

ligatures

DEFINITION

A **ligature** is, according to the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, “a printed or written character consisting of two or more letters or characters joined together.” Essentially, a ligature is the result of two letterforms

being produced as a single unit. Ligatures are part of a broader term called **contextual forms** which occur when the shape of a letterform changes depending on its surrounding letterforms (or lack thereof).

fi → fi

Above, a serif of the ‘f’ becomes the dot of the ‘i’, and a serif of the ‘i’ joins the the crossbar of the ‘f’ in the ligature version of ‘fi’.

[Typeface: Adobe Myriad Pro Semibold]

HISTORY

In Medieval times, scribes would often ‘squish’ two letterforms together into one shape to increase writing speed and fit a bit more on their material. With the introduction of metal type, it was often difficult or impossible for two letterforms to be printed

close enough together, so they were combined and placed on a separate sheet of metal. Thanks to the simplicity of **kerning** with computer programs, the use of ligatures is less necessary now than ever before.

ff → ff

Here, a small amount of space is removed between the ascenders of the two ‘fs’ and the crossbars are joined in the ligature version of ‘ff’.

[Typeface: Minion Pro Medium]

EXAMPLES

The most common examples of ligatures revolve around the letter ‘f’. When close to the letters ‘f’, ‘i’, or ‘l’, ligatures are often used to combine the two into something more readable. Curiously, the modern day **ampersand** (‡) is an evolved ligature of ‘Et’, which is Latin for ‘and’. Some ligatures only remain ligatures under

certain circumstances, for example, ‘vv’ was once a ligature but has since been replaced in some modern languages by ‘w’. Also, ‘ae’ is commonly thought of as a ligature, however in some languages, ‘æ’ is a separate letter entirely and is only a ligature when it is meant to represent the letter ‘a’ followed by the letter ‘e’.

et → &

A ligature that is seen very commonly, but not often recognized as a ligature is the modern day **ampersand** (‡), which is actually an evolved ligature of ‘et’, which is Latin for the word ‘and’.

[Typeface: Adobe Garamond Pro Regular]

fi st

While some ligatures, such as ‘fi’ above, are considered to be **functional** because they exist to enhance legibility, others exist solely for decorative purposes. Above, ‘st’ is an example of a **stylistic** ligature.

[Typeface: Adobe Caslon Pro Regular]