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In writing and typography, a ligature occurs where two or more letterforms are written or printed as a unit. Generally, ligatures replace characters that occur next to each other when they share common components. A letter with an accent mark is not usually called a ligature, though it would require a separate block of type just as a ligature does. Ligatures are a subset of a more general class of figures called “contextual forms”. Contextual forms describe the case where the particular shape of a letter depends on its context (surrounding letters, whether or not it’s at the end of a line, etc.).

One of the most common ligatures recognizable as such is “fi”. Since the dot above a lowercase i interferes with the loop on the lowercase f, when “f” and “i” are printed next to each other, they are combined into a single figure with the dot absorbed into the “f”, which appears as “fi”. This is just one of a series, which is comprised of ligatures for “fl”, “ff” (absent in English but encountered in Norwegian and other languages where j represents a vocalic or semi-vocalic sound), “fi”, “ff”, “ffl”, and “fft”. Formerly there were the additional members for “fa”, “fe”, “fo”, “fr”, “fs”, “ft”, “fu”, “fy”, and for the set of “fi” followed by a period (full stop), comma, or hyphen, as well as the equivalent set for the doubled “ff”, though “fft” was omitted.

More ligatures were developed for italic fonts rather than Roman ones. Fonts in italics used the “Long s” in ligatures for “sh”, “sch”, “sp”, “sf” and “sz”, among others mentioned on this page. There are also examples for the forms “as”, “ch”, “ck”, “nd”, “ng”, and “ff”. And there is one to make the tail for “Q” reach under a “u”, though this was also done by kerning or a character for “u” that included a tail sweep beneath it.

One Roman font by the French typefounder Garamond has a small capital ligature “Rx” for use in prescriptions, short for the Latin word “recipe”, meaning “take”. The same font has a minuscule “l” linked to a following apostrophe, for use in such French phrases such as “l’amour”.

The cursive Snell Roundhand has a ligature “o’c” for the single use in the English phrase “o’clock”, as its letter “c” has an extended flourish. For use in ordinal numerals in English, the font has raised small minuscules for “nd”, “rd”, “st”, and “th”.

A Roman typeface by William Elder had a distinct “ll”. He decorated the second “l” with two nibs at mean line height, and put it in a ligature so as not to get it confused with an ordinary “l”, to which he gave just one.

Zuzana Licko’s Mrs Eaves has a wide range of ligatures, including “cky”, “qf”, “gy” and “tty” in the italic. Some unusual combinations are found in Jack Yan’s JY Integrity from 1995, including “gr”, “gy”, “tr”, “fr” and “ty” in roman and italic versions. Stylistic ligatures may become more common with the development of the OpenType technology, which allows automatic substitution of two separately typed letters in certain programs such as Adobe InDesign.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ligature_(typography)