Tutorial

Create your own graffiti fonts

Make graffiti in your own style by building handwritten font sets in Photoshop, Illustrator CS2 and Fontographer…

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Most of us walk, cycle or drive past graffiti for most of our lives, often without even being aware of the tags, outlines and pieces in our urban environment. Graffiti is strategically placed on buildings and billboards that are impossible to overlook, or in obscure spots that are like little treasures when discovered.

As the graffiti movement inspired by 1970s New York has spread across the world, each city or region has developed a distinct style, providing plenty of inspiration for the observant designer. In this tutorial, we're going to use some of these ideas to create a graffiti font.

If you already have a graffiti style of your own or know a graffiti writer who can produce some lettering for you, then the work will be easy to convert into a font. If you are less familiar with graffiti, grab your camera and get outside. Take pictures of graffiti letters, tags, throwups — whatever pieces you find that capture your attention — and begin to practise the different styles by hand until you find one you are pleased with. In doing so, you'll quickly realise the close relationship graffiti shares with typography and graphic design.

If you are itching to make your own graffiti font and do not have the time to create your own, there's a hand-styled design on the CD so you can get started. To complete this tutorial successfully, you must be competent in *Fontographer*, *Photoshop* and *Illustrator CS2*.

Expertise provided by Stephen Faustina, the art director on Francis Ford Coppola's *All-Story* magazine and a mainstay of graffiti culture, both in conventional media and on the street. See more at **[w]** www.sfaustina.com.

The components needed to complete this tutorial can be found on the *Computer Arts Projects* disc 81 in the DiscContent>Tutorials>Tutorial Files>Graffiti Fonts folder.

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Part 1: Getting started

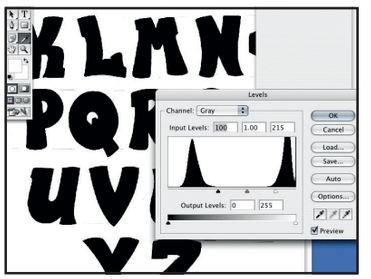
Design a character set and convert to vector-based shapes

Biting

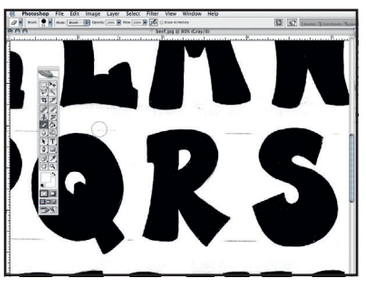
Any graffiti you gravitate to is solely a piece of inspiration to get you creating your font set. In graffiti culture, to directly copy a writer's letters or style is referred to as biting. We've provided few examples, taken in San Francisco, on the CD; look in the Inspiration folder.

1 Test out different felt pens, such as pilots, paint pens and ultrawide markers. The darker the ink is, the easier it is to convert to vector. Explore ink flows and tip thicknesses: these can contribute to your own graffiti hand style. Keep repeating the alphabet, including arrows, asterisks or simple characters you want in your graffiti font set.

2 After you have found a pen and a style you are comfortable with, start writing out your full character set in sequence. Make sure the letter size and styling stays consistent: pay attention to consistency in shapes such as ascenders and descenders. The CD includes examples for reference or to use in the rest of this tutorial.

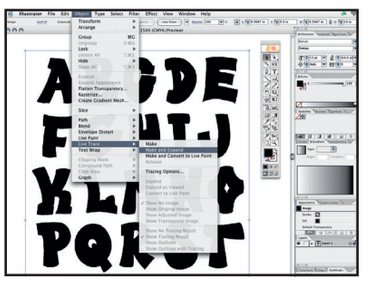


3 Scan the sketches into *Photoshop* in greyscale mode at 300dpi. If you are using the CD examples, open beef.jpg in *Photoshop*. Now we'll darken the letters so they are solid black, making it easier to convert the letters to vector. Choose Image >Adjustments>Levels. Set the input levels to 100, 1.00 and 215. Select Layer>Flatten Image.



4 Using the Eraser tool, clean up the corners and any spots, dust and pencil marks you find around each letter. Smooth out any abrupt inconsistencies in the line, ready for when the letters are converted to vector. When satisfied, save the file as beef.tif and close.

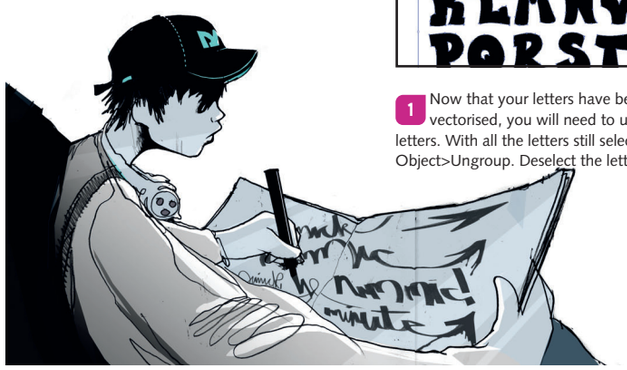
5 Now launch illustrator CS2 and open the beef.tif file. Next, we are going to make the letters into vector art with the new Live Trace feature in *Illustrator CS2*. If you don't have *Illustrator CS2*, you can make your vector in either *Streamline* or *Corel Trace*.

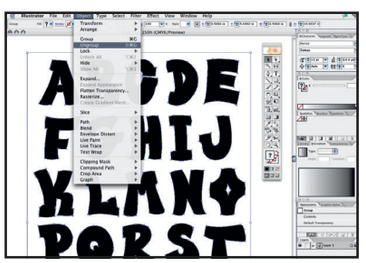


6 To make your vector in *Illustrator CS2*, select the letter file and go to Object>Live Trace >Make And Expand. If a dialog box appears saying, "Tracing may proceed slowly", click OK to continue. *Illustrator* now converts each shape to a vector.

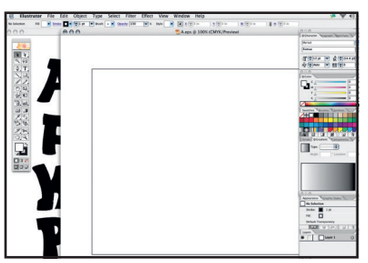
Part 2: Building your alphabet

Make a template so your font set is consistent

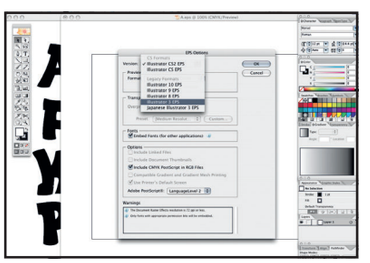




1 Now that your letters have been traced and vectorised, you will need to ungroup all the letters. With all the letters still selected, go to Object>Ungroup. Deselect the letters.

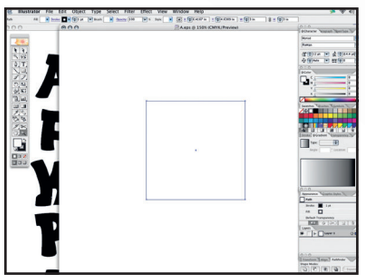


2 Save this *Illustrator* file and name it letterstage.ai. At this point, we are going to start building our first letter of the alphabet. Keep the letterstage.ai document open, then create a new *Illustrator* document: name it A.eps and make the artboard A4 with a landscape orientation.

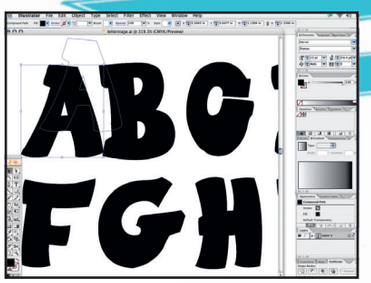


3 We must change this file to an *Illustrator 3* EPS to enable its import into *Fontographer*. Select File>Save As from the Format dropdown menu, then select Illustrator EPS and click Save. The EPS Options window will open. Select Illustrator 3 EPS from the Version dropdown menu and click OK.

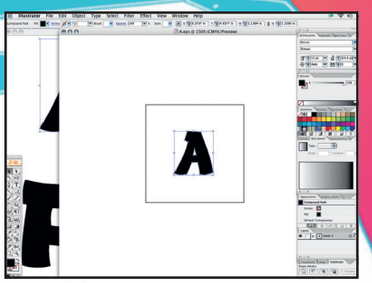
Building your alphabet continued...



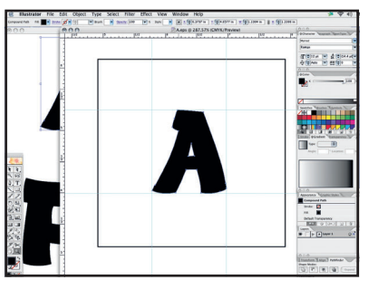
4 In the A.eps file, use the Rectangle tool to create a 3x3-inch 1pt stroke with no fill square in the middle of the artboard.



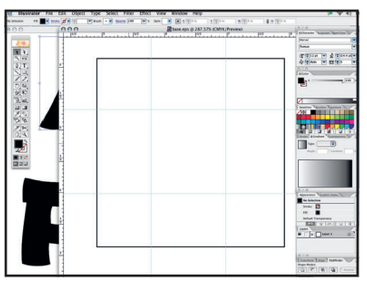
5 Go to your letterstage.ai document. With the Selection tool, select the letter A from your alphabet. Make sure not to select any of the white mask area that was created during Live Trace, and also make sure only the points forming the letter A are selected.



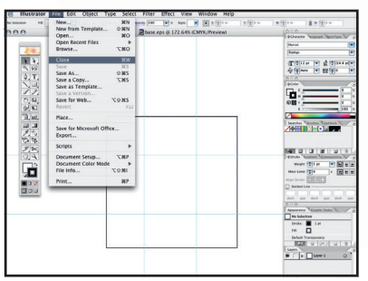
6 Drag the selection onto the A.eps document and position the letter in the middle of the 3-inch square.



7 Now drag in guides around each side of the letter A, enclosing the area it occupies, and save the A.eps file.



8 We will now use this document and its guides as a template to be used for the remaining characters, as well as for future fonts. Delete the letter A, then use Save As to save a new version of the file, naming it base.eps. Make sure it's an *Illustrator 3* EPS, as you did before.



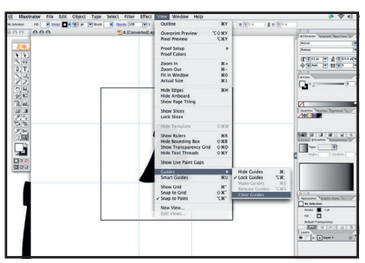
9 The area defined by the guides will be used for each letter hereafter: the top and bottom of each letter needs to fit within the guides. If a letter is too small or too big, we'll simply scale it to fit within the guides. Now close the base.eps file.

Part 3: Creating more letters

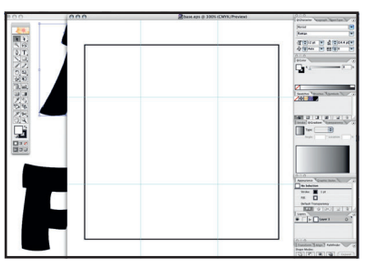
Make individual files for each character in your font set

Straight-letter styling

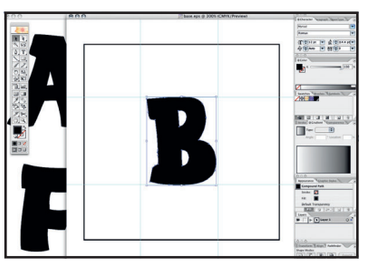
On the CD, SKERT is an example of a straight-letter graffiti style: the letters are neither bubble-style, common in throwups, nor abstract, common to piecing. If this is the style you want to achieve, this is a great photo to work from.



1 Open your saved A.eps file. We need to clear all the guides, because *Fontographer* will have problems with these when it imports the EPS files. Go to View>Guides>Clear Guides. Save the file and close. Well done: you've just completed your first graffiti letter.



2 With the letterstage.ai file still open, we are going to reopen the base.eps file that we created earlier. You should have a blank document with guides.



3 Go back to the letterstage.ai file and select the letter B, making sure you select only the points forming the B. Drag it to the base.eps file.

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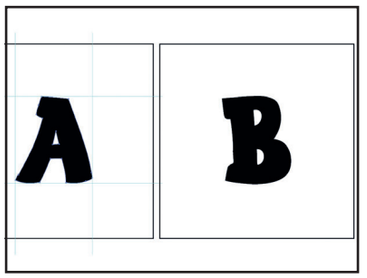
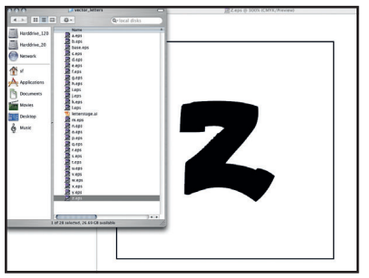
Creating more letters continued...

Overlapping letters

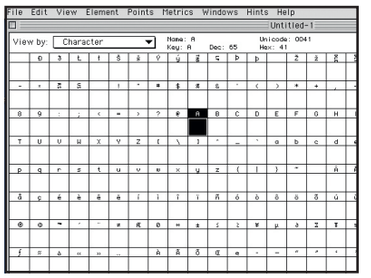
On the CD, ADIOS demonstrates a key element of graffiti, the use of overlapping letters. Rarely will you find on the streets a graffiti writer who leaves behind their word without at least one pair of overlapping letters. If your goal is to achieve an authentic street feel for your font set, overlapping letter spacing is essential.



4 Position the shape in the centre of the guides. Optically scale the letter to the same height as the A. Now go to View>Guide>Clear Guides. Use Save As to rename the file B.eps, then save it alongside your A.eps file, again making sure it's an *Illustrator 3* EPS.



5 Repeat this procedure until you have all the letters for your alphabet. Save each letter as an *Illustrator 3* EPS file, and name each letter accordingly. Remember to remove the guides before saving each letter: you can use Edit>Undo to reinstate the guides quickly, rather than reopening the base.eps file each time.



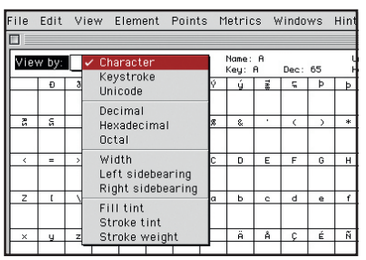
6 We are finished with *Illustrator*, and are now going to launch the *Fontographer* application. You can use *Font Lab* instead if you prefer. Once *Fontographer* is opened, select File>New Font. Your work area containing all related characters of a font will be in this window.

Part 4: Converting your font

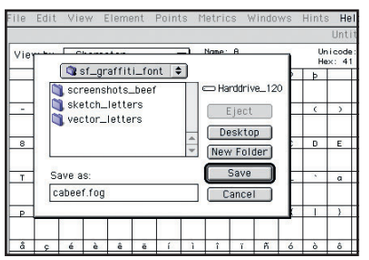
Paying attention to font spacing will create a graffiti-like feel later on

3D shadows

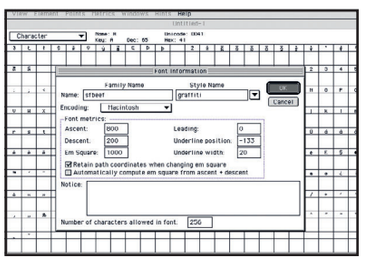
A 3D-effect shadow is an essential element of graffiti: it makes the writing more noticeable. On the CD, OBCES is an example of frontward 3D shadowing. The best thing to do is experiment with shadowing until you are satisfied.



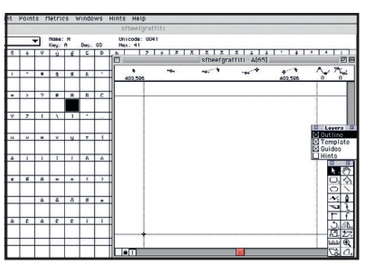
1 By default, the *Fontographer* work area window's View mode should be Character mode: if it isn't, change it now using the View By dropdown menu.



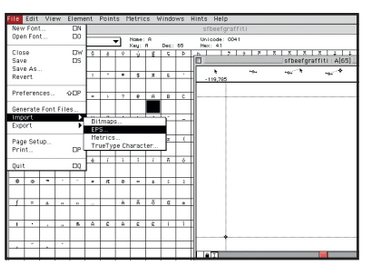
2 Name and save this *Fontographer* file as cabeef.fog. Now it's time to make this graffiti font official by giving it a name.



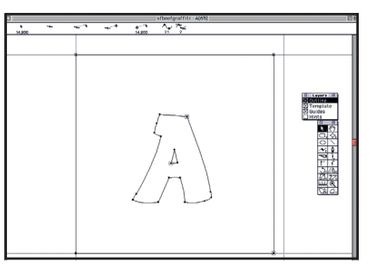
3 Select Element>Font Info: the Font Info dialog box will appear. Under Family Name, type 'sfbeef'; under Style Name, type 'graffiti'. Click Okay. Now let's prepare to import all the *Illustrator* letter files we made.



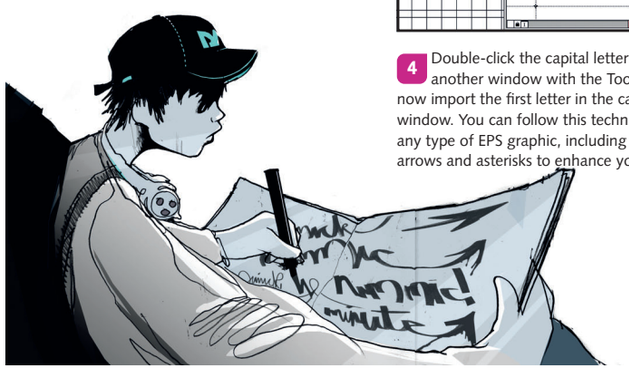
4 Double-click the capital letter A, opening another window with the Tool palette. We will now import the first letter in the capital A character window. You can follow this technique to import any type of EPS graphic, including elements such as arrows and asterisks to enhance your font set.



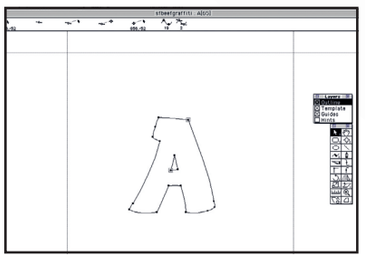
5 Go to File>Import>EPS. Select the folder enclosing your characters, and choose A.eps. Click Open.



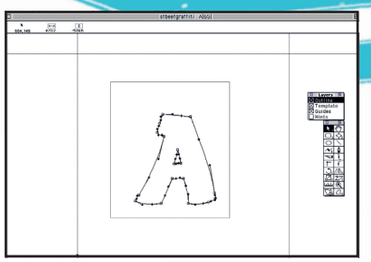
6 The A.eps letter file now appears in the middle of the window, showing you an outline preview of the letter. You'll notice that the square we made around the A in the *Illustrator* EPS file is still there.



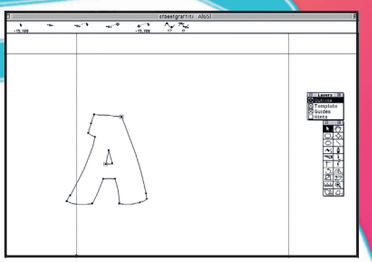
Converting your font continued...



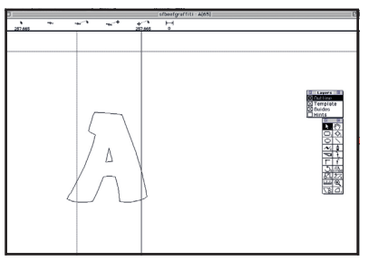
7 Using the Selection tool from the Tool palette, we'll delete the four corner points that make up the square. It's easiest to delete two points at a time by dragging the cursor over the two top points and deleting, then repeating the step for the bottom two points. Make sure not to select any of the points forming the letter itself.



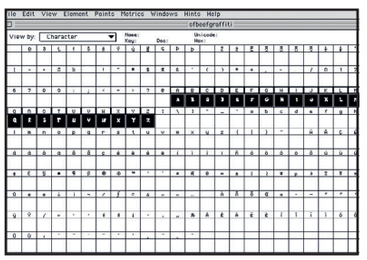
8 Now we are going to move the letter A to the left, creating graffiti-style letter spacing for the final font. With the Selection tool, highlight the entire A.



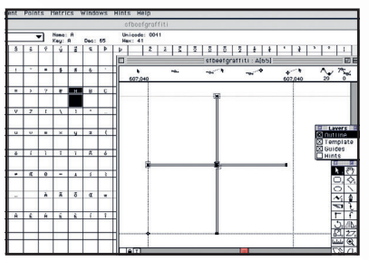
9 Use the left arrow key on the keyboard to move the letter. You are going to move the letter until the letter slightly overlaps the left vertical line. Deselect the letter.



10 Pull the right-side vertical line to the right side of the A. The proximity of the lines to either side of the letter determines the letter spacing when the font is in use. Graffiti writing is usually executed so that letters touch or overlap. Experiment with the spacing until you are satisfied.



11 The letter A is complete, so you can now close this window. Do the import and alignment procedures for the rest of your alphabet, remembering to import each letter into its correct letter window. Remember to save the cabeef.fog file periodically to preserve your work.



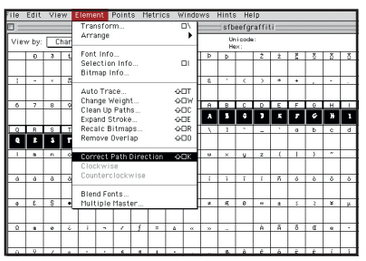
12 If a cross graphic appears in the window as you import any character, it means you forgot to delete the guides on your EPS file. Simply go back and clear the guides, then re-import the EPS file.

Part 5: Finishing your font

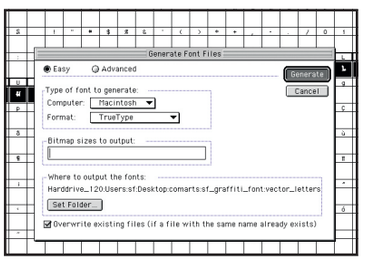
It's time to convert your characters into a true font

More inspiration

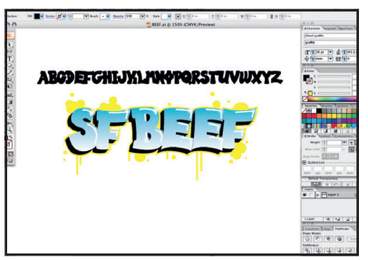
To get more ideas, check out the books *Subway Art*, *Faith of Graffiti*, *Getting Up*, *Spraycan Art* and *Bloodwars Volume One*; and the videos *Style Wars*, *Beat Street*, *Quality of Life*, *State Your Name*, *Piece by Piece* and *Wild Style*.



1 After importing each EPS letter into its appropriate box, choose Edit>Select All. With all the letters selected, choose Element>Correct Path Direction: this will remove any overlapping shapes or unwanted paths. The last step is to generate the font file.



2 Select File>Generate Font Files. The Generate Font Files dialog box will appear: the Easy option should be selected by default. Under Type Of Font To Generate, choose between Mac or PC for the Computer option. For the Format option, select TrueType. Click the Generate button to finish.



3 Now load the TrueType file into your font library and test it out. Make sure the Caps Lock key is selected as you type: the graffiti font is placed in the upper case character windows of *Fontographer*. You can always go back into your original cabeef.fog file to resize letters or adjust spacing. ca-p

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