Concept

The crystal goblet

The idea that the typography of a text should go unnoticed and serve it: like a clear goblet, its job is to show the content, not itself.



In Spanish

La copa de cristal

Origin

Lecture by Beatrice Warde to British typographers (1930); debated since the 1990s in Emigre magazine (Unger, 1992)

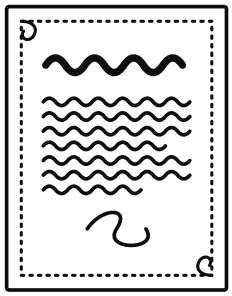
What problem it addresses

It warns against type that shows off at the expense of the message. Graphic design takes from it a criterion for choosing and setting type: first, what the text has to do; then, how it looks.

An example

An illustrative example: the instructions for a medicine, set in two ways.

Type that shows off



Decorative, cramped type with ornaments around it. **You see the type before the message.**

Type that serves



Plain type, a comfortable size, and air between the lines. **You read the instructions without noticing the type.**

The words are the same. In the second version the typography almost disappears, and that is what Warde asked of a text meant for reading.

Why it happens

1 

When we read, we look for meaning, not for the shape of each letter.

2 

Type that draws attention gets in the way.

3 

If it goes unnoticed, the content arrives whole.

Applications in design

Use it like this

For long or practical texts, choose familiar typefaces and set them so they read without stumbling.

Avoid

Using an eye-catching typeface for a text people need to read in full.

Don't fall for it

It doesn't apply everywhere: on a poster or a cover, type can also be the image, and its voice is part of the message.

8 → 15 min

In Arial

In Brush

What the research says

Minutes students estimated for the same exercise routine, written in Arial or in Brush, a hard-to-read typeface (Song and Schwarz, 2008).

●●○ **Debated evidence.** It was a small study, with 20 people. It suggests that type is never fully neutral: it changes how we judge what it says.

Connections

Used in

- Type design
- Typography

Related to

- Form follows function

Authors and works

1930	**Beatrice Warde**	Compared typography to a clear goblet and asked that type for reading not draw attention to itself.
1992	**Gerard Unger**	Disputed that invisible type exists, since nobody chooses one that looks like nothing, and recalled with Zuzana Licko that legibility changes with use.
2008	**Hyunjin Song and Norbert Schwarz**	Showed that instructions in hard-to-read type make a task seem longer and less appealing to do.

Sources

Original sources

- Warde, B. (1955). The crystal goblet, or printing should be invisible. In The crystal goblet: Sixteen essays on typography. Sylvan Press. (Original lecture delivered 1930).
- Unger, G. (1992). Legible? Emigre, 23. (Reeditado en Emigre, 65, 2003). View source (https://www.emigre.com/Essays/Magazine/Legible)
- Song, H., & Schwarz, N. (2008). If it's hard to read, it's hard to do: Processing fluency affects effort prediction and motivation. Psychological Science, 19(10), 986–988.

Last reviewed: October 27, 2026

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