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« [Web typography still sucks. Why do we need Sabon?](#) »

[The best Futura money can buy.](#)

[Futura](#) is one of those typefaces so taken for granted that it perpetually rides on the knife-edge of backlash. Like Helvetica and Univers, it's a versatile sans serif typeface that comes in a variety of widths and weights and comprises a more or less freestanding system for graphic designers who are (still) wedded to the grid. It's also a strongly geometrical, warm typeface, and is one I've used constantly since long before I knew anything about type.

I'm not sure that many people *pay* for Futura anymore. I used it at first because it came with Adobe's ATM (I think—I'm almost certain that however I got it originally was legit). It's so ubiquitous that it's really easy to take for granted. But there is more than one version of Futura, and not all Futuras are created alike.

Futura was created by [Paul Renner](#) at the dawn of modernism in typography, and the original version was very different from the version we see today. It had a number of alternates for many of the lowercase characters, some of which were radical, geometrically strange departures from traditional letterforms. The lowercase a and g, which can be found in Robert Bringhurst's [Elements of Typographic Style](#), make this most plain. From what little I've been able to glean on the subject from the Web, Bauer quietly dropped the alternate forms when they first issued the typeface, fearing their strangeness would harm sales.

There have been many versions of Futura over the years, both as licensed implementations and as knockoffs. The one I think most designers are familiar with is the original Adobe version, which has been ubiquitous for years now. However, for those who are interested in getting the best versions of the faces, there are alternatives.

For those who want the boldly modernist version of Futura as Paul Renner originally envisioned it, [The Foundry](#) has made available a regular and bold version of the face in two of its [Architype volumes](#), under the names "Architype Renner" and "Architype Renner Bold". The Foundry is allergic to forthrightly disclosing the prices of their typefaces, it seems, so you'll have to contact them directly if you want to license their fonts.

For those who want the most elegant version of the modern Futura, [Neufville Digital](#) in Spain has [the complete range of Futuras](#), complete with small capitals and the old-style figures that were dropped from the original metal issue of the type. Elegance doesn't come cheap, though, and purchasing the complete family will probably set you back around a grand. The Adobe versions, by contrast, will cost you around \$500, but they won't look as nice in print, and you won't be able to get the small caps, old-style figures, or Futura Shadow, Futura Script, Futura Black, or Futura Display.

About those last two... [Futura Black](#) and [Futura Display](#) are oddball fonts. Neither of them share much of the feel of the rest of the family, with the “Black” being more of a heavy stencil / Art Deco font, and the “Display” feeling like what the Germans called a «Schaftstiefelgrotesk» (“[jackboot blackletter](#)”) like [Tannenberg](#), [Gotharda](#) or [Honda](#) more than anything else.

Also of note is Adrian Frutiger’s rework of Futura in the form of [Avenir](#). It splits the difference between Futura and Frutiger’s own conception of geometric sans serif. I personally don’t think it’s as pretty as Futura. A few years ago, Linotype sort of flipped out and issued the bloated [Avenir Next](#), a 97-weight monstrosity that attempts to match the systematic variety of Univers and Helvetica with the humanist / geometric feel of Futura. I sort of get the impression that Linotype wants to corner the market on sans serif type. Anyway, Avenir Next will set you back another grand, and you can only buy it as a bundled collection. It does include pretty much every typographical feature known to humanity, though.

This entry was posted on Monday, February 7th, 2005 at 3:29 am and is filed under [Typeface design](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

6 Responses to “The best Futura money can buy.”

1. [Dan Reynolds](#) Says:
[April 27th, 2005 at 11:26 am](#)

Forrest, you should look at Avenir Next as a “completion” of Avenir, not a “97-weight monstrosity.”

In 1988, when the original Avenir was released, digital type founding was still in its toddler years. Avenir’s weight distribution wasn’t very logical (it would take Luc(as) de Groot’s Frutiger edits, theorizing for FF Info, and Thesis to create a genuine, digital family logic). Avenir Next has that logic (come to think of it, so did Futura in metal). Avenir Next also has condensed. I believe that Fred Smeijers wrote in his *Type Now Manifesto* that sans serif families sans condensed weights are no good.

Lastly, it has OsF and small caps, which, as you mention, really are essential for a “Futura” to look good in text.

2. [forrest](#) Says:
[April 27th, 2005 at 2:41 pm](#)

I’m slowly coming around to Avenir, but it still seems somewhat... gratuitous when Futura and Frutiger both exist.

Maybe after a few more years of doing this I’ll change my mind, but I find all of these modern type families with Extra Light / Light / Regular / Text / Semi-Bold / Bold / Extra Bold / Black / Extra Black to be gilding the lily. I greatly admire de Groot’s work on Thesis; I just plonked down a pretty sizable chunk of change for TheSans, and my next post for this blog will be detailing the process that led to me licensing it instead of, say, Syntax, or just using Myriad Pro, which I already had. But even so, I doubt I’ll end up using all of the weights in the family, and even if I use them, I doubt I’ll *need* them.

I didn’t mean to imply that I think Avenir Next is ugly or inelegant; while not everything Frutiger designed is gold, Avenir Next is a functional and useful geometric sans. It just seems a little...

excessive, like a lot of Linotype's digital projects over the last 15 years. It also seems a little presumptuous for him to have "revised" Futura, a face that has managed to stay timeless despite decades of overuse.

Fred Smeijers says lots of things in *Type Now*, some of which are more relevant than others. Robert Bringhurst says that the important elements are roman, italic, and small capitals, and almost seems to regard bold with distaste. There are lots of ways to look at how to design a type system.

I think it comes down to whether you're looking at type as a graphic designer or a book typographer; designers want as broad a palette as possible, book typographers tend to focus on using a small set of well-chosen tools. Book typography is what interests me the most right now. Still, there's no chance that when I do get rich and finally buy ND Futura that I won't buy the condensed at the same time. Futura without the condensed weights *is* incomplete.

3. [forrest](#) Says:

[April 27th, 2005 at 2:52 pm](#)

Another note... I find these font systems a lot less intimidating when they're wrapped up in OpenType, so all of the expert / alternatives / OsF / internationalization / small caps options are wrapped up in a single file. If Avenir Next were sold as a well-encoded OpenType family, I doubt it would seem so massive. Same goes for ND's Futura.

4. [Dan Reynolds](#) Says:

[April 27th, 2005 at 4:19 pm](#)

Avenir Next is sold as a well-encoded OpenType family. The PS/TT weights are actually a newer addition to the Linotype webshop than the OpenType weights!

It just seems a little... excessive, like a lot of Linotype's digital projects over the last 15 years I think it comes down to whether you're looking at type as a graphic designer or a book typographer; designers want as broad a palette as possible, book typographers tend to focus on using a small set of well-chosen tools.

Well, one man's excessive is another man's well worn toolbox, with all of the tools needed to complete a job. A designer who only needs four weights of a family should just license those four weights! But when someone else is working on a different project that requires another four weight set, it is good that there are font families out there with 24 weights! Something for everyone. Good design is about solving problems, even solving problems that aren't readily apparent, but which could turn up down the line in regards to different users and usages.

5. [Enrico Limcaco](#) Says:

[May 31st, 2005 at 12:35 pm](#)

Who would you consider to be the best vendors for the "true" Futura font family? I am looking for the core family (reg/bol/obl/bol-obl) with small caps (multiple weights) and Multi-language character sets...would you recommend the URW++ set as a less costly alternative to ND Futura?

6. *Paul Schliesser* Says:

[December 10th, 2005 at 11:20 pm](#)

Check out Berthold's Futura family – it includes not only the condensed versions, but also small caps and oldstyle figures for every single weight – note that some vendors only include these for some weights in the family. It's a nicely-done package. The whole collection is \$600, but I consider this one of the best type purchases I ever made. It's also available as four separate packages, if you don't want the whole thing.

http://berthold.de/bq_library/090204000.html

I also have the Foundry's ArchiType Renner, and I wish Berthold had included the marvelous f-ligatures that this contains.

I find a lot of use for all the “extra” weights, especially for things like large tradeshow graphics. The large selection of different weights let you match the stroke thicknesses of type at different sizes, such as if you're making fractions or superscripts. Often, I find the “%” or “\$” used with oldstyle figures looks obnoxious; this is another place where you can scale down the character and use a bolder weight to avoid that “fake small caps” look you'd otherwise get.

Also handy, especially with very large graphics, you can use slightly different weights to offset the optical effects that you get with large differences in size, in much the same way that old metal typefaces were proportionately bolder at smaller sizes and lighter at larger sizes.

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