

Printers' Terms

Most trades and technical activities soon evolve their own special terms and jargon, partly to speed communication, as an agreed technical word saves repeated explanations of whatever it refers to, and partly as a means of group identity: outsiders won't understand the specialist language. Printing was no different from other crafts in this, and soon had a range of special terms and phrases, some of which have spread into wider usage. This list makes no claim to be complete, and terms changed over time, so the definitions might not be exact in all periods. Terms which are self-explanatory (such as 'ink-roller') are not included, and other terms are explained in the posters on specific subjects such as type-casting.

You may be puzzled by the fact that the letterpress process shown here is known as **hot metal**, when obviously all the metal being used in the typecases & presses is cold! Even more so if you've come across the term **Cold Type** setting. Letterpress is known as hot metal, because it starts by casting the letters from molten metal. Cold type is lettering composed photographically, or by other methods not involving lead type.

Type was stored in wooden typecases, and for large amounts for setting **body text** (i.e. the main part or body of a book), these came as a pair, held on metal brackets on top of the worktop. The capital letters were stored in the **upper case**, the miniscules in the **lower case**, hence the common terms for these letters. Type used in smaller quantities would be held in a case that combined upper and lower cases in one, known as a **double case**. The arrangement of letters in the case was known as the **lay** of the case. An individual character, such as x, was a **sort**; hence the phrase 'to be **out of sorts**' when a supply of one character ran out. The punctuation characters

were known as **points**. A complete set of characters in quantity, as found in a typecase, was a **font** or **fount** of type. (For terms used describing the different styles of letters, see the information on typefaces.) Various decorative pieces were produced like type, and ones based on leaves and flowers (often designed so they could be combined into geometric patterns were known as **fleurons** or **printers' flowers**. Small illustrations cast as type are known in America as **dingbats**, but there is no British equivalent term I know of. Complete words or a group of letters cast as one piece are **logotypes**, letters which are united in design (such as ff) are **ligatures**.

The arrangement of letters into text was known as **composing**, but in the trade, usually **comping**: the craftsman doing it was a **comp**. Distributing the type back into the typecases was **dissing**. (No relation to the current slang expression.) The adjustable tray used to hold letters when setting was a **composing stick**, or simply a **stick**.

The strips of lead put between lines of type to space them out were known as **leads**, and the spacing became known as leading. Thus 10pt type with 2pt between each line is 10pt, 2pt **lead**. (In computing this has been corrupted by misunderstanding, and is sometimes seen as '10pt, 12pt leaded'. Type could be cast on a larger body than normal, so a 10pt typeface could be cast on 12pt size body, so that when set, it would be spaced out exactly as if 10pt type had been 2pt leaded: this was '10 on 12pt' setting.)

The spaces used with type that were a square of the type size, or multiples of that, were **quadrats**, or **quads** (e.g. a 4-cm quad). Larger metal rectangular spacing material pieces were **clumps**. Metal strips (lead or brass) used to print lines were **rules**. Lines of type cast as single units on Linotype, Intertype or Ludlow machines were **slugs**.

The type was transferred from the stick to **galley**, a long tray, and once complete, this was used to carry it to the flat surface used for assembling everything, known as the **imposing surface**, or **stone** – the original surfaces being stone, later cast iron. The specialist doing the final assembly was the **stone-hand**.

The metal frame into which the type was locked was a **chase**, and the wedges used to lock it tight were **quoins**, a term for a wedge also used in building and gunnery. The old wooden quoins were knocked into place using a mallet & a forked metal piece known as a **shooting stick**. The strips of wood used to fill out the spaces round the type were known as **furniture**, again a term used for similar concepts outside printing, as was the term for thin wood strips, **reglets**. The completed assembly was known as a **forme**.

There were of course plenty of technical terms for parts of the printing press itself, but the operator was known simply as a press-man; more interestingly, his junior assistant, who inked the ink-balls, and carried the paper, was the **printer's devil**. If a print had a bare patch because inking had missed it, it was a **monk**, & if a piece of dirt or dried ink left a black blotch on the page, it was a **friar**. And continuing the theme of errors—if some type was dropped, for example a page was not locked-up tightly, and collapsed, the resulting pile of letters was **printer's pie**. Damaged type was thrown into the **hell-box** (hell being where all bad characters went).

Where the press operated by the type resting on a flat surface, with the paper pressed down onto it, the surface was of course the **bed** of the press, hence the expression of '**putting a newspaper to bed**', meaning to start actual printing. Another newspaper term, not strictly a printing one, was to **spike** a story: the editor had a vertical spike on his desk (as did most desks then), and rejected work was impaled on the spike.

A group of printers employed together in one firm were a **Chapel**; a precursor of a trades-union branch. The senior printer in charge of the chapel was **father of the Chapel**. Chapels had rules, enforced by fines, the funds being used to assist needy printers or for drinks on holidays.

Ink-making (before specialist firms took over), involved boiling inflammable linseed oil over an open fire, so most town authorities banned it, and printers had to go out of town for the day to make ink: this was turned into an outing known as a **Waysgoose**, and the tradition continued long after they stopped making their own ink.