

# Hand Setting Type

Before the advent of mechanical typesetting, (invented in the end quarter of the nineteenth century,) and apart from the relatively small amount printed by processes other than letterpress, every single letter of every word printed was assembled by hand. Today, when we are used to keyboarding, character-recognition, and even voice-recognition, such a labour is staggering. The process of composing was a skilled job in times when even reading was not taken for granted, and yet in Britain alone, thousands were employed in the process to produce the work required. To take just newspapers alone, to produce the text in time for its publishing, teams of dozens of compositors would do the work—requiring dexterity, good eyesight, and concentration—at high speed for hours on end. A good compositor might set 6000 characters (1000 words) an hour: about two paperback pages. And remember that all this was before typing: the text supplied (the *copy*) would be hand-written.

Setting type was not just about the physical process of collecting the pieces of type together. The compositor was expected to correct the text supplied if necessary, and to design the layout of the finished job. (A matter of great subtlety, now the work of typographers.) Like others in the trade, there was a long apprenticeship (usually seven years), and examples of work entered for competitions in the *British Printer* magazine in the 1890s show the great skill and pride in their work that compositors had, even if the designs do not appeal so much to modern tastes.

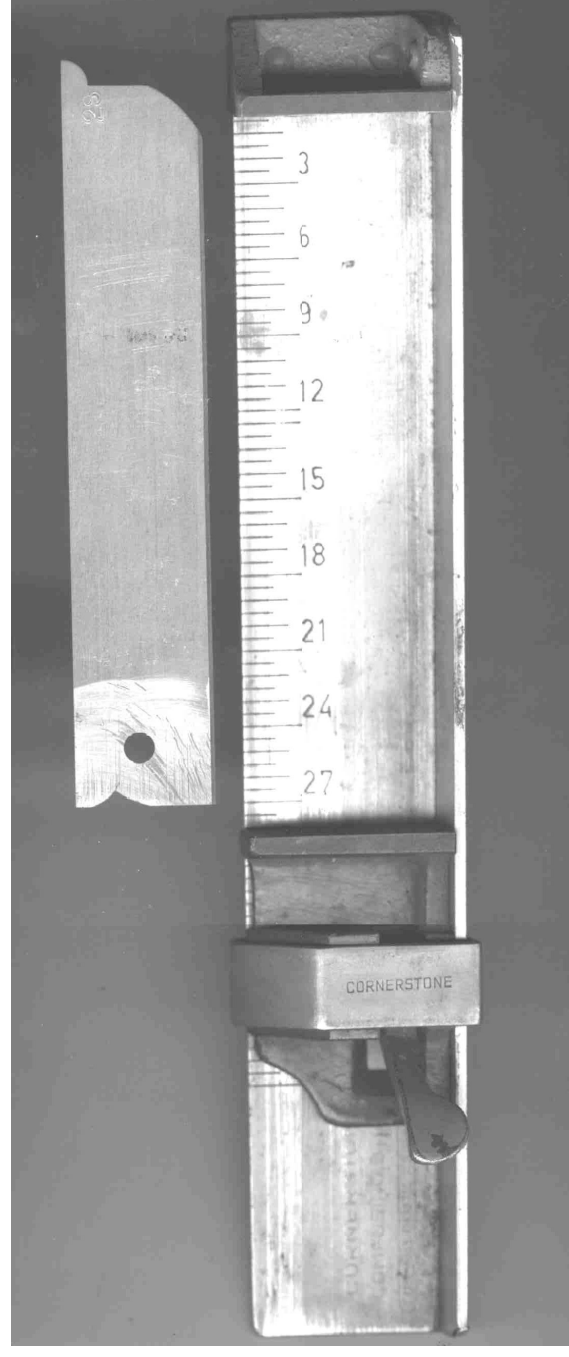
The basic tool of the compositor was the composing stick, a tray with an adjustable end-stop, to hold a few lines of assembled letters. For a right-handed compositor it is held in the left hand, as seen in the photograph, & the letters picked up from the typecase by the right hand, feeling for the nick as they are collected.

Placing the type in the stick from left to right, just as you normally read, with the nicks uppermost, results in the type reading from left to right but upside down. Thus, if you turned it over, it would of course be right to left, the right way up, and the mirror-image of the printed result. This is less confusing than it sounds, and printers read type while it is upside down, rather than reading in mirror-image.

Of course, each line of type must be exactly the same length, in order to be able to lock it all tightly together before printing. (See the poster on *Imposition*.) To do this, the stick is set to length beforehand by putting the setting rule in it, and using that to lock the length required: the setting rule is shaped to be lifted out by the end lug, the curved nick at the other end permitting it to lift out.

A space is placed between each word: this is simply a piece of type with no character on it, lower than the others. At the end of the line, the last word may need to be broken with a hyphen, and usually some space will be left, or a little needed to fit the last letter or so in. The line is now *justified*—made the exact length—by adjusting all the spaces in it. The spaces available thin, mid, thick and en, can be thought of as 1/5, 1/4, 1/3 and 1/2 of a square (em). If the original spaces used were mids, then changing all or some to thins will shorten the line, changing them to thicks will lengthen it, etc. The skill lies in making the slight variations in the widths of the spaces between the words unnoticeable.

When the stick is full, the really tricky step is lifting the completed block of type out, and putting it in the *galley* (tray) where the text is assembled. This is done by pressing both ends of the block with the centres of the second fingers of each hand, while holding the forefingers and thumbs along the top and bottom: the experts can do it unaided, the more cautious usually put a lead (strip) along the top and bottom of the type first to give support!



*An aluminium-alloy lightweight twentieth-century composing stick, with a brass setting-rule. The thumb lever on the left locks the adjustable end-stop in place to the length required, the markings are intended for guidance only.*



*Assembling the type: the thumb holds the type in place & feels the nicks forming a groove.*