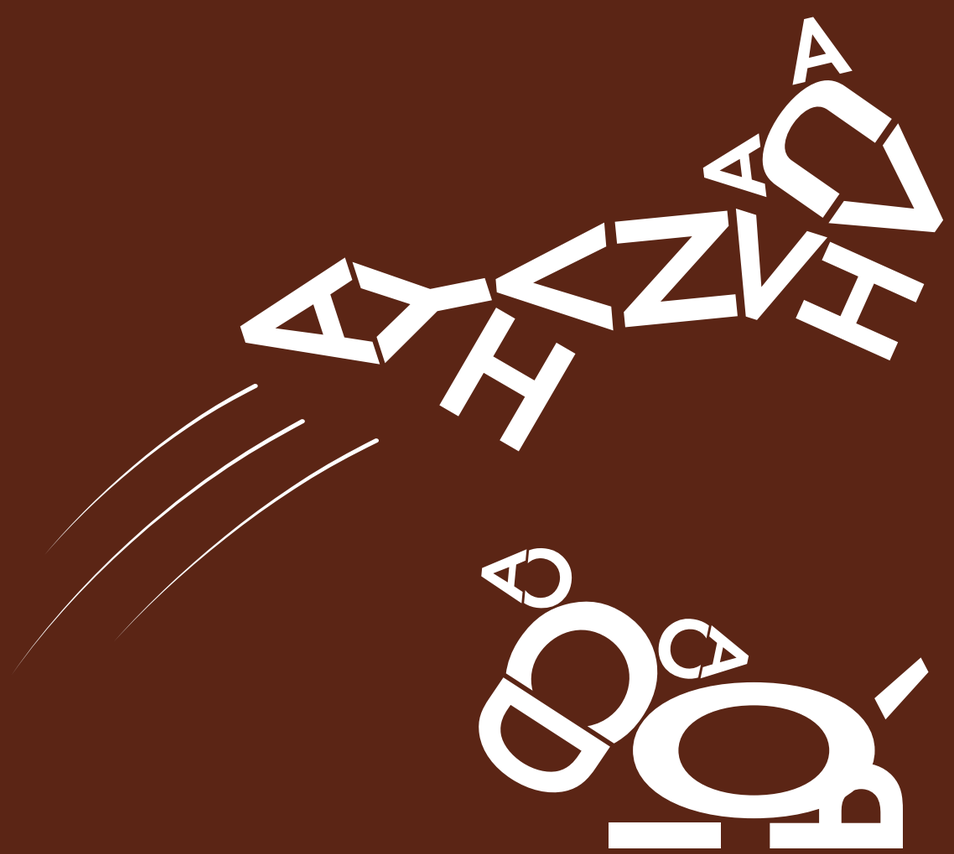
THE NOMENCLATURE AND FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURES OF LETTER FORMS



INTRODUCTION

Too often, in a discussion of typefaces, the lack of a generally accepted nomenclature for basic strokes produces a troublesome handicap. As a result, either the risk of vague and ambiguous improvised terms must be taken, or an excessive amount of time must be spent in explanation. The purpose of this section is to suggest a standard terminology for the basic strokes of the conventional letter form. It should be noted that no attempt has been made to standardize any but basic structures. It would be extremely difficult to label every minute characteristic of individual typefaces. The subtle features of a letter form do not lend themselves to the same kind of analysis that can be applied to a strict geometric form; in noting the finer characteristics of various letter forms, it is better to rely upon our powers of description.

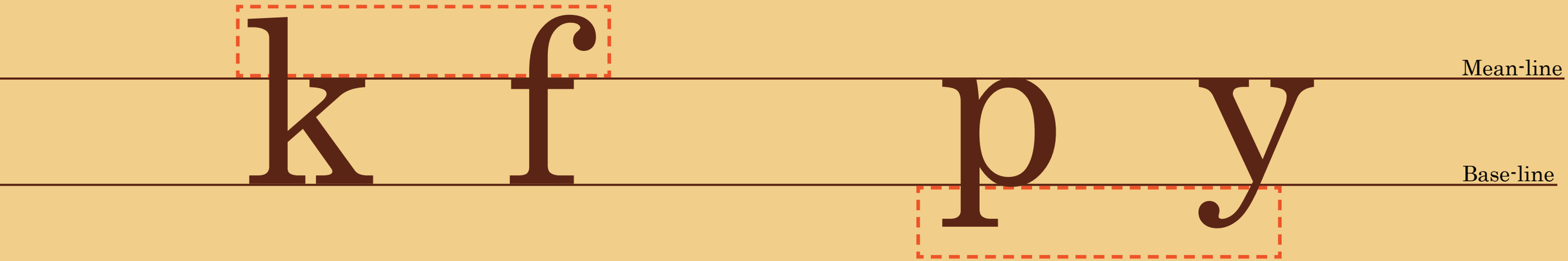
The material which follows is based upon Joseph Thorp's Nomenclature of Letter Forms and has been modified and reorganized with the permission of the Monotype Corporation, Ltd., of London.

CAP-LINE, MEAN-LINE, BASE LINE, AND DESCENDER LINE

ASCENDER AND DESCENDER

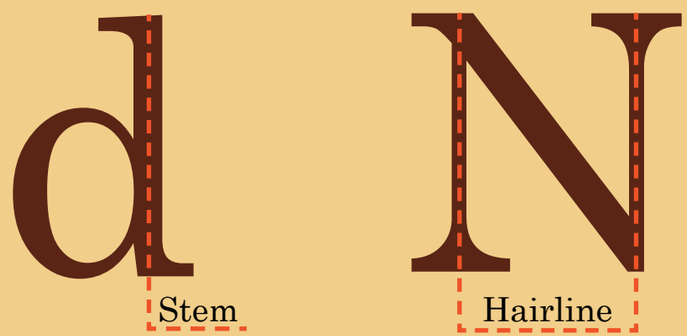
The **ascender** is the part of the lower-case letter which extends above the mean-line.

The **descender** is the portion which extends below the base-line.

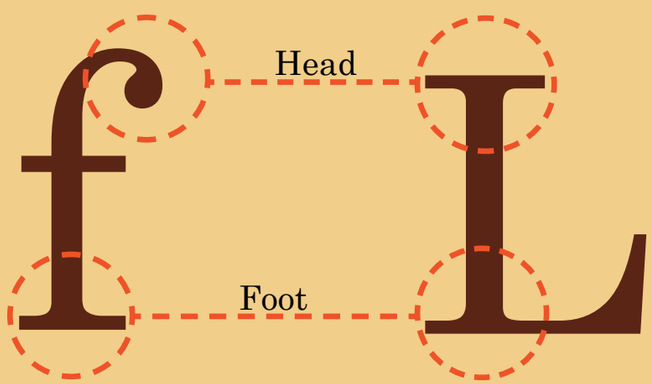


STEM AND HAIRLINE, HEAD AND FOOT

The term **stem** is used to identify the relatively thick vertical and oblique strokes of the letter form. **Hairline** is used to identify the relatively thin strokes.

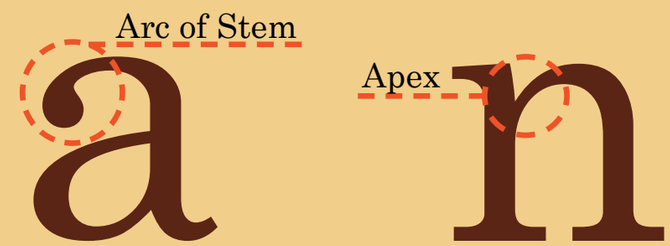


The **head** of the stem (or hairline) designates the general upper area of the stroke, while the **foot** denotes the lower area of the stem (or hairline).

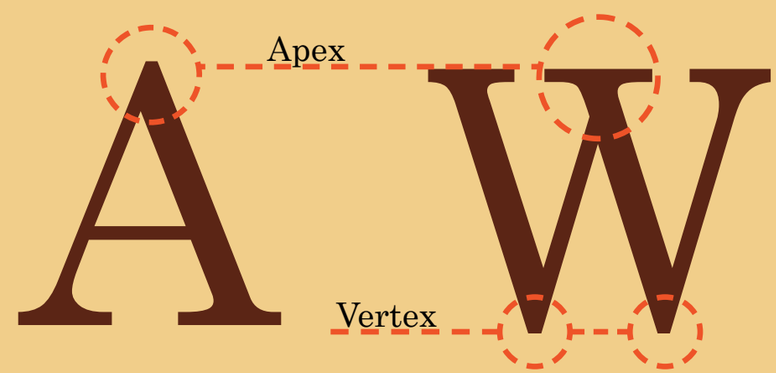


ARC OF THE STEM, APEX AND VERTEX

The curved part of the stems of letters a, m, n, and u is referred to as the **arc of the stem**.

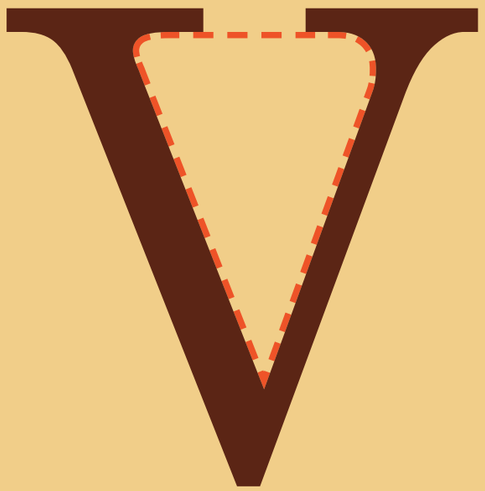


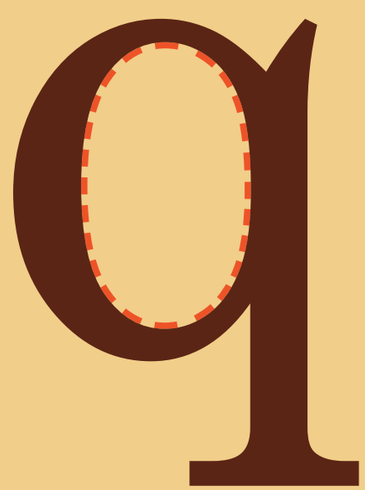
Apex is used when referring to the juncture of the stems and hairlines of A, M, W, and w at the top of the letter form; at the bottom of M, V, v, and w, this is called the **vertex**.

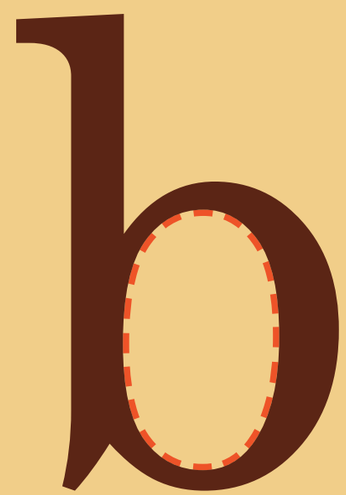


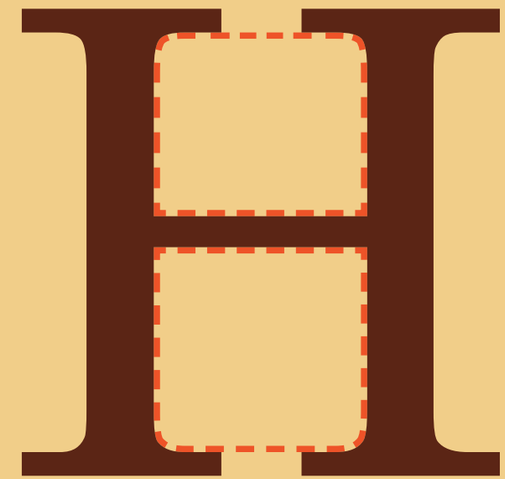
COUNTER

The term **counter** denotes the enclosed or partially enclosed areas of the letter form; shaded areas in the letter forms below are the counters.



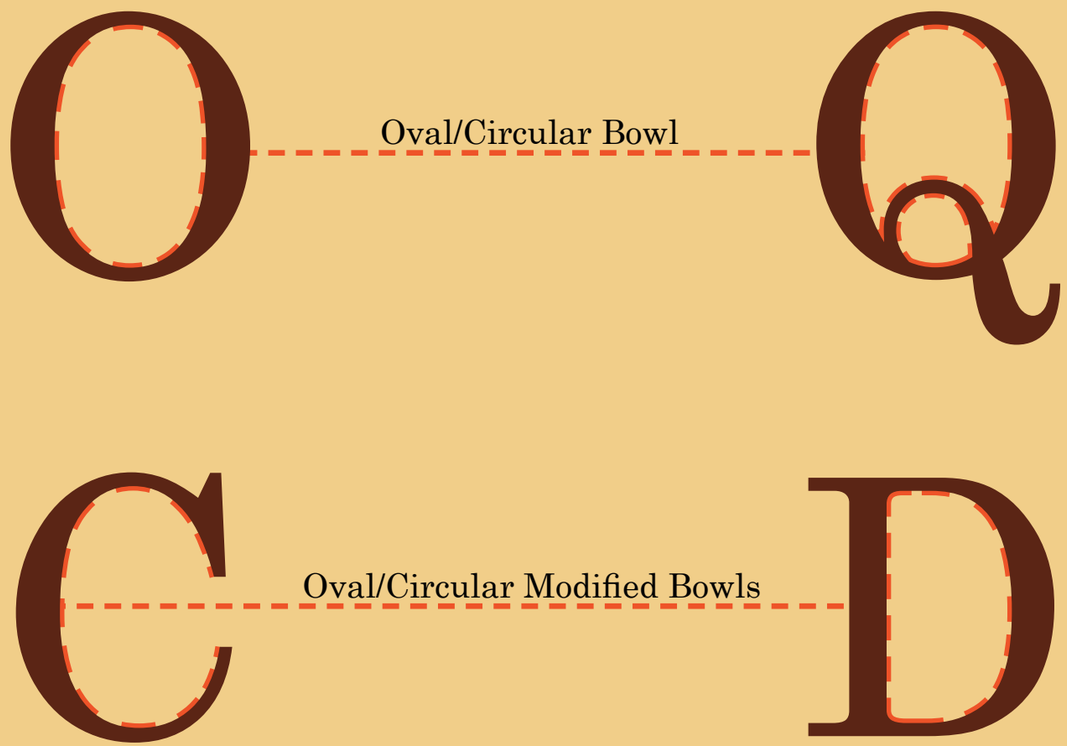






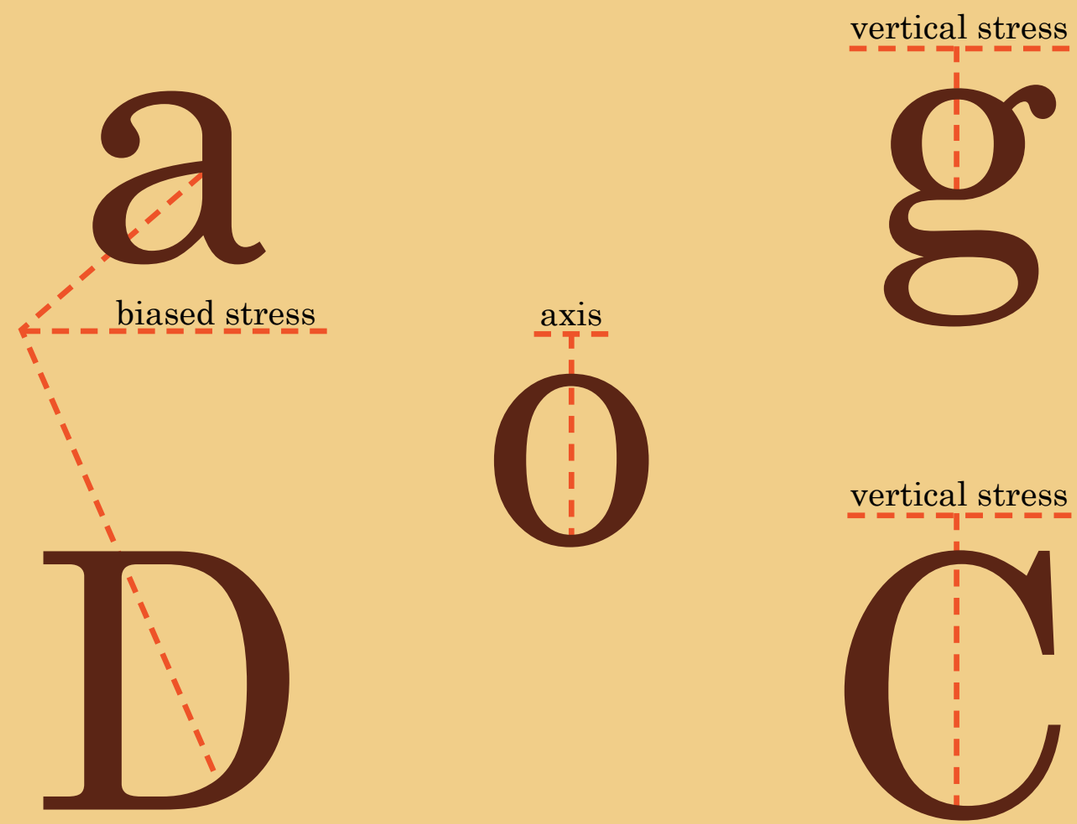
BOWL

The fully rounded (oval or circular) portion of the letter, or modification thereof, is referred to as the **bowl**.



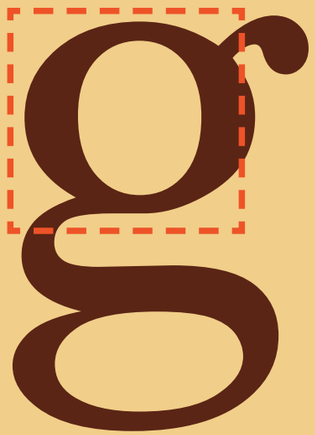
AXIS AND STRESS

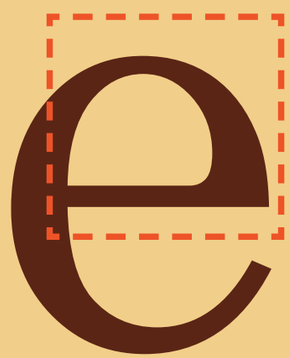
Apparent tilts in the **axis** of circular or oval letter forms are described in terms of **vertical stress** or **biased stress**.

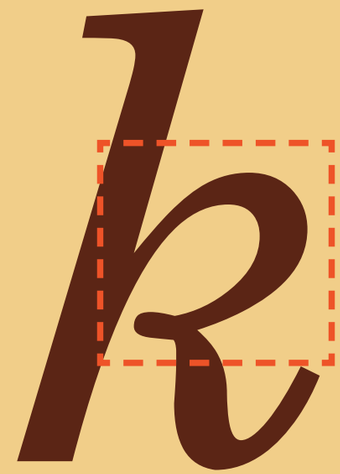


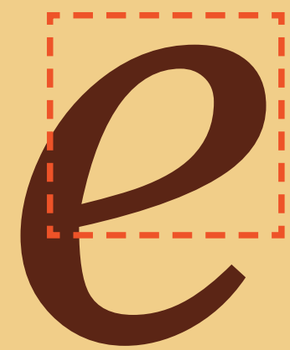
LOOP

The **loops** in roman and italic characters are special, rounded forms which cannot easily be identified as circular or oval in character.







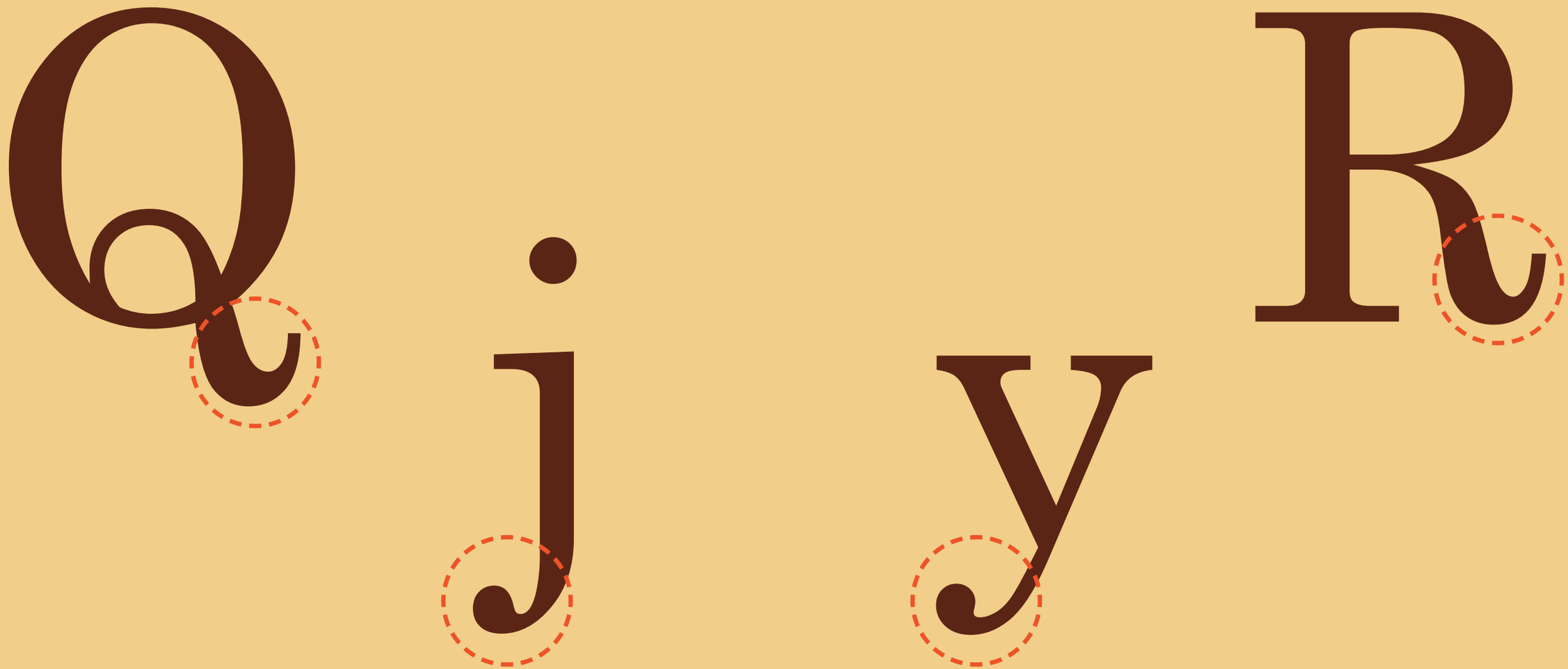


SPINE

The principal curved stroke of the character S is referred to as the **spine**.

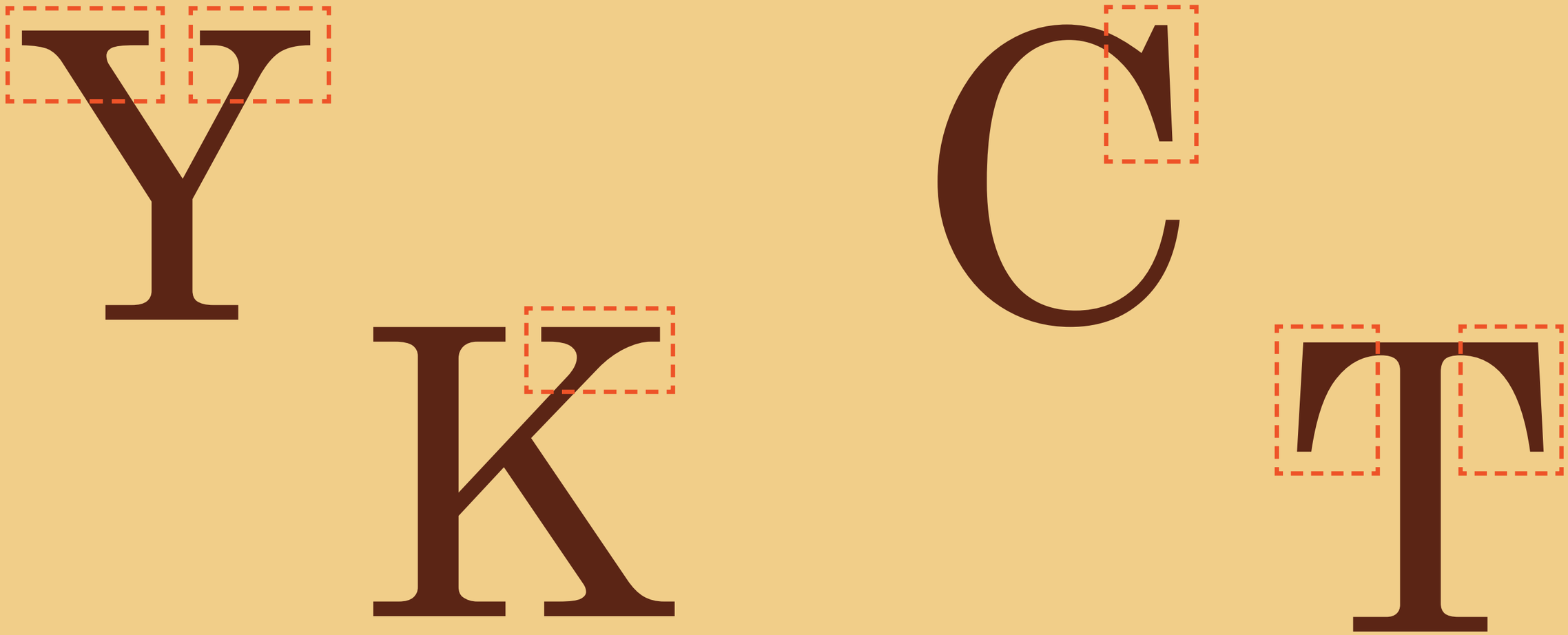
TAIL

The short, downward oblique or curved stroke of a letter form is identified by the term **tail**.



ARM

The **arms** of a letter form are the projecting horizontal, or short, upward-slanting strokes.

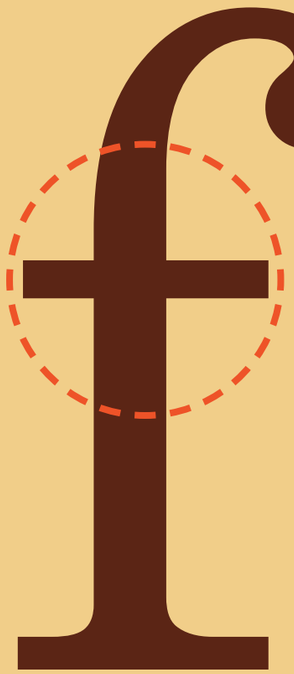


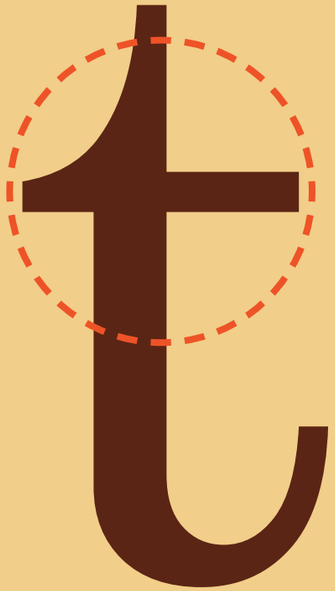
BAR

Closed horizontal strokes indicate the **bars**.

CROSS-STROKE

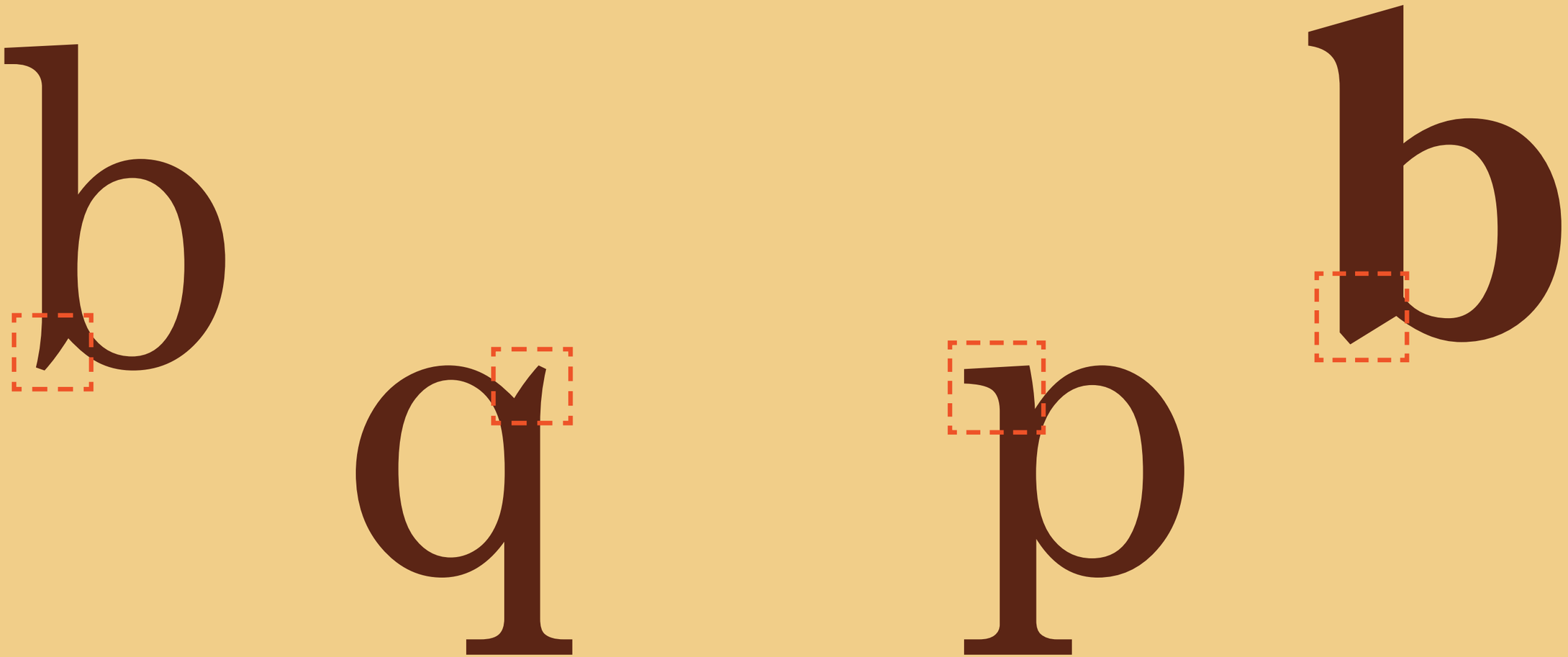
A short stroke which cuts across the stem is called the **cross-stroke**.





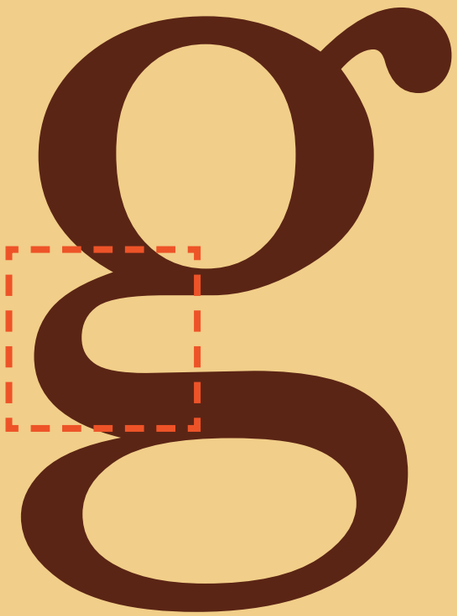
NICK

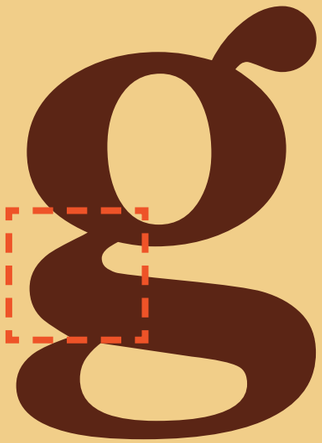
In studying the junction of the bowl with the stem of the lower case b and q, we find the terms **obtuse nick** and **acute nick** used.

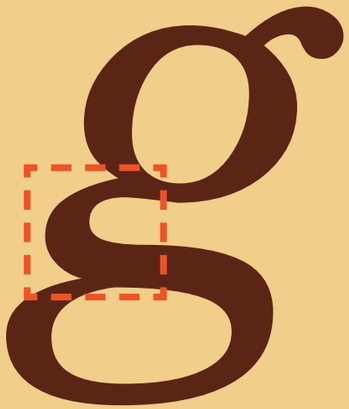


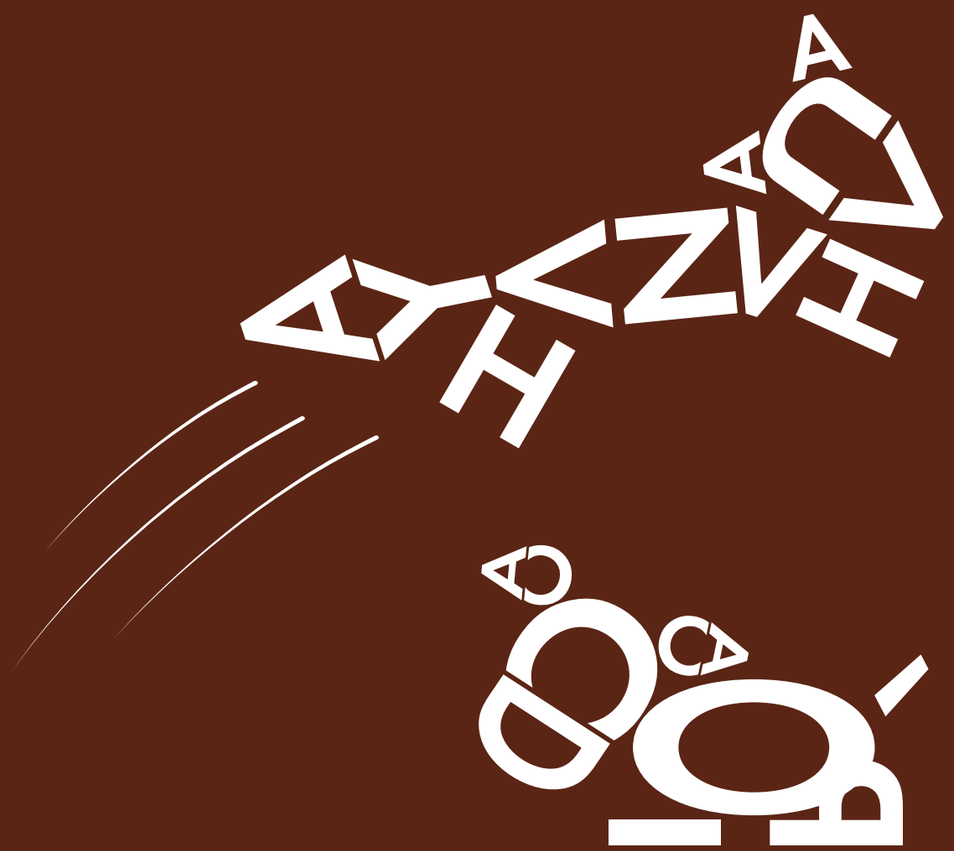
LINK/NECK

The perpendicular stroke joining bowl and loop of the lower case g is called the **link**, or **neck**.









CREDITS

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Typography
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Fonts Used
Century
Futura PT