

# Helvetica

**Outcome:** Students will study the development and use of the typeface, Helvetica and write an essay in response to the statement, *“Is Helvetica the official font of capitalism or socialism?”*

**Overview:** You will first watch the documentary titled, Helvetica. After completing a short tutorial exercise about Helvetica, you will write a 2 page essay explaining why you agree or disagree with the statement by Paula Scher, *“Helvetica is the official font of capitalism?”*

**Your essay should address the following topics:**

Each typeface has an expressive personality, communicated by the form of the letters. As designers, we must consider the personality of a typeface we choose when communicating with an audience. Please address the following topics in your essay.

1. Describe the personality of Helvetica and the historical development of Helvetica.
2. How important is legibility in a typeface? Should a typeface communicate meaning, or should a typeface simply communicate the word?
3. Take a stance on whether you believe Helvetica is the official font of capitalism or socialism. In your argument, consider the following quotes from the movie Helvetica. Explain why you **agree or disagree with at least two of them.**

**Rick Poynor:** *“Type is saying things to us all the time. Typefaces express a mood, an atmosphere. They give words a certain coloring.”*

**Massimo Vignelli:** *“You can say, “I love you,” in Helvetica. And you can say it with Helvetica Extra Light if you want to be really fancy. Or you can say it with the Extra Bold if it's really intensive and passionate, you know, and it might work.”*

**Michael Bierut:** *“Everywhere you look you see typefaces. But there's one you probably see more than any other one, and that's Helvetica. You know, there it is, and it seems to come from nowhere. You know, it seems like air? It seems like gravity?”*

**Jonathan Hoefler:** *“And it's hard to evaluate it. It's like being asked what you think about off-white paint. It's just... it's just there. And it's hard to get your head around, it's that big.” It's ubiquitous. It's like going to McDonald's instead of thinking about food. Because it's there, it's on every street corner, so let's eat crap because it's on the corner.”*

**Erik Spiekermann:** *“Most people who use Helvetica, use it because it's ubiquitous. It's like going to McDonald's instead of thinking about food. Because it's there, it's on every street corner, so let's eat crap because it's on the corner.”*

**David Carson:** *“Don't confuse legibility with communication. Just because something is legible doesn't mean it communicates and, more importantly, doesn't mean it communicates the right thing.”*

**Tobias Frere-Jones:** *“The sort of classical modernist line on how aware a reader should be of a typeface is that they shouldn't be aware of it at all. It should be this crystal goblet there to just hold and display and organize the information.”*

4. **Take a stance.** Is Helvetica overused, overrated, or both? What makes you consider a typeface overused or overrated? If Helvetica is considered the ultimate font expression of post-modernism and the post WWII world, what is the ultimate font expression of today? Is it still Helvetica, or is it a different typeface?

# Helvetica

## Vocabulary:

**font / typeface** – These terms are often used interchangeably, but there is a difference. **A font** is a complete assortment of type in one size and style, such as 10-point Times New Roman. **A typeface** is a set of one or more fonts that have stylistic unity.

**graphic design** – This refers to a number of professional artistic disciplines that focus on visual communication through the use of typography, page layout, color, images, symbols and words to create a message or represent an idea.

**grunge** – Most commonly used in reference to the music scene in Seattle during the 1990s, grunge also became a style of graphic design. Unkempt, jumbled-looking, ragged, disheveled and chaotic, grunge was in part a response to modernism by designers looking for a more expressive, energetic style.

**modernism** – This is considered both a style and a way of thinking. It takes a “form follows function” approach, in which the design of an object is based purely on its purpose. Characteristics are clean lines, smooth surfaces, abstract motifs, and a lack of ornamentation or clutter.

**serif / sans serif** – **A serif** is a stroke or fine line projecting from the beginning or end of one of the main strokes of a letter. **Sans serif** is a style of type with no serifs.

# Helvetica

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Describe the personality of Helvetica and the historical development of Helvetica.

Personality / Characteristics of Helvetica / Describe: \_\_\_\_\_

2a. How important is legibility in a typeface? \_\_\_\_\_

2b. Should a typeface communicate meaning, or should a typeface simply communicate the word? \_\_\_\_\_

3a. Do you believe Helvetica is the official font of capitalism or socialism? \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

3b. Explain why you **agree or disagree with at least two of the following**:

**Rick Poyner:** "Type is saying things to us all the time. Typefaces express a mood, an atmosphere. They give words a certain coloring."

**Massimo Vignelli:** "You can say, "I love you," in Helvetica. And you can say it with Helvetica Extra Light if you want to be really fancy. Or you can say it with the Extra Bold if it's really intensive and passionate, you know, and it might work."

**Michael Bierut:** "Everywhere you look you see typefaces. But there's one you probably see more than any other one, and that's Helvetica. You know, there it is, and it seems to come from nowhere. You know, it seems like air? It seems like gravity?"

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**David Carson:** "Don't confuse legibility with communication. Just because something is legible doesn't mean it communicates and, more importantly, doesn't mean it communicates the right thing."

**Tobias Frere-Jones:** "The sort of classical modernist line on how aware a reader should be of a typeface is that they shouldn't be aware of it at all. It should be this crystal goblet there to just hold and display and organize the information."

I agree/disagree with \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

I agree/disagree with \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

# Helvetica

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

4a. **Take a stance.** *Is Helvetica overused, overrated, or both?* \_\_\_\_\_

4b. *What makes you consider a typeface overused or overrated?* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4c. *If Helvetica is considered the ultimate font expression of post-modernism and the post WWII world, what is the ultimate font expression of today?* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4d. *Is it still Helvetica, or is it a different typeface?* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Helvetica - A Font for Capitalism or Socialism Rubric?

Criteria	Excellent (5-6)	Needs Attention (3-4)	Below Grade Level (0-3)
<p><b>Content-Descriptive Language:</b> Understanding and use of critical concepts from assigned task; your writing includes important details that describe Helvetica, cite the historical development of the font.</p>	<p>Demonstrates a thorough and critical understanding of how to describe the font; builds a visual image of the font using accurate language; integrates a great amount of details; the author wrote a detailed summary of the history development and stylistic qualities of Helvetica citing references from the movie.</p>	<p>Demonstrates a some understanding of how to describe the font, but misconstrues some aspects; integrates a few amount of details; Yet, the description of the font, Helvetica, lacks detail and/or the essay does not include the historical context and development of the font.</p>	<p>Demonstrates poor understanding of how to describe the qualities of a font; does not build a visual image of the it for the reader; essay lacking details and does not provide thoughtful insight into stylistic or historical development of the font.</p>
<p><b>Content-Introduction and Information successfully supports essay:</b> Use of proper introduction to support form and content of essay; students attend to precision when describing details; the organization of ideas and sentence structure helps the reader understand the ideas and arguments.</p>	<p>Introduction successfully supports essay; precise explanations helps the reader visualize ideas; the order of the arguments presented build in a logical manner; clearly states thesis using academic language. Organization of essay allows the reader to clearly follow the author's arguments.</p>	<p>Some explanations helps the reader visualize your ideas, yet the order may not support the author's ideas; the order of description may seem illogical; defines some information, yet there may be unclear positions in the author's argument.</p>	<p>Poor introduction leaves questions for the viewer; brief explanations do not build ideas for the reader; the order of your description is random leaving the reader lost and confused; lacks information and/or your information is not properly cited in the essay.</p>
<p><b>Persuasive Argument:</b> You included a thoughtful and fluent argument that address the question. You provided cited evidence from the movie and your argument builds to a logical conclusion.</p>	<p>The argument is thorough and detailed and grounded in evidence. The author cites specific examples from the movie that provides support for their stance.</p>	<p>Demonstrates some supported arguments from the movie, but failed to provide a thorough, supported stance.</p>	<p>Writing demonstrates little in-depth arguments to support his/her stance.</p>
<p><b>Academic Language (vocabulary):</b> Use of appropriate content vocabulary, phrases, and clauses.</p>	<p>Writing demonstrates a thoughtful and fluent use of content vocabulary, learned phrases, and clauses.</p>	<p>Writing demonstrates some use of content vocabulary, learned phrases, and clauses.</p>	<p>Writing demonstrates a little use of content vocabulary, learned phrases, and clauses.</p>
<p><b>Academic Language</b></p> <p>Use of functional academic language and formal style with an emphasis on description words and phrases.</p>	<p>Writing displays fluent use of academic language and consistently writes in a formal style with sentence fluency.</p>	<p>Writing displays some academic language, but may disregard some of the more formal stylistic choices.</p>	<p>Writing neglects or misuses academic language, which detracts from the formal style.</p>