

Rags, Widows & Orphans

RAGS, WIDOWS AND ORPHANS – sounds more like a Dickens novel than type, doesn't it? In spite of their odd names, these concepts are important to understand if good typography is your goal.

Rags

In typography, "rag" refers to the irregular or uneven vertical margin of a block of type. Usually it's the right margin that's ragged (as in the commonly seen flush left/rag right setting), but either or both margins can be ragged.

When setting type with a ragged margin, pay attention to the shape that the ragged line endings make. A good rag goes in and out from line to line in small increments. A poor rag creates distracting shapes of white space in the

margin. Don't rely on the line breaks generated by your software application; get in the habit of spotting and correcting poor rags by making manual line breaks or by editing your copy. Slight adjustments in point size or column width might work as well.

Widows and Orphans

A widow is a very short line – usually one word, or the end of a hyphenated word – at the end of a paragraph or column.

Not many days after we heard the church-bell tolling for a long time, and looking over the gate we saw a long, strange black coach that was covered in black cloth and was drawn by black horses; after that came another and another and another, and all were black, while the bell kept tolling, tolling.

Not many days after we heard the church-bell tolling for a long time, and looking over the gate we saw a long, strange black coach that was covered in black cloth and was drawn by black horses; after that came another and another and another, and all were black, while the bell kept tolling, tolling.

A poor rag (left) creates distracting shapes in the white space of the margin. Correct this by making manual line breaks (right).

A widow is undesirable because it leaves too much white space between paragraphs or at the bottom of a page. This interrupts the reader's eye and diminishes readability. Fix widows by manually reworking the rag or editing the copy.

Like a widow, an orphan is a single word, part of a word

or very short line, except it appears at the beginning of a column or a page. This results in poor horizontal alignment at the top of the column or page. The term "orphan" is not as commonly used as "widow," but the concept is the same, and so is the solution: fix it! ■

The next unpleasant
business was putting on
the iron shoes; that too
was very hard at first.
My master went with
me to the smith's forge
to see that I was not
hurt or got any fright at
all.

The next unpleasant
business was putting on
the iron shoes; that too
was very hard at first.
My master went with me
to the smith's forge to
see that I was not hurt
or got any fright at all.

The word "all" in the last line is a widow (left). This can be fixed easily by making a minor adjustment in the line length (right).