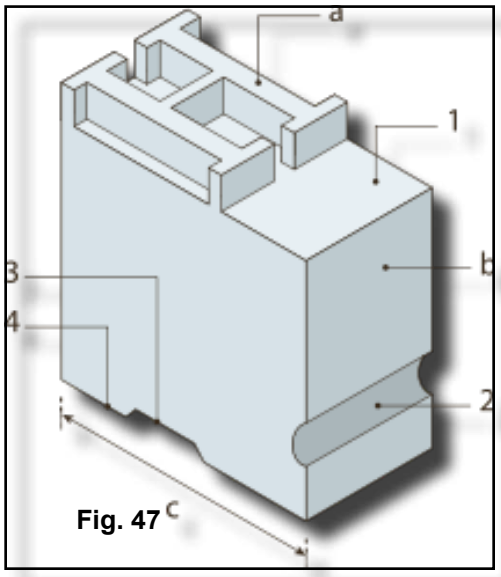


Fig. 47