

# Best Practice in Composing and Imposing Type

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Let's look analytically at just why orienting type **nicks-up** is the preferred way to do composition.

Fact: The face of type is wrong-reading so that it creates a right-reading image when it transfers ink to paper. This is a given. When a printer composes type by hand, how then should the types be placed in the composing stick to best facilitate the task?

A piece of type has six surfaces. Let us declare, first, that the type will be set with the face toward the compositor and the foot in the bed of the composing stick—otherwise the compositor couldn't even see the face. (Although I suppose that some time, some where, some benighted soul has attempted to do it that way, not knowing better.) We have now narrowed it down to four options: nicks-up, nicks-left, nicks-right, or nicks-down.

I think we can agree that nicks-left and nicks-right can be eliminated, otherwise the characters would be set in a vertical sequence, not horizontal. (I *have* done this on certain specialty jobs, such as ribbons; and there may be times one would choose to do this for artistic reasons, e.g., running the name of the month on a calendar page vertically along the side of the sheet.)

Okay, now we're down to the real issue. Do we compose nicks-up or nicks-down?

First option: nicks-down. Here is what you would see, looking at the face of the type in the stick:

In computer terminology, this is a **Flip Horizontal** from the right-reading image.

Advantages:

1. Characters are “right-side-up”.

Disadvantages:

1. Composition must be done right-to-left, which is counterintuitive.
2. When you finish composing the first line, you cannot go on to compose the second, because in the stick it would have to go *underneath* the first.

Second option: nicks-up. Here is what you would see in the stick:

In computer terminology, this is a **Flip Vertical**.

Advantages:

1. Composition is done left-to-right, same as you read or write.
2. When the first line is set and justified, you can go on to compose the second, because in the stick it would be *on top of* the first.

Disadvantages:

1. Characters are “upside-down”, which is counterintuitive.

There it is, you do the math. Which way is more advantageous?

But wait, there's more! As we move on from composition to imposition, it's traditional best practice to lock up a form in the same orientation with which you composed it, nicks-up—or flat on the stone, that means nicks away from you. This is preferred for at least two reasons:

1. Ink transfer from the rollers to the type works significantly better when the lines of type are parallel to the rollers. (For another angle on this, see [Skyline Bias Furniture](#) on our web site.) Granted, nicks-down would accomplish the same thing, but keep reading—
2. The printed piece comes out of the press right-side-up, which makes it much easier to monitor quality. (We're talkin' platen presses here, folks; you cylinder-printers live in a different world.) The eye sees the image in the normal orientation and is much quicker to recognize any flaw.

You will notice that photographs of type on the Skyline web site (such as used fonts for sale in The Junk Bin) are presented in the traditional nicks-up orientation. Typically in photos seen on eBay or posted online by printers showing off their composition, forms are depicted nicks-down, reading right-to-left. For an experienced printer, the word that comes to mind for this is “bass-ackwards”! I believe that the reason so many newbies unwittingly compose nicks-down, not realizing that they are making the whole process more difficult that way, is that they simply cannot get past the counter-intuitive nature of seeing the characters upside-down. Also, unfortunately, it is not uncommon for present-day instructors to teach the wrong method simply because they themselves were never taught correctly.

And so I rest the case. **Nicks-up—*always, always, always***. Your brain can and will adapt to reading the face of the type this way, and quicker than you might expect. Now you know the best practice—best, because it's the easiest and most efficient way to get the job done.

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