

## **OFF SET vs. SET OFF**

The question of the correct terminology was raised in the Q&A session at the end, with reference to the paper by Elena Fogolin, and led to an exchange of emails, that might be of interest, so we are adding them to the materials of the seminar.

**From:** JOHN LANCASTER <[jjlancaster@me.com](mailto:jjlancaster@me.com)>

**Subject:** Offset, set-off

I've seen these two forms used synonymously with regard to the phenomenon that was discussed (less common are "setoff" and "off-set", the latter I think employed in an attempt to distinguish it from offset printing). I have no sense that one is preferred over the other, except in any given individual's usage. I fear there will never be full agreement.

In searching any data base, I would always try both forms, maybe even all four.

But for what it's worth, Moxon's *Mechanick Exercises* uses "set-off" as a noun and "set off" as a verb, warning against allowing it to happen, either through bad ink or careless piling (before the ink is dry enough). So maybe with that historical technical precedent in usage, "set-off" should be preferred. I wonder what printers' manuals in other languages have to say.

Photoshop (and similar programs) are a great help to studying examples - I remember in my darkroom days, printing negatives in reverse to bring out the text of offsets in easily-readable form. Now you can just flip the image, darken, increase contrast, sometimes even filter the image to lessen the impact of the printed text.

Very informative presentations, Cristina - and good for the interns to have the sense of community, as well as the exposure.

All best wishes,

John

From: Neil Harris

Subject: Off set vs. Set off.

Dear John (and others),

I didn't quite catch the remark by Tabitha (?) about one being a verb and one a noun due to a bit of distortion. As John says, "set off" and "off set" (with formal variants) exist both as noun and verb and are applied in synonymous fashion in the literature. I prefer "set-off" in order to avoid confusion with the printing process, but, if we are talking about Renaissance printing, this is hardly an issue of moment.

There is also a question in Italian as to whether it should be "controstampe" or "contrastampe"; when I sent in the article cited below it was queried by Alessandro Olschki and I had to point out, as stated on the first page, that I was following the preference of Roberto Ridolfi.

Some of the relevant literature, including Moxon, who says "set-off", is quoted by self in: *L'Hypnerotomachia Poliphili e le contrastampe*, «La Bibliofilia», C, 1998, pp. 201-251, also in the volume: *Anatomie bibliologiche. Saggi di storia del libro per il centenario de «La Bibliofilia»*, a cura di Luigi Balsamo e Pierangelo Bellettini, Firenze, Olschki, Firenze 1999 (same paging). I can send an electronic offprint (off-print? printoff? print-off? ... why did English just not stick at being German and leave it at that?) to anyone interested. There is some subsequent literature on the matter, including an article by Edoardo Barbieri in the volume in honour of Conor Fahy in 1999.

The OED confirms that both "off set" and "set off" exist as noun and verb, and seems to favour the latter. It should be noted that "set off" is the older and goes back to Moxon. Note also Jacobi in 1888, so it may have been the trade (rather than the bibliographical) expression.

I agree with John, an enjoyable event, with people getting to visit some very interesting collections (something I no longer do ... sigh!). Cristina, it might be worth adding the present exchange to the day's proceedings in some way.

all the best

Neil

## OED ENTRIES

### 10. *Printing.*

**a.** The accidental transfer of ink from one page to another; an impression thus transferred; = [SET-OFF n. 5](#).

- 1888 C. T. JACOBI *Printers' Vocab.* 90 *Off-set*, the set-off of ink from one sheet to another of printed work whilst wet.
- 1888 C. T. JACOBI *Printers' Vocab.* 90 *Sheeted*, this expression is used when heavily printed work has to be placed sheet by sheet between other sheets to prevent off-set of ink.
- 1894 *Amer. Dict. Printing & Bookmaking* 407/1 If the paper is to be used immediately several plans are known for decreasing the offset.
- 1926 R. W. POLK *Pract. of Printing* xv. 116 Beginners often notice the offset on the back of the sheet, and say that the form has 'printed through'.
- 1952 R. W. POLK *Pract. of Printing* (rev. ed.) xvi. 127 Coarse or soft papers usually can be stacked up in reasonable piles without risk of *set-off*... The original term for this was *offset*... 2. The term *set-off* is a relatively new one..gradually superseding the term *offset*... However, some printers still use the word *offset* in both cases.

2001 *Edmonton (Alberta) Jrnl.* (Nexis) 26 Apr. 17 A new printing press, which called for specific sheet properties to minimize ink offset (the ink of one sheet rubbing off on the next).

5.

**a.** *Printing*, etc. The transference of ink from one page to another.

1842 *Penny Mag.* 24 Sept. 379 The rolling-press is found to be more efficacious than the hammer in producing less 'set-off', or transference of ink from one page to another.

1882 J. SOUTHWARD *Pract. Printing* 436 In this way only can 'set off' be prevented.

**b.** An impression transferred.

1839 T. C. HANSARD *Treat. Printing & Type-founding* (1841)  
138 Impressions in reverse, which, whilst the ink was yet fresh, were to be pressed strongly between clean paper, the set-off upon which would be fit for use.

1854 *Every Man his own Printer* 26 This will leave upon the stone what is termed a 'set off', or light transfer of the drawing.

4. *intransitive. Printing* = [to set off at SET v.1 Phrasal verbs 2](#). Also occasionally *transitive*.

1888 C. T. JACOBI *Printers' Vocab.* 122 When the ink off-sets from one sheet to another.

1894 *Amer. Dict. Printing & Bookmaking* 407/1 It must remain in a wet condition on the paper for some time before losing its moisture, and if touched in the meantime by the fingers or another sheet of paper some of it will smear or offset.

1926 R. W. POLK *Pract. of Printing* xv. 116 Sheets are said to be offset when ink from one is transferred to another. If freshly printed sheets are stacked too high, they will offset on one another.

1995 *Ink & Print* (Nexis) 22 Sept. 4 As the printed sheets are transported to the delivery, spray powder is applied via three nozzles to prevent ink offsetting onto other sheets.

**11. Printing.** To soil the next leaf or sheet: said of the ink or of the printed page.

1683 J. MOXON *Mech. Exercises* II. 76 Trane-Oyl..hinders the Inck from drying; so that when the Work comes to the Binders, it Sets off.

1777 in *Notes & Queries* 9th Ser. V. (1900) 189/1 [The binder] is particularly desired to beat the work before he places the cuts, in order to prevent the letterpress from setting off on the engravings.

1823 J. BADCOCK *Domest. Amusem.* 27 Some printers' works 'set off', as they term it, when the ink of one page leaves its impression upon the opposite page.

1883 R. HALDANE *Workshop Receipts* 2nd Ser. 343/2 An undue proportion of lampblack in the ink will cause it to smear,..and to 'set-off' during book~binding operations.