

COURIER FONTS

Some Abbreviated Remarks About the Courier Font

WHAT IS COURIER?

The font that we commonly associate with the typewriter is Courier, a monospaced slab-serif font that presents a clean appearance on the page.

The designer of Courier was Howard Kettler. IBM introduced the font in 1955. The name that Kettler originally intended for it was «Messenger», but — for whatever reason — he called it «Courier» instead. It became one of the most commonly used fonts on typewriters. It is similar in appearance to other typewriter fonts in use before and after 1955, but its serif features are less frilly than those of some similar fonts that typewriters used.

For many years now, especially since the introduction of the personal computer, people have identified «Courier» with any typewriter font. However, anyone old enough to have used typewriters from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s knows that different brands of typewriters often had their own recognizable typewriter fonts. Even so all typewriter fonts were fairly similar. They were monospaced serif fonts that were classified as either pica or elite. «Monospaced» meant that each character, thin or fat, resided in a small block of space that was the same size for each character, whether it was thin or fat.

PITCH

The distinguishing feature of a typewriter font was not its typeface, but its pitch, which is the number of characters that it makes per inch. The term «pitch» only applies to monospaced fonts, not to proportionally spaced fonts like the Charter font of this essay, in which a small <i> takes up much less space than a capital <W>.

Two pitches were generally available on typewriters: Pica, which measured out to 10 characters per inch; and elite, which measured out to 12 characters per inch. Overall, pica was preferred, though elite was in common use, especially in business settings where excessive length of correspondence and other documents could be a major consideration for paper use, mailing costs, and storage space.

The following words, in the Courier New font, approximate the difference between pica and elite:

Pica:	Individual
Elite:	Individually

The word <individual> has ten letters. In pica it is one inch long on the line, because pica gives 10 characters per inch (10 cpi). Although the word <individually> has 12 letters, it is still only one inch long on the line, because the smaller elite squeezes in 12 characters per inch.

Submission specifications for manuscripts, in the typewriter era, usually contained a request to type neatly on 20-pound-weight white paper, 8.5 x 11-inches, but generally made no reference to the font except sometimes to specify pica or elite. In some instances, especially for literary endeavors, the submission requirements would say that pica was preferred (it was larger and easier to read).

COURIER AND SCREENPLAYS

Because screenplay format developed in the typewriter era and has become loosely codified on the basis of that heritage, the writer has to do things similar to how they were done on a typewriter. If computers had preceded the development of screenplay format, Courier would not be the font in use for screenplays today. However, Courier is now the standard, and that is not likely to change.

COURIER BY ANY NAME IS COURIER

People frequently ask whether the screenplay has to be in Courier or whether Courier New is all right. The answer is simple: If it says Courier anywhere in the name, it is still Courier. Moreover, some fonts do not say Courier, but they are still acceptable in screenplays if they have a Courier look, because it is not being Courier that is really the essential feature, but being part of the “typewriter font” species. For example, several fonts sold for screenwriting are imitations of typewriter fonts, and their names are taken from specific typewriters (see the VT fonts below).

The real criterion is not the name of the font, but its look. Is it a bearded, monospaced font that you can print at 12 points? Does it have the same general look as Courier fonts? Does it look crisp and neat? If the answer is yes to these questions, then you can use it.

Of course, you have to keep in mind that some of the imitation-typewriter fonts have too much of a «retro» look, and might not be appropriate for a manuscript. You have to make the final decision about that on an aesthetic basis.

ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF COURIER FONTS

Courier is a very readable typeface. It is uncluttered without having the sparse appearance of a sans serif font like Arial or Verdana. Because it is a monospaced font, its use in a standard screenplay format allows a fairly accurate estimate of the time that one page will equal out to on screen. Also, the imposition of a common font like Courier eliminates the chaos that would ensue if people had freedom of choice in a font.

The only disadvantage of a Courier font, which is a small one, is that some specialized characters may not be available. This depends on the particular Courier font.

For example, a very useful character in screenwriting is the em-dash, which is used in printing to show a sudden interruption of thought or dialogue, as in: «I gave the matter some thought—for a week, at least—and decided to accept the job.» Typewriter policy was to show an em-dash with two hyphens in succession. That is where the two hyphens in a screenplay Scene Heading come from, as in:

I NT. BEDROOM -- NI GHT

Most Courier fonts have an em-dash, which the writer can insert by typing the em-dash ANSI code O151 like this: Left ALT key plus O151 on the Numeric Keypad.

I NT. BEDROOM – NI GHT

So should you use the em-dash in a screenplay? Why not? If it is available in the font, then use it.

S Comment

The em-dash is the subject of some controversy. People debate whether it should have any space before and after it. Consider these examples, in which the spacebar was used before and after the dash: “Look out, Papa — it’s falling!” or “Look out, Papa—it’s falling!”

With a desktop publishing program, you can insert a thin space before and after the dash. With a regular word processor, like Microsoft Word, the only easy option is to use the spacebar. Be aware that some publishers do not want the spaces. You just have to know the policy of the company you are working with.

In screenplays you should use the spaces. They make the script look neater. Moreover, the presence of spaces around the dash lets the screenwriting program break dialogue lines at the dash instead of wrapping <word+dash+word> to the next line.

Dashes look better at the end of a line than at the start. If you get a line break that puts a dash at the start of a line, you can avoid this by using a no-break space before the dash (in Word: Ctrl+Shift+Space).

Another special character is the en-dash, which is supposed to be longer than a hyphen but shorter than an em-dash. In Courier fonts the en-dash and the em-dash are often the same in appearance: slightly longer than a hyphen. This does not create a problem in screenwriting, because you can get along with the hyphen in place of the en-dash. In fact, most people have no idea what the en-dash is and never use it. The usual function of the en-dash (ANSI character O150) is to separate numbers in a range as in: “See pages 50–65.” Most people simply use a hyphen in that circumstance, as in: “See pages 50-65.” The en-dash never has a space before or after it, except in sophisticated typesetting when a thin

space is aesthetically helpful.

PROBLEMS THAT ARISE WITH PAGE COUNT

If you switch from one Courier to another, you may inadvertently change the total page count of the manuscript. The difference can be significant. The reason for this is that every font has a default line spacing in points. Courier Final Draft is set to a line spacing that is very close to 12 points; therefore you get six lines per inch. (Remember that 12 points equals 1/6 of an inch; therefore six lines would be 1 inch.) By contrast, Courier New seems to be set at around 13.5 points per line; you get about 5.3 lines per inch, as well as I have been able to measure it. Consequently, if you have a 100-page manuscript done in Courier Final Draft, and you then substitute Courier New, the difference is:

$$6/5.3 = 1.13$$

which means that your 100-page manuscript will probably increase by at least 13 pages (and possibly more, because as you add pages you encounter more and more of those situations that make a premature page break—a situation that causes the page count to snowball). «*What happened?*» is the usual cry of desperation at this point from the bewildered writer who is not familiar with these issues of fonts and line spacing.

Courier New puts a little too much space between lines. Fortunately, the more sophisticated word processors and screenwriting programs allow an adjustment of the line spacing. If you can set it in fractions of points, I suggest 12.5 points. This very closely approximates six lines per inch without scrunching the lines up so much on screen that the tails of letters like *y* and *g* are lost. (The characters still print all right, but some of the descenders may get clipped on screen.)

If you insist on the “classical typewriter standard” of precisely six lines per inch, you will need to set your line spacing at 12.0 or maybe 12.1 points. (You may have to experiment a little.) FinalDraft does not let you set line spacing by points. You have to use settings like Tight or Very Tight. Use the one that works best. However, if you use the Courier font that comes with Final Draft, the line spacing will be fine without adjustment. In fact, with Final Draft you should never tighten the line spacing; it is already tight enough. If anything, you may need to loosen it a bit for stageplays, which allow for much greater flexibility in formatting than screenplays do.

HOW TO COUNT LINES PER INCH

This is not as easy as you might think! You do not just count off six lines. You have to measure the lines properly. Consider the seven (7) lines below, which have a line spacing of exactly 12.1 points, a setting which corresponds closely to classical typewriter spacing with Pica type. Ideally, these lines would have spacing that corresponds to six lines per inch. I will show you how to measure lines properly, but be aware that the lines

below may not measure out to exactly six per inch in a printed PDF.

Look at my example line 1
 Look at my example line 2
 Look at my example line 3
 Look at my example line 4
 Look at my example line 5
 Look at my example line 6
 Look at my example line 7
 Look at my example line 8
 Look at my example line 9
 Look at my example line 10

To measure for six lines per inch, you have to measure from the *baseline* of line 1 to the *baseline* of line 7. Measure from the bottom of the *m* in *my* in line 1 to the bottom of the *m* in line 7. If the distance between those baselines is 1 inch, then you have six lines per inch. Always use a baseline for measurements, not the bottom of an extender like the tail on *y* in *my*.

If you make your measurement between lines 1 and 7, and the distance is more than 1 inch, then you are getting fewer than six lines per inch. However, it may be close enough that you do not have to worry. If you make your measurement and the 1-inch mark falls somewhere in line 7, that is probably good enough, from a practical standpoint.

(Please note that the examples of Courier, below, are intended to show what the fonts look like; they have not been set to a line spacing that will correspond to six lines per inch.)

EXAMPLES OF COURIER FONTS

In an earlier version of this article, I included a whole slew of Courier fonts for the reader to see. However, for a couple of reasons, I have cut out nearly all of the examples. I decided that they really did not matter, and the fact is that I no longer have some of the fonts to use in updating the article. I will limit the demonstration to just a few fonts.

Fonts are rated, completely subjectively, on a standard of four-stars as the best.

COURIER10 BT

FEATURES: It is dark without being a true bold (you can, in fact, make it bold). It is crisp on the page, and it displays well. The curly quotes are diagonal in the same direction but have different shapes (fat at bottom on the opening quotes, fat at top on the closing quotes). The en-dash (0150) and em-dash (0151) are the same length; however, they are longer than the hyphen. This is a free font. It is available for download on my website.

RATING: * * * *. In my opinion, this font (along with its derivatives; see later) is the best of the Courier fonts.

MAJOR

Do not worry, Lieutenant, soon there
will be plenty of cigarettes for you and
me . . . American cigarettes.

`1234567890- - - =~!@#\$\$%^&*()_+' ' " " <>/

COURIER MM SCREENWRITER

FEATURES: Excellent Courier supplied with Movie Magic Screenwriter 6. The font appears to be based on Courier10 BT. Courier MM may have a few minor display issues, in that some of the characters seem farther apart on screen than they should be, but the printout is fine. The weight of the characters is not significantly different from Courier10 BT. The curly quotes, the hyphen, and the dashes are the same as in Courier10 BT.

RATING: * * *. If you have this font, which comes with MM Screenwriter, you can definitely use it with satisfaction.

MAJOR

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`1234567890- - - =~!@#\$\$%^&*()_+' ' " " <>/

COURIER SCREENPLAY

FEATURES: Excellent Courier available for free on the Fade In website, as well as elsewhere. This font, which appears to be based on Courier10 BT, is the Courier that I use preferentially for many purposes. For some unknown reason, the regular typeface displays as italic in LibreOffice. If I am using LibreOffice and need a Courier, I use Courier10 BT. I have only encountered this issue in LibreOffice.

RATING: * * * *. I strongly recommend this font, despite the issue with LibreOffice.

MAJOR

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`1234567890- - - =~!@#\$\$%^&*()_+' ' " " <>/

COURIER PRIME

FEATURES: Courier Prime is another free font available on the Fade In website, as well as elsewhere. Like the other Courier fonts that I have already mentioned, it appears to be

based on Courier10 BT. Its primary claim to fame is that its typefaces include a true italic face instead of the rightward-slanting regular typeface that traditionally serves as a pseudo-italic face. It also has a lot of Unicode characters that are not available in the other Courier fonts that I have presented. Perhaps because Courier Prime has a true italic face available, and has an extensive number of Unicode characters, it has become popular. However, the italic face includes some features that I do not like, such as the weak-looking descender on the <y> (see below). More important for me, though, is that the font makes the vertical cursor move downward just a tad on the line in the fabulous writing program called Scrivener. It is not a big problem, but it drives me crazy. The problem does not occur in Word.

RATING: * * * *. Despite the problems that I mentioned, I still recommend this font, if only because of the Unicode characters.

MAJOR

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`1234567890- - - =~!@#\$\$%^&*()_+' ' " " <>/

COURIER NEW

FEATURES: This is the standard Courier that comes with the Windows operating system. The main problem with this font is that it is just too anemic in appearance. It prints out too thin. I have read that the font was digitized from the font of the IBM Selectric Typewriter. I remember that font, and it was, in fact, rather thin. Nonetheless, Courier New is still very readable and is exceptionally clear on screen. The hyphen and the en-dash are the same length; the em-dash is longer. The opening and closing curly quotes point in different directions — a feature that I do not especially like. PDF makers convert Courier New to Courier Type 1, which looks the same but may be minimally darker; consequently, the representation in this PDF file may look better than the real font does. Also, the grave accent (`) is ridiculously small. See the tiny speck just before the number 1 in the example below.

RATING: * *. A good font, just too anemic. It is still serviceable if you have nothing else.

MAJOR

Do not worry, Lieutenant, soon there
will be plenty of cigarettes for you
and me . . . American cigarettes.

`1234567890- - - =~!@#\$\$%^&*()_+' ' " " <>/

COURIER FINAL DRAFT

FEATURES: A good Courier supplied with the FinalDraft screenwriting program. It is still

a little thinner than I like, but it is definitely better than Courier New in that respect. It has curly quotes of the diagonal type in the same direction, which I prefer over the style of Courier New. The greatest disappointment of the FinalDraft font is that the hyphen, the en-dash, and the em-dash are all the same length, with the practical consequence that you only have a hyphen. Fortunately, it is a fairly long hyphen, which makes the lack of dashes more tolerable. In fact, you can get by with using a hyphen for the dash in Scene Headings in screenplays instead of having to use two hyphens (an ugly leftover from the typewriter era!) or having to create an em-dash with special keystrokes. The grave accent (`) is better than the one in Courier New, but it is still too thin.

RATING: * * *. It looks better than Courier New, though the weights of a few letters seem slightly heavier than others. A respectable font except for the hyphen/dash problem. Most people who have the FinalDraft screenwriting program use this font.

MAJOR

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DARK COURIER

FEATURES: This little-known free font, which can perhaps still be downloaded for free from Hewlett-Packard, is very good. It displays well and prints out well. Despite the name, it is not really all that dark; it is medium in weight. It is not as dark as Courier10 BT. The hyphen, en-dash, and em-dash are all different lengths. It has a little bit of a squared-off look, but not to such an extent that it the font is unattractive. For me the important drawbacks are that the comma is thinner and the period is smaller than I would prefer. Still, they are acceptable. The font used to be widely available on the Internet. You can perhaps do a Google search on the filename <lj611en.exe> and still find it. You can also download it from my website.

RATING: **.

MAJOR

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will be plenty of cigarettes for you and
me . . . American cigarettes.

`1234567890- - - =~!@#\$\$%^&*()_+' ' " " <>/

FINAL COMMENTS

I used to see a particular question appearing repeatedly on discussion boards devoted to screenwriting and other kinds of writing. The question was some version of this: «The

submission guidelines for my publisher or for a contest say that I am supposed to use Courier for my manuscript. The font on my computer is Courier New. Is it all right to use that font?»

The answer to that question is yes. Courier is Courier is Courier. If the word Courier is in the name, it is a Courier font. The real consideration is whether you want to be stuck with Courier New. You might want to venture out to something a little better, like one of the other Courier fonts that I have talked about.

The Courier font has been the target of a lot of snarky criticism in recent years, most of it just silly and baseless. Some people say that the font is ugly and is hard on the eyes. I see it completely differently in respect to both charges. I have always thought that it was very readable and also attractive for any kind of dramatic script. I would not use it for the printed version of a novel, but it works great for the manuscript of a novel. So select a version of Courier that you like and give it a try.