

Widows and Orphans and
Hyphens—Oh My!

Walton Mendelson

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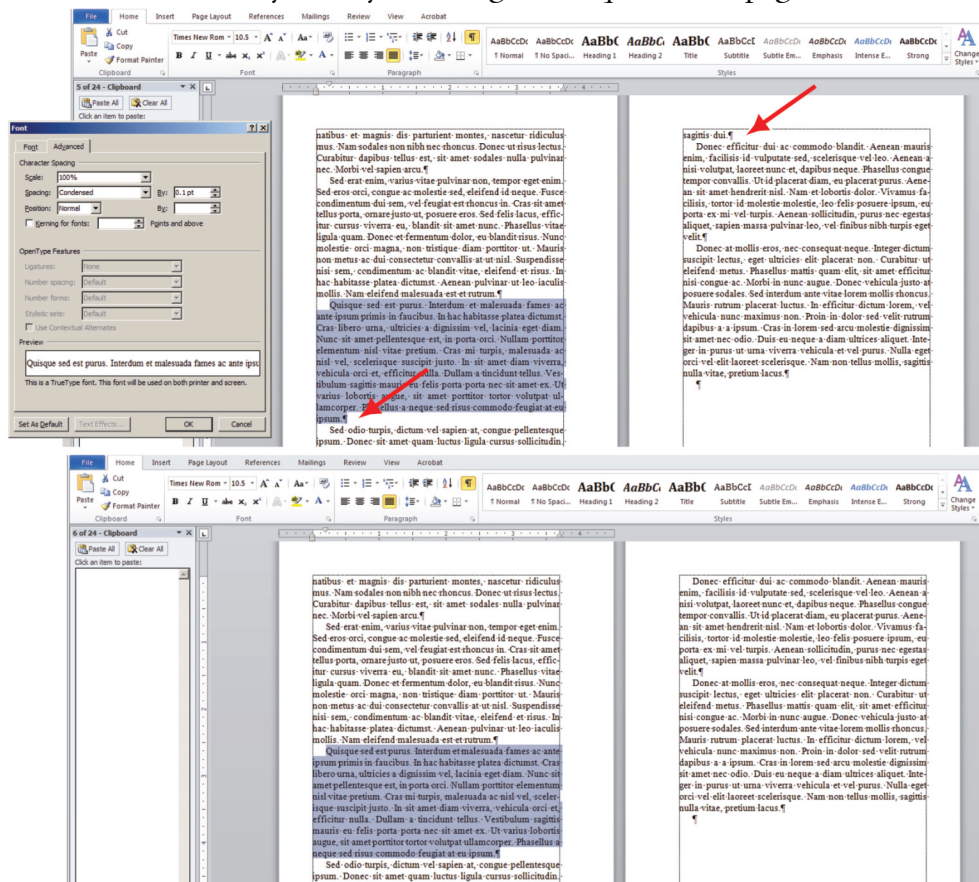
Widows: the last line of a paragraph at the top of a page or column.

Orphans: 1) the first line of a paragraph at the bottom of a page or column; 2) a very short last line of text in a paragraph. The second definition may be a regionalism; Adobe calls these runts.

In a survey of several hundred books—all from traditional book publishers, ranging from 1900 to 2023, including many high-end, limited edition books, and books designed by people like Hermann Zapf, Bruce Rogers, Eric Gill, Frederick Goudy, etc.—I found no book had widows, and every book had orphans of both definitions.

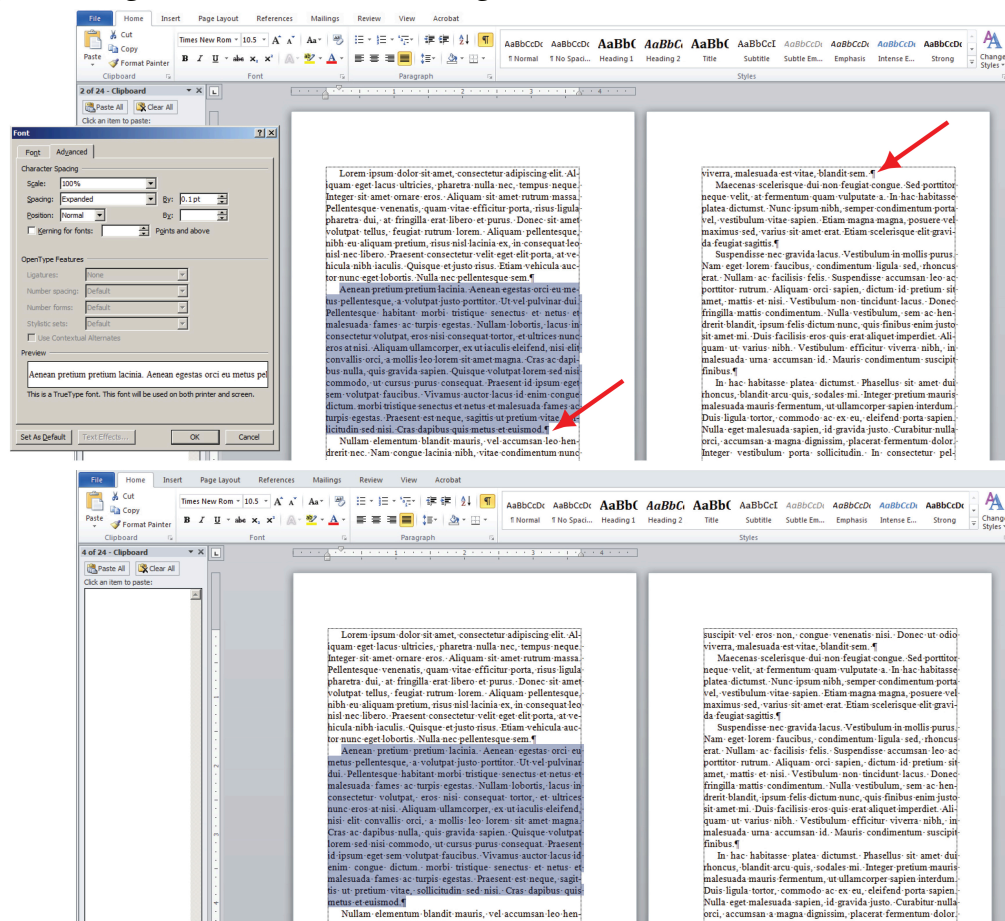
Removing widows and orphans—widows in particular—should be done, manually. Most word processing and page layout programs have some sort of Widow and Orphan Control option. This will lengthen or shorten the line count to eliminate them. While there are designers today who have no problem with longer or shorter pages (that is, uneven vertical alignment), within the more traditional aesthetics of book design, it is considered vulgar; although you will sometimes see a two-page spread that is longer or shorter by a line or two. Another popular solution is scaling, where the size of some number of selected words is increased or decreased by say 1%–3%. Scaling is used to control both widows and orphans, and end-of-line hyphenation.

The traditional method: somewhere before the widow, you can either remove a line to pull the widow back to the bottom of the page, or add a line to push another line of text from the bottom of one page to the top of the next. Sometimes you may have to go back quite a few pages, and sometimes you might



Pulling Back the Widow

create a widow somewhere else after the widow you've fixed. To add or remove lines, increase or decrease tracking or letter spacing or word spacing. Depending on the program you are working in, this could be done to a word, a line or an entire paragraph. Or you can place the cursor in front of or within the last word of a line and hit [Shift] [Enter] to force a line break. This is called a soft return. A soft return is also handy for fixing lines that are either too tight or too loose.



Pushing Down the Widow

In these two examples, both in Word, I used *Font > Advanced > Spacing* and either Condensed to pull back the last line of the paragraph and thus pulling back the Widow, or Expanded to push down an extra line of the paragraph and thus pushing the Widow down a line. Sometimes creating a line break with [Shift] [Enter] can often add a line to a paragraph. Which methods you can vary from page to page. Different fonts are more or less accommodating. Sometimes, even coming back the next day, changes the choices.

These are fairly simple examples, and Word doesn't offer as many adjustments as a desktop publishing program. However, very good work can be done in Word, arguably better than with cold metal type.

Using hyphens and soft returns is fairly straight forward. To add a little space between the words of the first line and at the same time close up the wide spaces in the second line, I used a soft return:

window towards the back of the entry, you at last come to the conclusion that such an idea, however wild, might not be altogether unwarranted.

But what most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast.

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The cursor was placed before the final *a*, hold the shift key down and hit enter. This forces the line to break before the *a*.

Below, the first highlighted line is too open and the second line is tiny bit tighter. The cursor was placed between the *to p*'s in disappointed and I typed in a hyphen.

tucked it under my arm, and started for Cape Horn
and the Pacific. Quitting the good city of old
Manhatto, I duly arrived in New Bedford. It was a
Saturda night in December. Much was I
disappointed upon learning that the little packet for
Nantucket had already sailed, and that no way of
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Word accepted the adjustment, but sometimes it doesn't: then you can adjust the letter spacing to make it fit.

representing a tall straight jet of misty spray, and
these words underneath—"The Spouter Inn:—Peter
Coffin."
Coffin?—Spouter?—Rather ominous in that
particular connexion, thought I. But it is a common
name in Nantucket, they say, and I suppose this Peter
here is an emigrant from there. As the light looked so

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Top left—the first line is too widely spaced. Inserting a hyphen into "particular" did not cause Word to hyphenate the word as it did in the previous example (top right). Bottom left, I selected the letters before the hyphen, and condensed the spacing by 0.1 pt (see illustration on first page). Lower right—the compression is not too bad, and the words are better spaced.

I believe that both justified and ragged right text benefit from hyphenation. I have seen a few books without hyphens that look great, but it's rare.

There are some traditional do's, don'ts, and considerations: Do hyphenate justified text. Don't have more than two consecutive end-of-line hyphens. Don't hyphenate the last word of a page, especially before a page turn. Consider hyphenating text set ragged right. Consider hyphenating capitalized names. Divide words between syllables; preference to prefixes and suffixes make good divisions. Divide hyphenated words at the existing hyphen. The hyphen belongs with the first part of the word.

Workflow: generally permit hyphenation (most programs let you define some settings, e.g. the number of consecutive hyphens—choosing settings that produce fewer hyphens is a good place to start), then look for widows. Go back through the book looking for lines that are too tight or too loose. Check for hyphens at the end of pages. Double check for widows.

Every once in a while, I will run into widow I cannot seem to remove. Ninety percent of the time if I leave it and return to it the next day, I find the solution quickly.

I view the removal of widows and adjusting tight and loose lines as an opportunity to scan the pages with an eye to finding other problems.