
Font Height

Font height is measured in a peculiar unit called a **point**, where

72 points = 1 inch

Given the preceding definition, you might expect a 36-point character to be exactly 0.5 inches tall. You silly logician, you! In fact, every 36-point character is far shorter than 0.5 inches. However, measuring from the bottom of the font's lowest letters (for example, *g* or *j*) to the top of the font's tallest letters (for example, *Z* or *I*) does yield a height of exactly 0.5 inch. See Figure 19-3.



FIGURE 19-3 A 36-point font is 0.5 inches from the lowest point to the highest.

Best Font Sizes for Hard Copy

The following are a few general guidelines for setting font sizes in hard-copy documents:

- **Set all body components (paragraphs, lists, and table cells) to the same font size.** The size you pick should be somewhere between 10 and 11 points, inclusive. For example, don't set paragraphs to 10 points and bulleted lists to 11 points.
- **Sans-serif fonts look a little bigger than serif fonts of the same point size.** For this reason, set the following components one point smaller than body components:
 - table headers
 - table and figure captions
 - figure callouts

For example, if you set your body components to an 11-point font, set your table headers to a 10-point font.

- **Leave big deltas between different section header levels.** I like to leave a difference of at least three points (four points is better) between the font sizes of a first-level header and a second-level header. For example, readers can easily distinguish

between an 18-point first-level header and a 14-point second-level header, but the difference between an 18-point and a 16-point font is much harder to distinguish.

Larger Fonts Appeal to Older Readers

One of the central theorems in technical communication is to be clear. For this reason, good technical communicators consider the age of their readers when making font decisions. When writing for the over-40 set, never pick a body font smaller than 10 points. Older readers greatly prefer an 11-point body. Remember—your readers can't click a menu to make text bigger in a hard-copy book.

Best Font Sizes for Soft Copy

PDF and HTML are the two most popular formats for online documentation distribution.

When creating PDF documents, *absolute* font sizes are not important since readers can easily change the effective font sizes through a simple menu selection. Nevertheless, *relative* fonts sizes are still important, so the size guidelines for hard copy are relevant for PDF documents.

When creating HTML documents, you must choose between one of the following strategies for setting font sizes:

- Set font sizes explicitly through HTML tags or through cascading style sheets (CSS).
- Do not set font sizes; instead, let users set them through browser controls.

The first strategy—setting font sizes (and other font characteristics) explicitly—offers authors the greatest control. For example, with a CSS, you can tell the browser to render all paragraphs in 11-point Arial. However, this control is somewhat illusory because you cannot control the screen resolution at which readers will view the document. For example, 11-point Arial looks sharp on an 800 × 600 screen but becomes intolerably tiny on a 1600 × 1200 screen.

The second strategy—letting users pick font sizes—is generally preferable for technical documents. This strategy permits users the luxury of adjusting the font to meet their eyes' needs. In addition, this strategy is much easier to implement than a CSS.