AN ICON YOU SHOULD KNOW...

Adrian Frutiger

Swiss type designer, 1928 to 2015

Adrian Frutiger was a Swiss type designer, born in Unterseen, near Interlaken, in 1928. He trained as a typesetter, studied in Zurich and moved to Paris in 1952 to work for the type foundry Deberny & Peignot. His typefaces Univers, Frutiger and Avenir are used around the world, and his OCR-B is read by machines on passports and credit cards. Read this page in about five minutes, then use the links at the end to look deeper.

FURTHER LOOKING

Type Directors Club, Adrian Frutiger: His 1987 medal page, with a short biography. tdc.org

Production Type, Deberny et Peignot's Univers, 1957: An illustrated look at the original Univers specimen. productiontype.com

The Guardian obituary by Charles Foster: His life and his major typefaces. theguardian.com

Video: Adrian Frutiger: A Tribute by Matthew Carter



Charles de Gaulle Airport signage, where Frutiger designed the sign lettering. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0. Full credit on page 3.

01 Fact Sheet

1928	Born May 24 in Unterseen, near Interlaken, Switzerland, the son of a weaver.
1944 to 1948	Apprentice typesetter at the Otto Schlaefli printing house in Interlaken.
1949 to 1951	Studies at the Kunstgewerbeschule, the school of arts and crafts, in Zurich.
1952	Moves to Paris and joins the type foundry Deberny & Peignot.
1957	Univers is released for both metal type and phototypesetting.
Early 1960s	Opens his own studio near Paris with André Gürtler and Bruno Pfäffli.
1968	Designs OCR-B and becomes an advisor to the D. Stempel AG type foundry in Frankfurt.
1972	Univers is used throughout the design of the Munich Olympic Games.
1973	OCR-B is adopted as a world standard.
1975	Designs the signs for Charles de Gaulle Airport near Paris.
1976	Linotype releases the airport lettering as the typeface Frutiger.
1978	Publishes *Der Mensch und seine Zeichen*, later published in English as *Signs and Symbols*.
1987	Receives the Type Directors Club Medal.
2015	Dies September 10 in Bremgarten bei Bern, Switzerland, at age 87.

Life and career Milestones tied to the key works

FOUR KEY WORKS, PAGE 2

1957 Univers
1968 OCR-B
1975 Charles de Gaulle Airport
1976 Frutiger

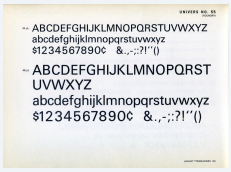
02 Four Key Works

Typefaces are shown here with free sample images and photos. The typeface names are trademarks of their foundries.

1957: Univers

One family, more than twenty styles

Charles Peignot wanted a sans-serif typeface for the new phototypesetting machines. Frutiger persuaded him to make a new design instead of copying an old one, building on a project he had started as a student in Zurich. Univers came out in 1957 with more than 20 variants, all planned together from the start. Univers 55, the regular weight shown here, was the starting point for the rest. At the same time a Swiss foundry released Helvetica, and designers argued over which one was better.



Univers, 1957. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0.

LOOK FOR Even strokes with flat, level ends | The same shapes repeated across every weight

Read Production Type's article on the 1957 Univers →

1968: OCR-B

Letters for machines and people

Early computers needed letters that scanners could read without mistakes. In 1968 Frutiger designed OCR-B, a typeface that machines can read but that still looks friendly to people. Five years later it was adopted as a world standard. It still appears on passports, credit cards and barcodes. Type designer Erik Spiekermann said Frutiger "managed to do something that is legible by machine and by people alike."



OCR-B, 1968. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

LOOK FOR Every character the same width | Plain shapes that are hard to confuse with each other

1975: Charles de Gaulle Airport

Signs you can read on the move

Frutiger noticed that typefaces that looked good in books did not work on signs. The letters needed more air around them to be read from far away and from an angle. For the new Charles de Gaulle Airport near Paris he used scissors to cut out test signs and pasted them on yellow foil to try them out. The photo shows the airport in 2016.



Charles de Gaulle Airport, 1975. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

LOOK FOR Open letter shapes that stay clear at a distance | Short words and arrows on a strong color band

1976: Frutiger

From airport signs to a typeface for everything

The airport lettering was so clear that Linotype released it as a typeface the next year and named it after its designer. It is praised for its openness and balance and has shaped many later sans-serif typefaces. One detail is the square dot over the lowercase i. Its crisp corners keep the dot from blurring into the stem, so an i still looks different from an l at a distance.



Frutiger, 1976. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

LOOK FOR Wide openings in letters like a, c and e | A square dot on the i

TRY THIS

Pick a short sign message, such as the way to your classroom. Set it in three typefaces, print each one at full size and tape them up across the room. Which one can you still read from the back, and why? Change the spacing on the weakest one and test it again.

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REFLECT

Think About It

Frutiger cut out test signs with scissors and pasted them on yellow foil before the airport lettering became a typeface. What could you learn by testing your type at full size, in the real place, before you finish it?

03 Sources

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Process Circles. Full Color Icons. Supplied series branding asset.