

The **HERIOC** Powers and the Weaknesses of Superfamilies



Before you begin to lay out a page, you must choose a few fonts and create a hierarchy system. That's no small feat. Choosing fonts for basic hierarchy requires you to research possibilities, decide on classifications, compare x-heights, estimate character widths and so on. And if you're like me and under a deadline to get something to the client asap, spending this kind of time on one step is not always possible.

But I remembered hearing of font "superfamilies" and that using them can shave time off this task because the similarities within each family make working with its fonts a no-brainer, eliminating time-consuming guesswork. Wanting to test this theory, I begin my research the way most naïve people do, by asking complete strangers on Twitter.

My query was, "What are your favorite superfamilies?" And of course, I

received replies with images of the Incredibles and the Obamas. Perhaps I should have been more specific.

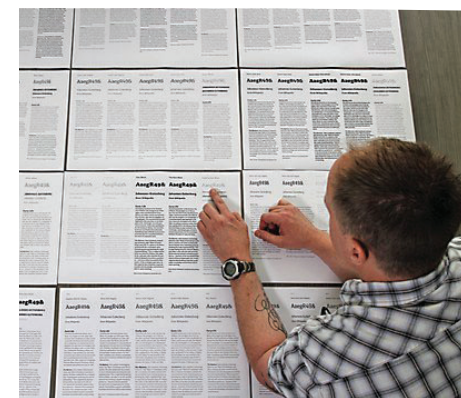
Typeface superfamilies are those in which the fonts in a family fall into many classifications. And, much like the Incredibles and the Obamas, every member of a superfamily has similar DNA—resulting in related letterform structures with corresponding characteristics—but different functions. Because of the way these families are designed, we can assume that their members will instantly complement one another and create beautiful functional type palettes. But is it true? Are superfamilies the true superheroes of type pairing? For guidance, I turn to Michael Stinson, my business partner and the resident typographer at our



By: Rachel Elnar

Los Angeles-based studio, Ramp Creative. I ask him if all superfamily fonts have the ability to harmonize in any situation and help me design faster. He begins, "Well, it depends." That's his typical response for most of my typography questions. "It depends on what you're trying to do."

Wanting to quickly build a mental go-to list of typefaces, I recruit Stinson for forensic research. Together, we choose five typeface superfamilies designed with varying personalities. My mission: to discover the superpowers and weaknesses of each superfamily and the kind of reading each is suited to—skimming, scanning or studying.



Michael Stinson, creative director at Ramp Creative, lays out pages typeset with superfamilies to compare and evaluate how they perform.

Stinson gets to work, setting a column of type with a system of hierarchy for each of the five typefaces. In each column, he flows in body copy at ten-point size and builds his hierarchy to the top of the page with run-in subheads, subheads and headers. He typesets both serif and sans serif fonts into four columns and reserves a remaining column for mixed fonts to analyze pairing performance.

Astonished at his process, I ask him, "When you are setting up these pages, what are you looking for?"

"I'm test-driving typefaces," he explains. When evaluating typefaces, it is best to create a system that emulates the hierarchy required for the design and then replicate it with different typefaces for comparison. Typesetting pages in Adobe InDesign enables him to make observations on the font's performance in letter spacing, numeral handling and glyph offerings.

He prints and lays fifteen tabloid sheets on the floor. "Let's start with these," he says, pulling aside two sheets, each printed with five serifs and five sans serifs set in regular weights. Right off the bat, I notice differences in overall color, apparent size and line spacing, although they have all been set with the same type size and leading.

"You can really see the size differences in the typefaces this way," he says,

pointing to the end of each column to show me that the lengths of the paragraphs correlate to character widths. "The narrower the characters and spacing, the more content you can fit on the page." We compare the following five superfamilies: Quatro, Kairos, Heron, Tisa and Slate.

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"[Quatro] is a large typeface," Stinson says. "Both in x-height and character width. But the character spacing is compressed."

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Superpowers: Quatro's sans serif has more weights and is lighter in color than its slab serif counterpart. There are seventeen sans serif fonts and ten slab serif fonts, and because the weights vary so much, the family can create distinctive looks. There are also nice subtle differences on the ear on

the lowercase g and the belly of the lowercase a.

Weaknesses: Quatro's design is really big, making it difficult to use at small sizes. In addition, the characters are so wide that copy set in Quatro takes up a lot of space, and no condensed versions were designed, so it is best used with large pages.

Reading best suited for: Scanning. Quatro has so much personality that it's hard to skim. And because it doesn't work well at small sizes, it's not suitable for studying.



"If versatility translates to the number of fonts," says Stinson, "you can create thousands of combinations with Kairos. The serif counterpart alone has sixteen condensed weights and sixteen extended weights, and there are 100 weights in the whole family."

Monotype designer Terrance Weinzierl, who created Kairos, says that Kairos Pro would be best classified as a slab serif and that Kairos Sans would be a "square" sans. "I think they are both better suited for headlines and subheads," he remarks, "but can work for short texts." Stinson agrees.

Superpowers: Kairos exudes a lot of personality, so it lends itself well to large sizes. It has delightful characteristics, like the crossbar at the apex on the capital A. The contrasts between serif and sans serif are slight, so Kairos is perfect for understated combinations.

Weaknesses: Kairos has generous default character spacing, so it produces rivers of white in blocks of text. Not that it won't perform well in body copy, but it will take more work to make it look even. Also, the apertures are closed, so it is difficult to read at small sizes.

Reading best suited for: Skimming. The high x-height makes it easy to skim at large sizes.

the empire's existence were of stability, the Pax, or "Roman Peace". Following the assassination of Caligula in AD 41, the Senate considered restoring the republic, but the Praetorian Guard

"Heron is very upright and narrow," Stinson remarks. "It doesn't take a lot of room, so it's perfect for what it was designed for: editorial use."

Cyrus Highsmith from Occupant Fonts designed Heron Sans for Men's Health after it was commissioned by art director Joe Heroun. "We were going for sort of a license plate style," Highsmith explains. "Since it was only used for headlines on the cover, it worked well."

"It's still kind of clunky and utilitarian," Highsmith admits, "... but the lighter weights can be used pretty well at text sizes too."

Superpowers: Heron is narrow and great for small spaces, and you can set type nicely in a narrow-measure column. It has lots of visual variety, with 40 styles and weights available, including condensed and extended.

Weaknesses: With its dark color and narrow build, Heron is not our first pick for lengthy reading. The default character spacing is a little tight, and in body copy, it may need to be opened up.

Reading best suited for: Scanning. There are enough details for easy character recognition, but its slender

profile makes it slightly difficult to read in body copy.

period of Rome lasted approximately the 500 years of the Republican era. The empire's existence were of stability, the Pax Roma Tisa or "Roman Peace". Following the assassination of Caligula in AD 41, the Senate considered restoring the republic.

"Tisa is the only one of these five that is really designed for reading," Stinson mentions. "With default old-style numerals and even spacing, it is perfect for body copy."

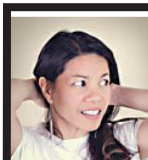
Tisa's designer, Mitj a Miklavčič, founder of Studio Mitja Miklavčič, says that although his inspiration was nineteenth-century wood-type printing, he decided to "make a contemporary version that could be used in digital and printed media."

The Tisa superfamily, distributed by FontFont, was Miklavčič's attempt to create a low-contrast typeface with contemporary, yet humanist characteristics. "Due to its low stroke contrast and relatively large x-height, it was primarily meant for magazines and other demanding reproduction conditions," Miklavčič tells me.

Superpowers: Default old-style numerals. Stinson loves that caps and small-caps commands instantly change numbers to either lining or old style. The 28 fonts in the family will cover most hierarchy needs. Tisa has some personality, but not so much that it interferes with readability. Open apertures make it easy to read at small sizes.

Weaknesses: There are no condensed weights, so it won't work in tight spaces.

Reading best suited for: Studying. Flow it all in with this one.



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the 500 years of the Republican era. The empire's existence were of stability and prosperity, the Pax Romana, or "Roman" Slate Following Octavian's victory, the size of the empire was dramatically increased. After the assassination of Caligula in AD 41, the Senate briefly considered restoring the republic.

"Slate is another one I'd use for body copy," Stinson reveals. "It'd be good for magazines with its varied weights in combination with the slab serif."

Slate is a neogrotesque sans serif typeface designed by Rod McDonald for Monotype. With the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, McDonald was involved on a research project that focused on maximizing the legibility of characters and readability of text. The Slate family, designed for maximum legibility for both print and screen, was the result. He designed the slab serif counterpart, Egyptian Slate, two years later.

Superpowers: Highly legible, even with a small x-height. Slate's condensed weights make it a great face for editorial use.

Weaknesses: The expression is faint between weights—you can't get too crazy with this family. Beware of the single-story g in regular, in case you're seeking two stories for maximum readability.

Reading best suited for: Studying.

After picking up all the prints off the floor, I am satisfied with our findings. The theory is correct: superfamilies are easy to pair. But Stinson is right, too; depending on how much content is being typeset, not all families will work for every situation. Every superhero family will have its strengths and vulnerabilities, but each one also offers something unique. And depending on what you're designing, you may just find a typeface hero that will save the day. ca

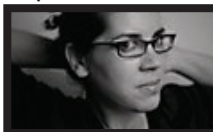


Illustration Credit: Susan Beele