

Letter Anatomy – Definitions

Typography employs a number of technical terms. These mostly describe specific parts of letterforms. Knowing a letterform's component parts makes it much easier to identify the type's classification and even the specific typeface.

Baseline

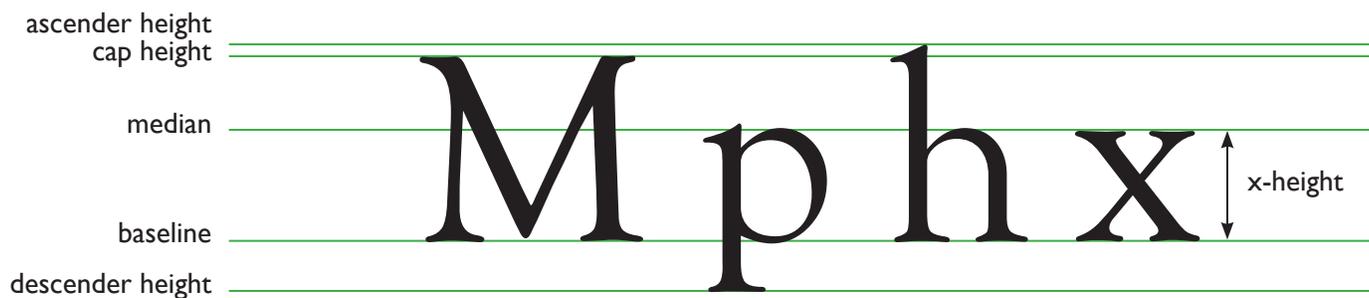
The imaginary line defining the visual base of letterforms (see the diagram below).

Median

The imaginary line defining the x-height of letterforms (see the diagram below).

X-height

The height in any typeface of the lowercase "x" (see the diagram below).



Letter Anatomy – Definitions

A B C

Stroke

Any line that defines the basic letterforms.

A M V

Apex/Vertex

The point created by joining two diagonal **stems** (**apex** above, **vertex** below)

F T Y

Arm

Short **strokes** off the **stem** of the letterform, either horizontal (E, F, T) or inclined upward (K, Y)

b d h k

Ascender

The portion of the **stem** of a lowercase letterform that projects above the **median**.

C G S

Barb

The half-**serif** finish on some curved **strokes**.

E T L

Beak

The half-**serif** finish on some horizontal **arms**.

b d p q

Bowl

The rounded form that describes a **counter**. The bowl may be either open or closed.

T l

Bracket

The transition between the **serif** and the **stem**.

a d P O

Counter

The negative space within a letterform, either fully or partially enclosed.

A H

Cross Bar

The horizontal **stroke** in a letterform that joins two **stems** together.

f t

Cross Stroke

The horizontal **stroke** in a letterform that intersects the **stem**.

K V

Crotch

The interior space where two **strokes** meet.

p q y

Descender

That portion of the **stem** of a lowercase letterform that projects below the **baseline**.

g r

Ear

The **stroke** extending out from the main **stem** or body of the letterform.

M d p

Em/En

Originally referring to the width of an uppercase M, an em is now the distance equal to the size of the typeface (an em in 48pt type is 48 points, for example). An en is half the size of an em. Most often used to describe em/en spaces and em/en dashes.

f a

Finial

The rounded non-**serif terminal** to a **stroke**.

L K R

Leg

Short stroke off the stem of the letterform, either at the bottom of the stroke (L) or inclined downward (K, R).

fi fi fl fl

Ligature

The character formed by the combination of two or more letterforms.

g

Link

The **stroke** that connects the **bowl** and the **loop** of a lowercase G.

(continued on next page)

Letter Anatomy – Definitions



Loop

In some typefaces, the **bowl** created in the **descender** of the lowercase G.



Serif

The right-angled or oblique foot at the end of the **stroke**.



Shoulder

The curved **stroke** that is not part of a **bowl**.



Spine

The curved **stem** of the S.



Spur

The extension that articulates the junction of a curved and rectilinear **stroke**.



Stem

The significant vertical or oblique **stroke**.



Stress

The orientation of the letterform, indicated by the thin **stroke** in rounded forms.



Swash

The flourish that extends the **stroke** of a letterform.



Tail

The curved or diagonal **stroke** at the finish of certain letterforms.



Terminal

The self-contained finish of a **stroke** without a **serif**. This is something of a catch-all term. Terminals may be flat ('T', above), flared, acute ('t', above), concave, convex or rounded as well as a ball or a teardrop (see **finial**).