While default letter spacing, the amount of space between characters, may be appropriate when working at text sizes, it is usually not appropriate when working at display sizes, even with sophisticated auto kerning functions. For that reason, application programs which include high end typography features, have techniques for adjusting the spaces between characters as well as the spaces between words (word spacing).

Tracking, also called letterspacing, is the overall or global spacing of letters and words in a block of type. It could be referring to an area as small as one word or as large as a book.

Kerning, on the other hand, refers to selective letterspacing or word spacing. That is the space between two specific letters or words.

The objectives of both tracking and kerning are:
- enhanced readability
- aesthetic considerations
- professional quality

Tracking, being the global approach, should be decided on and executed first. If kerning should be done before tracking, it is a waste of time, because the kerning relationships may need to be revised upon applying tracking.

Tracking is most frequently used to balance the positive and negative shapes between the letters and words. However, extreme tracking can also be used as a design approach as in the example below. When this technique is used, spacing should be exaggerated so that it is obvious that the open spacing is intended and not just “loose” conventional spacing. It is also frequently interesting to use a condensed font which has a vertical thrust in contrast to the wide spacing. A bold version of the font is also frequently better in this style because a more substantive font is usually needed. When working with open letterspacing the most conventional approach is to use all caps, as the graphic quality is stronger.

What is one attempting to achieve aesthetically? Primarily, the objective is to achieve a comfortable balance between the positive and negative elements dependent on the spacing of the typography. Try to forget that you are looking at a word meant to be read and evaluate it based on its visual quality. A good technique is to turn the word or words upside down which momentarily “tricks your left brain.” This allows you to be more intuitive about the visual spacing.

Generally speaking, how tight should the overall spacing be, vs how loose? You will get as many opinions on this as you have designers. Before the 1960’s it was technically very difficult to space type tightly. With the advent of phototype in the 60’s spacing became much more manageable, and the trend became to space type very tightly. However, the current norm is somewhere between the very loose spacing of the days before the 60’s and the extreme of the 60’s. Usually, for display type, the tracking needs to be negative, due to the large size of the letters. Some designers like some of the letters to touch while others do not. Frequently the type of job, font being used and other considerations contribute to this decision.
Once the aesthetic decisions have been made, how is the job actually accomplished? Keep in mind that kerning and tracking are based on the smallest horizontal measuring value—the unit. Units are relative to the size of the font being used. There are two commonly used methods to add or remove units: (1) character palette in the type menu, (2) use of arrow keys.

For tracking, select an area of type. For kerning, place the insertion point between the two characters to be kerned.

(1) If using the character palette technique, enter a value in the kerning box.
(2) If using the arrow keys, press the option key and the left or right arrow. The right arrow adds units and the left arrow removes units. The number of units to be added or removed each time is set in the Preferences dialog box (edit menu). 20 units is the default. If you have the Character palette open while using the arrow key technique, you can see the units changing as you use the arrow keys, and this helps you keep up with the amount you have kerned.

A kerning unit is relative to the font size used. It works like this:
An em space is equivalent to the font size being used; i.e. in 12 point font, an em space is 12 points. A unit is subsequently 1/1000 em. If you are using 12 point type, then one unit is equivalent to 12/1000 or 3/250 of a point.

Suffice it to say that a unit is the smallest value ever used, it is always a horizontal value, always used with type and is relative to the font size being used.