

# Sassoon Primary

typeface for children's reading and writing

ABC

DEFGHIJKLMNOPQR

STUVWXYZabcdefgh

ijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

1234567890&?;:)([\$]

[fiŒÆØÅ\*†&§flıß%

“Moderns typefaces are fine for fluent adult readers, but what about the young children?!” Rosemary Sassoon is one of the most important and most recognized type designers in the world. She designed one of the most used, if not the most used typefaces for children world-wide. Sassoon decided to focus one of her most important works solely on the research of designing a typeface specially made for children, that could be used for writing and reading.

Types that were being used for children reading were not friendly and were not easily recognized. Moreover, she created the typeface based on the handwriting forms since she believed that it showed the relationship between each letter easier. There was a research project that was opened in children’s schools, which after two years of hard research gave birth to Sassoon Primary Type. In addition Sassoon has tried to recover the basics of handwritten forms which have been almost lost, in this era which seems that everything revolves around technology, which clearly shows in the style of new arising typefaces.

## **I. Origins.**

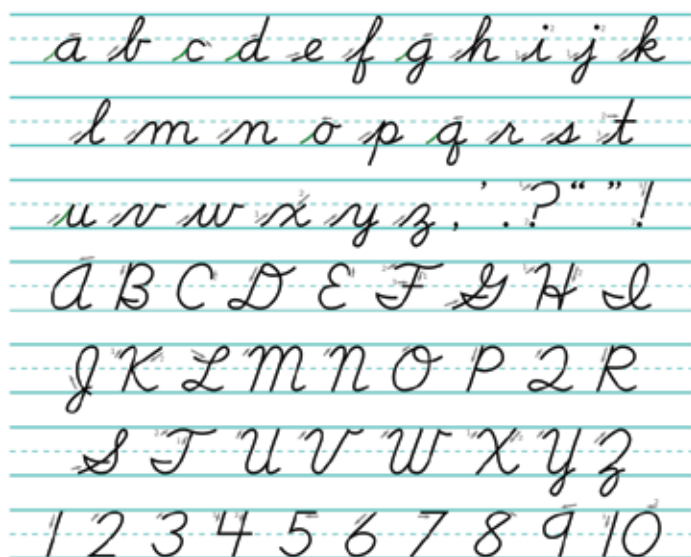
Handwriting is the art of writing with the hand. Since the invention of printing, handwriting started to lose its importance, it did not have the same role it had before, where everything was handwritten. By then, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries handwriting became very difficult to read. It was then that handwriting started to decline more and more because of various factors like for example the development of electronic communication.

Nowadays “handwriting tends to be a mixture of cursive\* and printing; some consider this as evidence of the decline of handwriting.”<sup>2</sup>

“Sassoon typefaces are ‘fonts’ and as such can only represent handwritten letterforms. They are not to be confused with handwriting models, which are seldom legible and understandable”<sup>3</sup>

Rosemary wanted to represent in her font the idea of movement that the handwriting has. The arches represent it, and the exit strokes encourage spontaneous joins and also build up the adequate space in between letters,

whether separate or joined.



Example of English cursive by Andrew Buck.

\*Cursive handwriting is designed for writing down notes and letters by hand. There are various types of cursive: Latin, Cyrillic, Hebrew, Roman, Chinese, Russian, Greek and English, each one has a different style; word connected, word unconnected, letter connected, letter unconnected and some are a mixture of unconnected and connected letters.

## 2. Why it all started

I asked Rosemary why Sassoon Primary Type was created, and she just answered me “When you see that something is necessary you just have to go for it.” She left me thinking profoundly about this. By the time, in 1986 there was nothing similar, a big problem had to be solved, it was necessary. Typefaces were fashionable, and suitable just for fluent readers. Designers wanted to pack as many lines as possible in one page, descenders and ascenders had been shortened because of this fact, problems were not going to be solved this way, typefaces didn’t follow their original function, letters started to lose their shapes and their actual function. “I was well aware of the injustice of imposition of various idiosyncratic handwriting models on young children, and the harm that could be done by not considering this from the writer’s point of view.”<sup>4</sup> It was amazing to notice how typography design and layouts could affect children’s reading, it was then when Rosemary said “This deserves investigation.”<sup>5</sup> the research project started to develop.

## 3. How it all started

The original Sassoon Primary Type was designed for children and by children to replace the type they read. It all started when Rosemary went to visit a remedial center for children with learning difficulties, and the teacher that was in charge asked her: “Can you tell me why my pupils with learning difficulties can read one page and not the other, although the vocabulary is at the same level?”<sup>6</sup> She just gave a fast glance to the papers and noted that the one causing problem was the first to be justified. The teacher didn’t understand and so she started to explain what is

justify text- a text that is straight on the right margin, the lines of text are forced by variable word spacing and the use of hyphens- and what is unjustified text -a text that has equal spacing between words, this produces line lengths that are irregular. “A book is primarily a thing to be read, and the merely neat appearance of a page of type on which all the lines are equal in length is a thing of not very great value.”<sup>7</sup> She thinks that unjustified text might make a page neat and pleasing but not from the children’s point of view. To children with problems in this case justification may cause confusion, a rectangle of text might be confusing and interpreted other way instead of guiding them in their reading.

Firstly the project was concerned on with spacing rather than with letterforms. Since no funding was found to develop, the project’s success was dependent on the cooperation of hardworking teachers that didn’t have much knowledge about typography. The way the project developed was not specified, it had to be done in working hours. After presenting the projects to different special needs teachers in various places in Great Britain, finally just one teacher “Dorothy Ibbotson” was able to produce a worldwide study.

The text that firstly caused some problem was reproduced in five different spacings: Justified solid spacings, Justified increasing word spacing, Unjustified increasing word spacing, Unjustified using double word spacing, Unjustified using double word spacing but for each new sentence a new line was created.

Then a choice of typefaces from sans serif to serif either slanted or upright had to be made, they chose: Times Roman, Times Italic, Helvetica and her typeface slanting sans serif typeface.

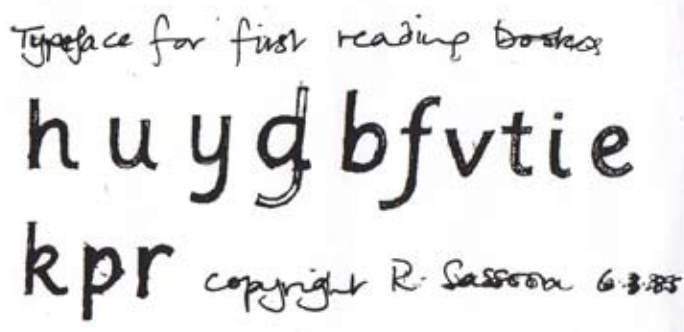
The method was developed, the teacher chose 100 children, half of them were pupils with special needs aged from eight to thirteen and the other half were eight year old children in mainstream education. The first half had to choose from 4 typefaces set solid, which one they preferred and then they were exposed to 4 different spacing of the font they had chosen and ask which one they preferred. The other half (eight year old) were not shown the typefaces set solid, but were exposed to 16 variables, and they were also asked which one they found the best and easiest to read.

After the development of the method, Dorothy said “Children who were very poor readers preferred wide spacing and plain print. More intelligent children and better readers enjoyed reading script and liked narrow spaces.”<sup>8</sup> In spacing manners she concluded that depending on the level of reading the children had different requirements of spacing, but the new sentence new line was the favorite one for children with the lowest level of reading capacity. In typeface, overall the favorite was slanted sans serif (36%) Times and Italic in second place (26%), Helvetica

third (20%) and Times Roman fourth place (18%). The children with learning difficulties showed the most marked preferences, 44% read best when using slanting sans serif, 28% Times Italic, 18% Helvetica and only 10% Times Roman.

All this research brought Rosemary to the solution she had to create “My job was to built extra legibility and friendliness into the forms. Balancing the overall preference for sans serif with the comments about liking the kick-up of Times Italic and a new kind of letter evolved that cannot be described in typographic terms as either seriffed or sans serif.”<sup>9</sup>

The typeface for children was created; sans serif and exit strokes that have two functions: ensured clear letter spacing and clump the letters of each word together along the baseline into a more cohesive shape. The length of descenders and ascenders was increased and the smooth arches were designed to accentuate the movement and particular care was taken to simplify the counters and improve legibility. All this details created a friendly atmosphere to the letterforms.



Sassoon Primary type 1985. Little has been altered since the first sketches.

#### 4. How it got into the real usage

There were no problems on getting its usage into the market, it got on it spontaneously since there was the necessity of a font for children “When the inevitable proposal turned up I could not have prevented it, even if I had wanted to. I am not particular in favor of commercial handwriting schemes and had no intention of producing one myself.”<sup>10</sup>

She doesn't like to advertise the font, it got little by little into the market. It was a cheap solution for publishers, editorial company's paid full price which was like £35 and school teachers paid half of it. RM company and other company's paid very little and got the usage of the font in every school that was interested on it.

Then an upright typeface both for reading and writing led to an other market departure. A joined version was challenged and could not be resisted, but then it brought considerable complications. “The joined version for teaching handwriting needed handwriting, not typographic ligatures. It needed to show how letters joined, not only give a cursive appearance.”<sup>11</sup> Rosemary has the ideology

that the hand needs a rest as it progresses along the line, and she recommends pen-lifts every few letters. So far she has limited the use of joined handwriting font to pair of joined letters, this can also be used for demonstrating various alternatives to encourage experimentation. A cursive looking typeface is perhaps now possible for use in advertising, but anyways it will be not practical for long texts.

#### 5. Font Usages

It is very interesting to see all the different usages that has been given to the font

##### a. Books and signs

Its first usage was 20 years ago in 1991 when Cambridge University Press used the font for a series of science books called “New Horizons”, meant for infants from five years old right up to sixteen year old students. Each book is very beautiful and has nice illustrations. The text of 12pt in black, not justified is positioned always on a white background. The text, along with the illustration is positioned in different manners, it depends on the way they want that the children read the images. Some times the illustration uses double page and the text is align in one page to the right and in the other to the left, to give the sense of continuity. Small squared books with a small amount of pages and a beautiful typeface makes it very easy and pleasing for children's reading.

New Horizons also used the typeface, because of its friendliness and informality for a part of the series of Science (5-16). This time the typeface was placed into balloons in a comic strip format to brake a little bit the rigid project.

“Pick the odd one out,” another book that used the font to help differencing the letter ‘b’ from the ‘d’. It used Sassoon Primary typeface when the difference was being stressed but still clug to good old Helvetica in other places on the same page.

An other big use of the font was for the sign-system of the kids area of the British Museum.

##### b. Teaching

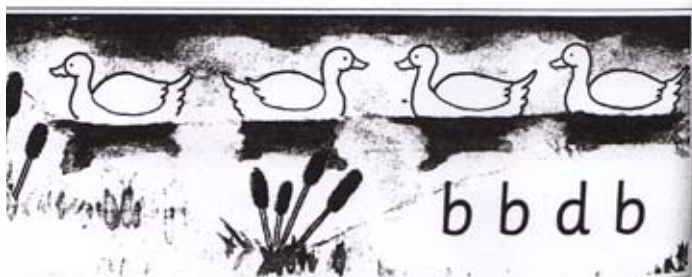
Copying under printed text was other usage, children spend a long time copying or writing under printed text. Using Sassoon Primary type plus leaving big spaces in between words allows children copying under printed text with much more facility.

In education they have also used the typeface, for example: teachers printed-out the letters in a big size for teaching better the alphabet. They also printed single letters of 250 point, just outlined or with arrows that indicate the direction of the strokes this is use for finger tracking exercises. Printing the letters in dots was other good exercise for learning how to write the letters. Other

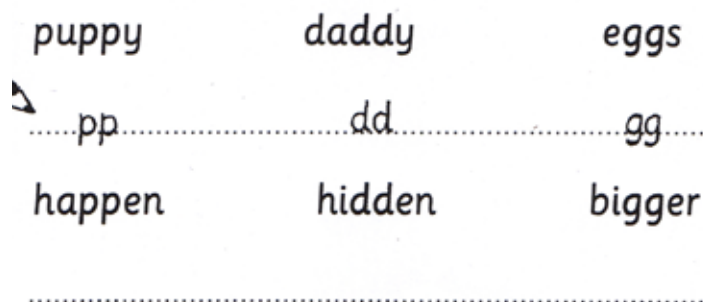
material used in school was friezes which they places in the classrooms as good pupil exercises, sometimes this were printed in color to give a more effective result.

Teachers concluded that after they started showing and teaching their children with Sassoon Primary, children were more involved in reading and writing exercises. Children started to read with greater easy and fluency "...There was a high degree of reading with expression."<sup>12</sup> Children started to say they liked the writing, the curly "f" or even words like "puffed", "softly", and much more other comments that were impressible to see in children at that age. In all the occasions children choose Sassoon Type as their favorite or with a much more easiness, also in bingo games and in readings in which the typeface was the one of smaller size.

They discover after lots of usages of the font and investigation that there are lots of themes that could lead to other very interesting projects of research. One of them is how altering the typefaces can also alter the atmosphere of a page. "It was easy to demonstrate this by using overlays. This can change the mood of the whole page."<sup>13</sup> This technique was tried out with young children and the results were that they found difficulties even with terminology for describing the different atmospheres. "This is hardly surprising... It reminds yet another fascinating subject to research one day."<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Sassoon said.



"Pick the odd one out" Use of the typeface to help discriminate between the letters 'b' and 'd'.



Copying letters exercise for Linguaphone Children English.

## 6. End

It is Amazing how the design of a good font can change so many things. Kids started to feel much more comfortable with reading, they were enjoying it. Writing was easier. That makes this font so important, not only because of the design, but because of the spaces in between each letter and each row of text.

We see that a good invention will be used throughout time and will help so many people, in this case, make reading more comfortable and pleasurable.

Researching is also very important, we discover throughout it the different ways to solve a problem, ending to the result you wanted or even something that you didn't expect.

We don't have to impose children to write in the same way the of the font design, we should better let them be free, and write the way they do spontaneously. They will express their thoughts and feelings the way they want. As Rosemary says "to write and to make your own mark is a basic human need."<sup>15</sup> It is right we need to express and a good way to do it is by writing, by expressing your thoughts directly to the paper.

It is important to notice that today, because of the computer invention, computers have become part of our daily life, I have started to notice that sometimes designers go right away to the computer and write a text using the font, size and space they like better. Probably they don't stop before and think how a bad use of these elements can affect the clarity of a message or slow down the speed of reading.

Children have been also affected by computers, "they look at keyboards as normal tools to communicate. Lessons could be programed into Pcs, but with spaces in which children could add their personal notes."<sup>16</sup>

We have been losing the importance of expressing ourselves spontaneously. I know this may sound like it has nothing to do with Sassoon primary typeface, but it has to do with the feelings I got after talking, sharing and having a seminar with her.

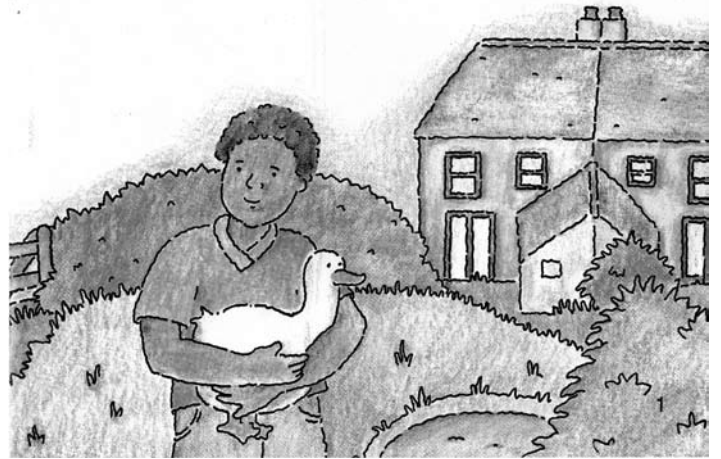
We have to sit down and write, let our hands free, express, and then is when we can go to the computer and make our design perfect

Mariana Eggers.  
2graC

# A duck called Dennis

When I was six, I had a duck called Dennis.  
He was a very clever duck.  
He always did exactly as I told him.

NEW HORIZONS  
science 5-10



Cambridge



All except Dennis . . .  
16 He loved the rain!

## Citations

1. Sassoon Rosemary, Williams Adrian. "Why Sassoon?" . pp.2. Typefaces specially designed for children's reading.
2. Wikipedia free encyclopedia. "Penmanship."
3. Sassoon Rosemary, Williams Adrian. "Why Sassoon?" pp.4. The choices to make for children.
4. Sassoon, Rosemary "Computers and Typography" 1993. pp.152.
5. Sassoon, Rosemary "Computers and Typography" 1993. pp.152.
6. Sassoon, Rosemary "Computers and Typography" 1993. pp.152.
7. Eric Gill (1931). Sassoon, Rosemary "Computers and Typography" 1993. pp.153.
8. Sassoon, Rosemary "Computers and Typography" 1993. pp.155.
9. Sassoon, Rosemary "Computers and Typography" 1993. pp.159.
10. Sassoon, Rosemary "Computers and Typography" 1993. pp.161.
11. Sassoon, Rosemary "Computers and Typography" 1993. pp.163.
12. Sassoon, Rosemary "Computers and Typography" 1993. pp.168.
13. Sassoon, Rosemary "Computers and Typography" 1993. pp.169.
14. Sassoon, Rosemary "Computers and Typography" 1993. pp.169.
15. Sassoon, Rosemary "Computers and Typography" 1993. pp.174.
16. Sassoon, Rosemary "Computers and Typography" 1993. pp.174

## References

- Sassoon website. [www.clubtype.co.uk](http://www.clubtype.co.uk)
- Wikipedia free encyclopedia. [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com).
- Rosemary Sassoon. Computers and Typography
- Letterbox N°6. A journal of type information from Linotype.
- Why Sassoon? A descriptive guide for educators and Publishers to promote good practices among users of the typeface by Rosemary Sassoon and Adrian Williams. [www.clubtype.co.uk/sassoonintro.html](http://www.clubtype.co.uk/sassoonintro.html).
- New Horizons (1991) "A duck called Dennis". Cambridge University Press.
- Dick Hoogeveen (1998) "Tutti's favourite cap".