1 Statutory & regulatory baseline

Source	Rule
17 U.S.C. § 102(b)	Ideas, systems, and "methods of operation" aren't copyrightable.
37 C.F.R. § 202.1(e)	"Typeface as typeface" is excluded from registration.
U.S. Copyright Office Compendium (Third) § 906.4 + Circular 33 (2021 rev.)	Typefaces/lettering are "building blocks" and "not registrable," but a *computer program* that generates them may be.

2 Controlling case law

Holding	Key decision
Typeface designs are unprotectable industrial design.	*Eltra Corp. v. Ringer*, 579 F.2d 294 (4th Cir. 1978).
Digital *font software* (the Bézier-point data and accompanying code) *is* protectable as a computer program; copying that code infringes.	*Adobe v. Southern Software*, 45 USPQ2d 1827 (N.D. Cal. 1998).
Recent courts still draw the same line: typeface ↔ no, font software ↔ yes (if original).	*Laatz v. Zazzle*, No. 22-cv-04844, slip op. at ¶¶62-64 (N.D. Cal. 2023).

3 Why the line is drawn

- Fonts show letters needed to convey ideas → functional "methods of operation."
- Copyright protects expression, not the utilitarian letter shapes themselves.
- The *software* that tells a computer where to plot the points is a literary work under § 102(a)(1); that code can display unlimited shapes and thus is not bound to the "useful article."
- The Copyright Office's 1992 Policy Decision, 57 Fed. Reg. 6201, confirms that only the original computer instructions—not the glyph shapes—may be registered.

4 Key limitations

Limitation	Practical effect
Typeface shapes remain public-domain; anyone may draw the same letterforms.	
Only the exact digital data or code is protected; re-digitising the same outlines from scratch avoids infringement (*Adobe* notes this explicitly).	
Merger & scènes-à-faire doctrines: common stroke endings, overshoots, etc., are unprotectable.	
If the code was produced largely by an automated tool with minimal human choices, originality may fail (*Laatz*, at ¶¶64-70).	

5 Applying the rules to the hypotheticals

Scenario	Copyright outcome
A. "Font created by proprietary software." Designer chooses point coordinates, kerning tables, hinting, etc. -> those specific instructions constitute a computer program protectable as a literary work. Copying the *file* infringes; reproducing the letterforms independently does not.	
B. Designer merely types paths into an off-the-shelf generator that autocalculates all points. Originality is thin or absent; registration may be refused, and infringement suit will likely fail. (*Laatz* highlights this risk.)	
C. Each capital "A" integrates a realistic apple drawing. The drawing is a separable pictorial element; it can be registered and enforced. Others remain free to use the same underlying "A" outline without the apple. The apple graphic itself is protected.	

6 Other IP routes (outside the question's scope but often relevant)

Design patents can protect novel ornamental typeface for 15 years; trademarks can guard a font name (e.g., "Helvetica®") or a logotype. Neither changes the copyright analysis above.

Bottom line

Typeface designs per se are excluded from U.S. copyright. The digital files that instruct a computer how to render those designs qualify for protection if they embody at least minimal original code authored by a human. Decorative artwork embedded in a glyph is protectable—yet only the artwork, not the basic letterform, receives that protection.