

# Having Character

## The Anatomy of a Character

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YOU'VE KNOWN THE NAMES OF LETTERS AND numbers since you were a little kid. But did you realize that every part of those characters have names, too? Knowing this terminology will help you better understand typefaces and communicate about design.

**Q:** Why should I care what the names are for parts of a character? Does it really matter?

**A:** Knowing the terminology for the anatomy of a character might seem like a painful exercise in memorization, but it's actually useful knowledge for any design professional. Not only does it make it easier to communicate about typefaces and their characteristics, but it also serves to educate your eye to recognize the underlying structure of typeface designs, as well as the differences between them.

I've prioritized the following terms into three groups based on what, in my experience, are the most useful to know, and most frequently used, in everyday design work.

### ESSENTIAL

**Ascender:** The part of a lowercase character (b, d, f, h, k, l, t) that extends above the height of the lowercase x.

**Baseline:** The invisible line on which the flat part of characters sit.

**Bowl:** A curved stroke that creates an enclosed space within a character (which is then called a counter).

**Cap height:** The height of capital letters from the baseline to the top of caps, most accurately measured on a character with a flat top and bottom (E, H, I, etc.).

**Counter:** The partially or fully enclosed space within a character.

**Descender:** The part of a character (g, j, p, q, y, and sometimes J) that descends below the baseline.

**Serif:** The projections extending off the main strokes of the characters of serif typefaces.

**x-height:** The height of lowercase letters usually based on the lowercase x, not including ascenders and descenders.

### USEFUL

**Arm:** An upper horizontal or diagonal stroke that is attached on one end and free on the other.

**Axis:** The angle of the stress of the round part of a character.

**Bar:** The horizontal stroke in characters such as A, H, R, e, or f.





**Leg:** A lower horizontal or diagonal stroke that is attached on one end and free on the other.

**Loop:** The lower portion of the lowercase g.

**Shoulder:** The curved stroke of the h, m, or n.

**Spine:** The main curved stroke of the S.

**Stem:** A straight vertical stroke or main straight diagonal stroke in a letter that has no verticals.

**Stress:** The direction of thickening in a curved stroke.

**Stroke:** A straight or curved line.

**Swash:** A decorative flourish replacing a terminal or serif.

**Terminal (or Finial):** The end of a stroke not terminated with a serif.

**IMPRESSIVE**

**Ear:** The small stroke that projects from the top of the lowercase g.

**Link:** The stroke that connects the top and bottom part (bowl and link) of a two-storey lowercase g.

**Spur:** A small projection off a main stroke, found on many capital Gs.

**Tail:** The descender of a Q or short diagonal stroke of an R.