Newspapers measure stories in inches. A short filler item might be just 2 inches long; a major investigative piece might be 200. But since one inch of type set in a wide leg is greater than one inch of type in a narrow leg, editors avoid confusion by assuming all text will be one standard width (that's usually around 12 picas).

You can design an attractive newspaper without ever varying the width of your text. Sometimes, though, you may decide that a story needs wider or narrower legs; those non-standard column widths are called bastard measures.

Generally speaking, text becomes hard to follow if it's set in legs narrower than 10 picas. It's tough to read, too, if it's set wider than 20 picas.

The ideal depth for text is between 2 and 10 inches per leg. Shorter than that, legs look shallow and flimsy; longer than that, they become thick gray stacks. (We'll fine-tune these guidelines in the pages ahead.)

Text is flexible. When you design a story, you can bend and pour the text into different vertical and horizontal configurations, as these examples show:

Suppose you have a 12-inch story. It can be designed as one leg 12 inches deep... It can also be doubled up into two equal legs, each 6 inches deep... It can become three legs, each 4 inches deep... It can even be spread into six legs, each 2 inches deep. It can be four legs, 3 inches deep... It can be five legs, each 2.4 inches deep...

A lot of math is involved in page design, especially when you calculate story lengths and shapes. To succeed, you need a sense of geometry and proportion — an understanding of how changing one element in a story's design affects every other element.
TEXT SHAPES

To repeat once more: Always shape stories into rectangles. That means all four edges of the story should align — or "grid off" — with each other, as they do in this example:

This story is designed into a square-shaped rectangle. The legs are all even lengths, and all outside edges of the story align with each other. It’s a clean, well-ordered story design.

Beginning designers often find themselves wrenching text into bizarre shapes as they try to make stories fit. Or they’ll choose risky, offbeat designs when simpler layouts would be more effective.

If you have that problem, try looking at your stories a different way: Focus on the shapes of your text blocks.

TEXT SHAPES: THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

Ranked from best to worst, these are the most typical shapes for text blocks. Arrows follow the flow of the reader’s eye through the text.

1. This is the safest shape of all: a rectangle. Whether in one leg or many, it’s clean and clear: no odd wraps, leaps or bends.

2. L-shaped text results when text wraps under a photo. It’s still a neat and readable shape.

3. U-shapes break up boring stacks of text, but beware of giant leaps to the top of that right leg.

4. These shapes (called doglegs) are often inevitable when you design around ads. Try to avoid them otherwise, since art placed below text is often mistaken for an ad.

5. This backward "L" is a risky shape. Readers may think the text starts in that second leg. Besides, that second leg will butt into any leg above it. Be careful.

6. Avoid forcing readers to jump blindly across art parked in the middle of one leg or sandwiched between two legs. It might sometimes work, but it’s usually risky.

7. Ugly shapes. When your text snakes around like this, it means your art is badly scattered. Back up and redesign before you confuse your poor readers.