

Book review: *Stop Stealing Sheep & Find out how type works*, by Erik Spiekermann

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Erik Spiekermann, *Stop Stealing Sheep & Find out how type works*, 4th edition. The Other Collection, 2022, 231 pp., softcover, ISBN 978-3-949164-03-3. Available from https://fonts.google.com/knowledge/stop_stealing_sheep.pdf at no cost.



From the start, T_EX was designed to set type well. *Stop Stealing Sheep* is a book that explains why that matters. First published in 1993, the book is hardly new. What is new is that the author, Erik Spiekermann, with the help of Google Fonts, has made the book available under a Creative Commons licence, CC BY-ND 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0).

Spiekermann has written a delightful, readable guide to the world of type. He shows us what type is, how it works, how it makes us feel and how we might choose it for different situations. He explains different varieties of type and how they interact. He shows us how type works at different sizes with tracking, kerning, spacing between words and lines, grids, and the layout of the page. And he builds all of this into a book that more than anything else illuminates his concepts. The left page of each pair

is a full-page image that illustrates some concept on the right. And these text pages are filled, but not cluttered, with sidebars, illustrations and marginal notes, all exemplifying how type can be used well. The chapters are short and can be read independently, which makes the book one you can browse or dip into whenever you like.

The book's terse, lively style means that it is not a detailed guide on how to choose typefaces (or fonts) or how to decide on such things as column width, line spacing and page layout. For these, I would suggest the book by Williams [1] for a more gentle introduction, or Bringhurst [2] for a comprehensive treatise. But this doesn't mean you won't find much helpful material in the present book.

First, it is worth reading because it helps you understand the value of many of the design choices of T_EX. Compared to most word processors, T_EX and its variants make it difficult to change typeface whenever you like. Although you can do more than this, the easy option is to choose a package giving you a set of families of typefaces to be used together: one roman, one sans serif and one monospaced. And you don't easily change type sizes arbitrarily. You can use boldface or italics, but underlining is not so easy. On the other hand T_EX has hyphenation switched on by default, and goes to great lengths to get it correct, while word processors usually have it switched off and hyphenate more crudely. T_EX also uses different spacing between words depending on whether they end sentences or not (by default), produces ligatures by default and allows fine control over spacing and kerning. Spiekermann explains why these and other design choices matter and illustrates how they work to produce more readable, legible and beautiful type.

Second, if you don't want or need detailed type information, *Stop Stealing Sheep* gives you some sensible ideas about the choices you still might make. When should you use `\raggedright` or `flushleft`? Is it a good idea or not to put lines in a table? When should you indent paragraphs or put space between them? When is it better to use two columns rather than one? And why is ALL CAPS not usually a good idea?

While it introduces you to sensible design choices, *Stop Stealing Sheep* is not a book about T_EX or any of its variants. Indeed, it mentions neither these nor any composition software, but notes in passing a few other programs such as Adobe Illustrator. So, if you wish to apply the ideas, you will need to look to other sources such as [3] or the various online guides. To use colors (Chapter 3) you might investigate the `color` or `xcolor` packages. The `fontspec` package is

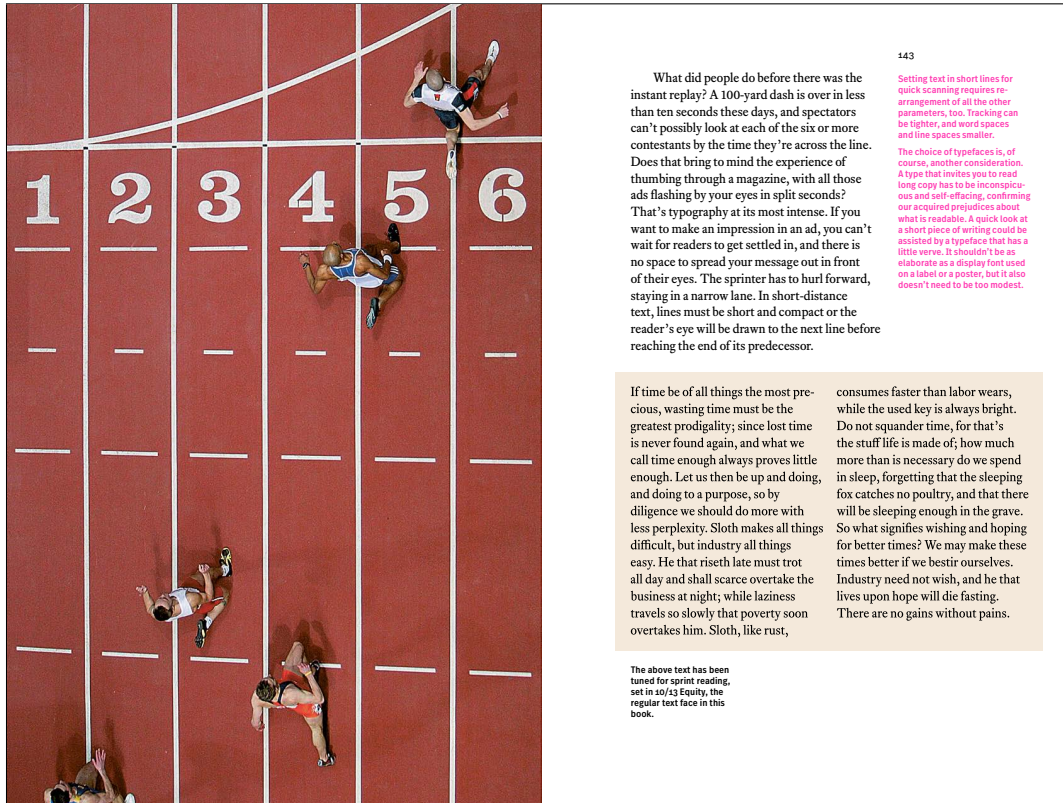


Figure 1: A page spread (pp. 142–143) from *Stop Stealing Sheep*.

helpful for font selection with OpenType (Chapter 6), while the `geometry` package will help design the page layout (Chapter 8) and `textpos` is a possibility if you want a detailed grid layout (also Chapter 8).

You may also investigate the `unicode-math` package if you want to use OpenType with mathematics. But, to be clear, *Stop Stealing Sheep* is not a book about typesetting mathematics. Indeed, it mentions nothing about mathematics beyond illustrating the various possibilities for setting figures—tabular and proportional, lining and oldstyle. But even here it should be useful if you produce tables of numbers or more readable equations.

In summary, then, while this is not a book about $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$, it is one that I would recommend to anyone who uses $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$.

First, it is an excellent introduction to what type is, how it works and how it can be used. The fourth edition covers many of the features of OpenType, which is becoming the standard for any application that uses type. Whether you want to use OpenType or just use type well, *Stop Stealing Sheep* has much to offer, without excessive technical detail.

Second, $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ remains ahead of any current word processor in its ability to make the features of type

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What did people do before there was the instant replay? A 100-yard dash is over in less than ten seconds these days, and spectators can't possibly look at each of the six or more contestants by the time they're across the line. Does that bring to mind the experience of thumbing through a magazine, with all those ads flashing by your eyes in split seconds? That's typography at its most intense. If you want to make an impression in an ad, you can't wait for readers to get settled in, and there is no space to spread your message out in front of their eyes. The sprinter has to hurl forward, staying in a narrow lane. In short-distance text, lines must be short and compact or the reader's eye will be drawn to the next line before reaching the end of its predecessor.

If time be of all things the most precious, wasting time must be the greatest prodigality; since lost time is never found again, and what we call time enough always proves little enough. Let us then be up and doing, and doing to a purpose, so by diligence we should do more with less perplexity. Sloth makes all things difficult, but industry all things easy. He that riseth late must trot all day and shall scarce overtake the business at night; while laziness travels so slowly that poverty soon overtakes him. Sloth, like rust,

consumes faster than labor wears, while the used key is always bright. Do not squander time, for that's the stuff life is made of; how much more than is necessary do we spend in sleep, forgetting that the sleeping fox catches no poultry, and that there will be sleeping enough in the grave. So what signifies wishing and hoping for better times? We may make these times better if we bestir ourselves. Industry need not wish, and he that lives upon hope will die fasting. There are no gains without pains.

The above text has been tuned for sprint reading, set in 10/13 Equity, the regular text face in this book.

Setting text in short lines for quick scanning requires re-arrangement of all the other parameters, too. Tracking can be tighter, and word spaces and line spaces smaller. The choice of typefaces is, of course, another consideration. A type that invites you to read long copy has to be inconspicuous and self-effacing, confirming our acquired prejudices about what is readable. A quick look at a short piece of writing could be assisted by a typeface that has a little verve. It shouldn't be as elaborate as a display font used on a label or a poster, but it also doesn't need to be too modest.

available. *Stop Stealing Sheep* will give you a good idea of what these features are. While most are already available in $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ or its derivatives (though many are frustratingly absent in word processors), it is likely that they will become even more widely available in future. So, it makes sense to learn what these features are and why you might want to use them.

Finally, while the printed book is certainly good value for money, the online version is, undeniably, unbeatable value for money.

References

- [1] Robin Williams, *The Non-Designer's Type Book*, 2nd edition, Peachpit Press, 2006.
- [2] Robert Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style*, Version 4.3, Hartley & Marks, 2013.
- [3] Frank Mittelbach with Ulrike Fischer, *The L^AT_EX Companion*, 3rd edition, Part 1, Addison Wesley, 2023.

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