



Justified vs Rag Right

by Ilene Strizver

ONE OF THE MANY DECISIONS TO BE MADE WHEN DESIGNING WITH TYPE is its alignment. The two most common alignments in Western typography are justified and rag right (also called flush left). Each has different strengths and applications, as well as challenges in making the text look readable and maintaining the intended color and texture of the typeface.

Justified Type

Justified type has a very geometric appearance, created by both the right and left margins being aligned. This is achieved by increasing and/or reducing the spaces between words, characters, and, in some unfortunate instances, the width of the characters themselves.

Justified type, when done well, can look neat and crisp, and support a design with its more formal, symmetric appearance. It allows for more copy in an allotted space, as characters fill the full line length. But when justification is applied to a narrow column, or to one with too few characters per line to allow the text to flow without undue stretching and/or squeezing, it can compromise the color and texture of the type. This can result in spotty type with rivers of white space (gaps between words that create vertical patterns) and too many hyphens, both of which can reduce readability as well as distract from other design elements.

If the text is for the web – or any medium that does not allow for complete control over size, line breaks, and hyphenation – it is best to avoid justification entirely.

Rag Right

Rag right text is easier to set, more natural to read, and requires less adjustment to finesse. Rag right settings are more informal, such that the reader

usually doesn't even notice the alignment. It generally results in better type texture and color, since the original spacing is not manipulated.

EXCERPT FROM THE CRYSTAL GOBLET, BY BEATRICE WARDE

Printing demands a humility of mind, for the lack of which many of the fine arts are even now floundering in self-conscious and maudlin experiments. There is nothing simple or dull in achieving the transparent page. Vulgar ostentation is twice as easy as discipline. When you realise that ugly typography never effaces itself; you will be able to capture beauty as the wise men capture happiness by aiming at something else. The 'stunt typographer' learns the fickleness of rich men who hate to read. Not for them are long breaths held over serif and kern, they will not appreciate your splitting of hair-spaces. Nobody (save the other craftsmen) will appreciate half your skill. But you may spend endless years of happy experiment in devising that crystalline goblet which is worthy to hold the vintage of the human mind.

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Justified text, when well executed (upper), creates a sense of symmetry, formality, and emphasis. The same text set rag right (lower) looks fine, but doesn't convey the same sense of importance.

Justified vs Rag Right (cont.)

Rag right settings produce fewer hyphenated words than justified settings. This is the better choice when avoiding hyphenation altogether is desired. Rag right is also the best alignment for narrow columns of text which can look especially awkward

when their spacing is manipulated. This is not to imply that rag right copy doesn't need any adjusting at all to look its best. A good rag goes in and out in small increments. Check for and manually correct any deep indents and unplanned organic shapes – either

of which can reduce readability and deflect the reader's attention.

When used appropriately, both alignments can look great and contribute to creating a strong, effective design. ■

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Distracting gaps and rivers of white space can occur when narrow columns of type are justified (left). The same text, when set rag right (right), flows more naturally, with better color and texture.

You have two goblets before you. One is of solid gold, wrought in the most exquisite patterns. The other is of crystal-clear glass, thin as a bubble, and as transparent. Pour and drink; and according to your choice of goblet, I shall know whether or not you are a connoisseur of wine. For if you have no feelings about wine one way or the other, you will want the sensation of drinking the stuff out of a vessel that may have cost thousands of pounds; but if you are a member of that vanishing tribe, the amateurs of fine vintages, you will choose the crystal, because everything about it is calculated to reveal rather than hide the beautiful thing which it was meant to contain.

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Even text set rag right warrants careful attention to avoid deep indents and distracting shapes (left). Review and correct as necessary to achieve a more balanced, natural looking rag (right).