

Initial Letters

AN INITIAL LETTER (or initial cap, as they are also called) is an enlarged letter that is used as the first character of a paragraph. It can sit above, below, to the left of, or even behind the body text, and can be set in a contrasting weight, style or color. Initial letters can be:

- **Dropped** (this is called a “drop cap”) so that the baseline of the drop cap is below the baseline of the text.
- **Raised**, so that the top of the initial is above the height of the body text.
- **Boxed**.
- **Reversed** out of a background shade.
- **Overlapped**, so that the initial cap actually overlaps the body copy. Keep the color and/or tint light enough so readability isn't impaired.

How to set your initial letter is one question; which letter to set is another! You're not limited to the same typeface

as your body copy. In fact, decorative, calligraphic and ornate type styles can be very effective. You can even use a lowercase character as your “cap”—consider it typographic license!

The key to using initial letters successfully is proper alignment. If the character is intended to appear flush left with the text, it should align optically rather than mechanically. Certain characters, such as those with rounds (C, O, S, etc.), diagonals (A, V, W, Y) and characters with serifs (which get proportionally larger with size), should be pulled out to the left a bit to align visually.

If the initial cap is the first letter of a word (as opposed

Drop caps begin at and drop below the first line of text and should go at least three lines deep (an odd number of lines look the most balanced and pleasing). Make sure it optically aligns with the cap height of the first line and base-aligns with a line of type below. Tuck in the rest of the first word to help readability.


Raised caps base-align with the first line of type and rise above the body copy. They are much less complicated to do tastefully than a drop cap as there are fewer alignment issues.


to a single-letter word, such as “A” or “I”), make you sure you set the rest of the word close enough to the initial so that the eye reads it as a single word.


Other things to remember: don't repeat the letter you use as the initial cap at the beginning of the body text, and


don't use too many initial caps in one layout. In fact, one per length of copy or long section is enough. And, as always, readability should never be sacrificed for style.

Now you're ready to get started with initial letters! ■

boxed and reversed initials are other techniques to add visual interest and originality to your work. You can also set the initial in reverse, dropping it out of a box of black or any solid color.

ometimes a fancy or ornate initial is the perfect choice. A typeface with elaborate swashes or calligraphic forms can be quite striking and work well as long as it is appropriate to the content and blends with the rest of the design.

ometimes positioning a tinted initial behind your text creates an unusual and exciting look. Your imagination is the limit to what you can do as long as it is appropriate to the job

here are fonts that come with their own decorative initials, such as TTC Rendo designed by Phill Grimshaw.