Use shared strokes

Many letter pairs form natural links; they have identical parts or complementary shapes that fit like hand in glove. Let's begin with the easiest letters to link—those that have identical adjacent strokes.

HK

HK are an ideal pair; each letter is distinct from the other, but their adjacent stems are identical. Link by removing either stem and abutting the letters. Two colors put the emphasis on one letter or the other. This is a good way to handle an acronym in which the second letter is the more important.

Almost-identical strokes

Pairs like UR share not-quite-identical strokes, yet often flow naturally together. To link neatly, you must usually sacrifice some parts; here, the R gave up a foot, the U a serif.

In Illustrator, set the letters, *Create Outlines,* and move together. Cut away the unneeded pieces, leaving the remainders overlapped, then in the Pathfinder dialog, select *Add to shape area* (below).

Angled to vertical

Angled strokes often link well to vertical strokes. The easiest technique is simply to cut the angled letter in half.
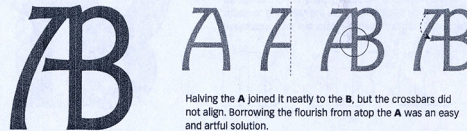
Halving the **A** joined it neatly to the **B**, but the crossbars did not align. Borrowing the flourish from atop the **A** was an easy and artful solution.

If your letterstrokes don't quite match . . .

AN an   **AN AN**

Try changing case
The lowercase alphabet is much different from uppercase, and many letters that do not link in one will link in the other. As a rule, lowercase imparts a less formal, more casual image.

Try a different font
Similarly, letters that don't link in one typeface may link in another. Try many! Typefaces that would be too stylized for everyday use often make excellent ligatures.

combining letterforms1.jpeg

Curved to vertical

The more decorative the typeface, the more easily dissimilar strokes can be linked. Even a curving stroke can replace a vertical. You need gentle curves, though, circles won't do (far right).

OD OD
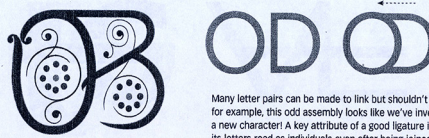
Many letter pairs can be made to link but shouldn't be; for example, this odd assembly looks like we've invented a new character! A key attribute of a good ligature is that its letters read as individuals even after being joined.

Uppercase-lowercase

Uppercase letters can often link to lowercase with excellent results. An uppercase I, though, won't link to anything—its body just disappears! But a lowercase i has the advantage of its distinctive dot and can link with many letters.

iM M iM
Distance   Color   Style
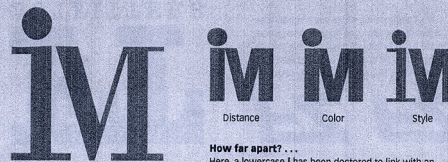
How far apart? . . .
Here, a lowercase **i** has been doctored to link with an uppercase **M**. Letters can be separated by distance, color, typestyle or any combination.

Horizontal crossbars

A few letter pairs share top crossbars, which are easy to link. Similarly, some typefaces have exaggerated serifs that can be linked.

FT
OUTFITTERS

FZ FZ

Crossbars link so obviously that in san-serif typefaces they can appear to be merely tightly kerned. To avoid this impression, add a pattern (above) or an outline (left). Better is to use a serif typeface and share the serif (left).

Mid-letter crossbars

Many letters, such as ABE-FHPR, have mid-letter crossbars that can be connected with a little help—just cut the letter apart and s-t-r-e-t-c-h the bar!

fe   **AF**

Key to this technique is to keep the letterforms distinct. You can do this by separating the letters with two colors (above) or for a one-color ligature by making a gap in the intersecting stroke (left).

combining letterforms2.jpeg

Reverse the field
Put negative space to positive use! Add a same-color field behind your letter, then reverse the second letter out of the field. Especially effective with three-character acronyms.

Set tightly . . .

. . . add a field . . .

. . . color.

(Colors added for clarity)

Crop!
Your intrigued reader will linger for valuable moments on this design! Crop away the bottoms of your letters, and the viewer's eye must complete the image. Add a company name or other horizontal graphic to span the gap (far right).

Reversing the field (light on dark) modifies the look and often improves it. Always check!

Remove a stroke
Here, a phantom stroke hints at what's not there! This is particularly effective with Modern typestyles such as Bodoni and Didi that have extremely thin strokes.

cosmetics

Remove one leg and move the letters together.

Remove part of a stroke
Letters with angled and overhanging arms—FKTVWXYZ—benefit from this technique, which is especially attractive in serif typestyles. The illusion is that of a stencil; the line is interrupted, yet our eyes "fill in" the missing part!

What's in the negative space?
Negative space is the area in and around your letters; it has shape and volume and always affects the viewer's perception. *Negative space is always present.* In the best design it plays an active role, as it does in the TP above. Watch your negative space!

combining letterforms3.jpeg

Interlock
Circular letters flow most naturally into other circular letters. Interlocked here like wedding bands or Olympic rings, two complete letters function as one.

Set
In Illustrator, set the letters, *Create Outlines,* and move together.

Divide
Select both letters, then in the Pathfinder dialog, click *Divide* (below).

Cut
Use the Direct Selection Tool to click an intersection, then *Cut.*

Overlay
A simple alternative to interlocking is to lay one letter atop the other, then "link" with a common fill or stroke. Here, a colorful gradient turns two letters into one object.

What colors?
Easily create a pleasing gradient by using *analogous* colors (colors adjacent on the wheel), in this case green to blue. Analogous colors *always* work well together.

Follow the white line
Create the *illusion* of attachment! Rather than abut letters, leave a gap, then make a flowing centerline that draws the eye smoothly around.

Don't close it! Doing so breaks the flow.

Disconnect and attach
An entertaining ligature unique to the T, disconnect one arm and attach it to its neighbor!

To maintain the form of both letters, keep the stroke widths the same.

combining letterforms4.jpeg

Build bridges

This technique works when nothing else will! Abut your letters, then conceal the junction with a decorative graphic, line or a series of lines and shapes. Easy, fun and always engaging.

FQ

Lay on top
Evenly spaced dots just lay on top.

SB

Paste into
Diagonal lines are "pasted into" (InDesign).

AH

Replace letter parts
Barely touching letters are brought together by playful shapes and colors.

RM

Fill a space
The diamond does double duty—it links the letters and helps form the shape of the R!

Use transparency

Transparency *softens*. Create a gossamer effect on even the boldest ligature by lowering the opacity of one or more characters. Here, all three letters are set at 50%.

abc
interior design

abc

Do you like the overlap effect but need strong colors? Keep your colors at 100% opacity, but in the Blending mode dialog select Multiply, which adds the colors of an object to the ones beneath it.

Color the negative spaces

Finally, some stubborn letters just won't link physically. So try linking the background! Put the letters in a box, and color the negatives spaces; you can get all kinds of energetic results!

DW

DW

No software stunts here. Just draw and color funny shapes behind the letters, then paste everything into a box.

combining letterforms5.jpeg