

Four things a font knows about its own letters

A font file carries more than one glyph per character. It says which letters are drawn joined, which figures hang below the line, which letters have a small capital of their own, and how far apart each pair of glyphs should stand.

None of it is used unless it is asked for, so a document written before these settings existed comes out byte for byte as it did. Each sample below is set twice, and only the setting differs.

Ligatures

Letters that meet are drawn as one glyph the font designer cut for them.

off office filing affidavit
on office filing affidavit

Small capitals

Lowercase letters drawn as capitals no taller than an x.

off reprinted quarterly
on REPRINTED QUARTERLY

Old-style figures

Figures that rise and fall around the x-height instead of standing at cap height.

off 1 234 567 890
on I 234 567 890

Kerning

Each pair of glyphs moved as far apart as the font asks.

off Wavy TAXI Today
on Wavy TAXI Today

The first sample takes 23 glyphs as it stands and 18 with the ligatures on: the pairs the font joins are one glyph each.

The last sample is drawn 2.2 points narrower with kerning on, and it is measured that way too, so the line is as wide as it looks.