

Auto Leading

THE CONCEPT OF LEADING – the spacing between lines of typeset copy – has existed since the days of metal type, but auto leading is a relatively new idea. Like straight quotes and newsletter templates, it emerged with the advent of desktop publishing and “do-it-yourself” typography. Auto leading is a feature that allows your soft-

ware to automatically assign a leading value to the text you set, based on its point size.

Most design software programs use a default auto leading setting of 120 percent of the point size. (This value can be changed by the user, as can most default values.) In some programs, it’s hard to know what the auto leading is for a particular point size, and in many cases it results in a fractional value. For example, for 10 point type the auto leading might be a nice, even 12 point, but for 11 point it becomes 13.2, for 12 it is 14.4 and for 14 it is 16.8.

Without question, auto leading can be very convenient when working with text type. By using auto leading, you can change your text size as many times as you like and the leading will adjust proportionally and automatically. This is a real time-saver when you’re unsure of your final point size and want the freedom to experiment.

On the other hand, there are several pitfalls to be aware of when using auto leading. First of all, get in the habit of converting auto leading to a fixed value in your final layout, even if that value is the same as the auto leading value.

Grass never
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Auto leading set this 42 point text in Bernhardt Fashion on 50.4 points of leading, which is much too open (left). Reducing the leading to 35 points greatly improves appearance and readability (right).

This way, if you have to adjust the point size of a particular word or symbol, the leading will remain the same and not disturb the overall spacing. Converting auto leading to a fixed value also ensures that the leading won't change if the document is opened on another computer with different default settings.

While auto leading can speed the setting of body text, it's not useful for setting display type. Display type in larger sizes needs a lot less leading than text. This is especially true with all-cap settings that have no descenders to fill

in the space between the lines. For display type, auto leading settings will generally be way off the mark. Use your eye, not your software, to make larger type settings visually appropriate.

Although there are times when auto leading can increase efficiency, point size and leading, like all design decisions, should ultimately be determined by a skilled eye. It's up to you to determine what looks best and achieves the best outcome for your project. ■