How to Become a Graphic Designer

All great designers start the same way – with an idea. The question is: where do you begin? How do you go from having an idea about a career to becoming a successful designer? You need a road map that will take you from complete beginner, to employable, to running your own business. Here, we guide you through the early steps of learning and training, so you’ll have the essential tools, skills, and knowledge to build a career with longevity and meaning.

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Getting Started: Build Your Foundation

You’ve loved to sketch, draw and paint your entire life – and having grown up in the world of social posts, hashtags, memes, and live streams – your computer skills are excellent too. So, when the time comes to choose a career, you’ve decided that a job in graphic design is not only going to ensure a steady paycheck, but also allow you to combine your gift for creativity with your computer skills. Graphic design professionals work in the commercial art industry, specifically, in advertising, marketing and identity branding.

Learn Basic Drawing Skills

Before approaching the commercial side of art, you need a basic ability to illustrate your ideas on paper. Many graphic designers begin every project with a series of “thumbnails” (small sketches that illustrate basic layouts and concepts) before turning their top selections into “roughs” (detailed layouts that illustrate the concept). They show these rough sketches to other professionals at their firm, including art directors, creative directors and account managers, and to clients. To express your ideas concisely, you need basic drawing abilities and a practiced clarity in your sketching that allows you to express your point of view. And, later, if you work in television, designing for commercial advertising, you’ll use those drawing skills to “storyboard” your concepts – thumbnail drawings that accompany the voiceover text and art direction.

Learn Graphic Design Theory – Typography, Color Theory, & Grid Systems

Graphic design is not simply slapping a fun font and a few images into a design. Instead, good design and strong layouts can be approached in a scientific manner. You must put a lot of effort into determining the correct imagery, layout, spacing, visual structure and appropriate typography, and an appealing design. Graphic designers must consider the white space around the design elements in the layout – clients don’t like paying for empty space! – or how headers and subheads can be a consistent size while fitting the space on the page. Designers must know how color and imagery impact individuals and how to manipulate them effectively to direct users (and buyers) where you want them to look.
Learn the Basics of User Experience

A good graphic designer has to understand both the client's brand and the brand audience to create materials that are appealing. A website, for example, must be designed in a way that visitors can navigate it easily. If user experience (UX) isn't considered, visitors may become frustrated and quickly leave when they are unable to find the content they want.

Learn Website Design Best Practices

Users spend only a few seconds to determine if your digital ad or website holds their interest or meets their needs before deciding to explore further — or bounce. Understanding best practices for content, structure, layout and visual aids helps increase engagement time, click-through rates and visitor retention. You also need to know how to ensure quick page loading times, optimize designs for mobile and the responsive elements that personalize all aspects of the UX.

Learn Professional Copywriting

Graphic designers, especially those working as solo entrepreneurs, may need strong writing skills to ensure the client’s message is clear and appealing. Since visitors often skim content to determine if they want to spend time reading it, graphic designers sometimes must write descriptions, text blocks, headers, article titles, CTAs and even meta descriptions for brochures, point-of-sale, collateral, websites and digital ads. Writing should be grammatically correct, concise and remain consistent with the voice of the brand in an effort to increase engagement and promote interest and visibility. If the company does not have a developed voice, then the graphic designer likely helps determine the voice best suited for the target audience of that brand.

Learn the Art of Critique

One of the hardest skills to learn is how to not only take criticism from others, but critiquing your own work effectively. Graphic designers must be willing to create what the client wants. Clients, peers and even the public will criticize every part of ads and designs. Starting with the initial brainstorming process, a graphic designer has to be able to think creatively and look at every idea with a critical eye. Designers have to consider how something might be misinterpreted or how it could be improved in the smallest way.
Master the Software

Computer design skills are vital in creating professional layouts. To become proficient, the designer needs a high degree of skill in the industry's standard software programs, usually acquired through long hours of practice. You need to get comfortable with the software to create designs quickly and up to industry standards. Whether you are preparing images for website use or laying out a brochure for the printer, a graphic designer must know the right size, format and dimensions for every different kind of project a client may need. If you aren't familiar with the programs, you won't know your limitations or design abilities before beginning the project. Three Adobe Creative Cloud suite programs have tools (and even time-saving hot keys) that designers often learn to use without even thinking. Other programs that many designers also become proficient in include Adobe's Dreamweaver software for digital and web design. Many professionals advise designers to also learn at least some programming, using the languages of the web: CSS, HTML, or JavaScript. The more you know, the greater your chances for employment in the field.

Learn Adobe Photoshop®

If you need to edit or adjust an image, Photoshop is your go-to program. Photoshop works with rasterized images that allow manipulation of individual pixels. This ability makes Photoshop suitable for photographic imagery, but not for website design, logos, fonts or any other type of graphic design work. You can use Photoshop to swap parts of images to change out a face, for example, or to insert a background or edit flaws in a photo. From healing brushes, lasso tools, feathering and burning, you need to understand and be able to use the numerous editing tools that Photoshop offers to edit images at a true professional level for your client. A good designer will not rely on stock images, since they are often generic and do not promote the brand.

Learn Adobe Illustrator®

When a client needs a logo or an illustration, you will likely use Illustrator to complete the project. Illustrator works with vector art, creating lines that can be expanded in size but still not lose clarity. A logo created in Illustrator, for example, can be used on both a business card, on which it’s no larger than an inch high, and on a billboard, where it appears 10 feet high. Illustrator has extremely complicated line, gradient and coloring tools that allow the user to make complicated projects. Like Photoshop, Illustrator, created as a tool with professionals in mind, is not an intuitive program to beginners. This program does not handle raster images well and will quickly get bogged down if you try to drop photos into your design.
Learn Adobe InDesign®

For projects that combine rasterized images with vector elements, you need a program that handles both effectively. InDesign effectively allows you to organize your text, create layout formats, insert image placeholders and then save the file in a format designed for professional printing. If you are creating the mechanical for a brochure layout to go to press, for example, you will save your final project into a folder that contains copies of your fonts and images as well as the design file. Because the program is essentially adding “placeholders” instead of real images, you can create a large number of pages without the program bogging down due to its size. Once you've learned Illustrator and Photoshop, InDesign is somewhat easier to learn, but it is still quite different from most tools and should be practiced until you gain proficiency.

Earn a Degree in Graphic Design or Related Field

Not every job needs a degree, but some skills are very hard to learn on your own. Not only will having a degree in Graphic Design carry weight with clients and graphic design firms when you’re applying for a job, but studying for the degree teaches you vital aspects of graphic design. From learning the software to understanding the history of design and how design bias impacts your audience, a lot of information isn’t available through searching google or attempting a process of trial and error. You simply can't know what you don't know. Experienced, skilled professors and the right combination of art, marketing, advertising, and writing classes will help you learn the information and skills you need to succeed in the graphic design industry. As AIGA, the professional association for design, reports, you may find work at a specialized design firm as a member of a collaborative team, or work independently as a self-employed contractor. Graphic designers are responsible for laying out the design elements, creating concepts, and overseeing the production of all the digital, printed and visual materials for a brand. A graphic designer works directly or indirectly for a client to create materials that align with the client's brand, appeal to the target audience and, ultimately, please the client. Understanding design theory, mastering specific commercial art skills and learning industry standards set the professional designer apart from the amateur.

Choose an Area of Specialization

Having a niche helps narrow your focus to a single area, so you can get really good at what you do. For many graphic design firms, it is important to have a solid understanding of all aspects of graphic design, but a focus sets you apart from the rest of the professionals. If you plan to work as a freelancer, you want a very specific focus so that firms or companies are eager to hire you instead of other professionals in that area.
A few popular areas of specialization include:

**Logo Design**
Being able to pinpoint the direction of a company and succinctly conceptualize it in a memorable logo is no easy task. To create logos that are unique but yet still express purpose and meaning to the target audience takes not only the ability to think creatively, but also a deep understanding of design history combined with a lot of skill and practice. Logos have to be instantly recognizable, with the ability to be scalable for both small and large branded materials.

**Web Design and Digital Design**
Web and digital design is growing quickly in importance. Today, brands without websites or digital advertising lose a lot of business. Some estimates compare the lack of a website to closing the bricks-and-mortar location for an additional day each week. Digital designers must stay current with design and technology trends. A talented graphic designer with a niche in digital and web design must be able to understand the innate expectations of internet visitors, creating layouts and ads that are easily navigable and that function correctly.

**Multimedia Design**
With a wide number of formats and platforms, some graphic designers choose to focus on creating designs that work across various channels. You may prefer to focus on video and audio to help produce commercials, tutorials and podcasts for your clients.

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**Build a Stand-Out Portfolio**

Your portfolio proves your skills and understanding of the industry. Your school should help you develop an impressive portfolio that helps you get a job as soon as you graduate. You want to focus on quality over quantity, choosing your very best work to showcase to clients or potential employers. A portfolio should include a handful (often about 10 to 12 examples) of your best work that demonstrates your abilities and niche skills and interests. Many students create mock ads, logos and graphic design projects for fake companies or even fake projects for real companies. A student may choose an existing company's materials and rework them for the sole purpose of displaying his or her talent in identifying and addressing the target audience. When you've worked in the industry or have worked on real projects as an intern, then you will likely want to include projects that demonstrate your ability to work for a real-world client. Some graphic design students volunteer their talents to organizations or local brands to work on projects for their portfolios. Others may be able to pick up graphic design projects for local companies with very small budgets that will pay an amateur rate for a project perfect for display in a portfolio.
Start Your Career
Taking the next step may seem scary, but your education has prepared you. The key to working as a top professional is continuing your education as much as possible by being involved in the industry and staying up on the trends. Continuing to critique your own work may be the single most important factor in improving, and you will constantly want to assess the impact of your work. After graduation, you will spend a lot of time initially in perfecting your resume and portfolio as well as marketing to potential clients and applying for jobs at marketing and design firms.

Be Exceptional
Don’t settle for middle-of-the-barrel work. Keep pushing for better and better designs. You want to stand out so that you are invaluable to your clients and employer. Many graphic design artists work in agencies, but some prefer to work alone. No matter where you land, you want to stand apart so that you are not easily replaced. Amateurs and college students abound who are willing to work for low rates just to build their portfolios. You will win jobs at premium rates only by being far better at your job than the other candidates for the position.

Continue to Create
Keep working to stay original in your approach. Become a leader in the design industry, not simply a follower. Find ways to measure results and keep improving based on methods that work better than others. Stay involved in top companies from all industries, since you never know when inspiration may hit. Join local and national design organizations and participate in them. Explore new apps, platforms, media and tools without hesitation.

Keep Learning and Growing
Don’t hamper your talent by slowing to a standstill after earning your degree. Keep growing and look for new perspectives that are outside the graphic design world. Don’t allow yourself to get into an echo chamber that keeps you thinking inside the same box with assumptions you don’t even realize you hold. Allow the data to drive your direction. Keep taking classes to stay up-to-date on new techniques, practices and tools that will become industry standards for the competing new talent. Adobe and other software makers, for example, continually provide updates to their software, so designers must stay in “student” mode their entire careers, taking classes either online or in traditional settings, or teaching themselves new tricks and tips. This is an industry in a near-constant state of flux, as new trends and technological updates emerge. A designer who wants to stay employed in the field must learn to embrace change and stay ready to learn. As noted in GDUSA (Graphic Design USA), “It’s important to always be learning when you’re in a digital career.”
Understand Business Basics: Contracts, Marketing, & More

Finally, don't think that graphic design is simply a technical art. Explore the basics of business, so you have a solid understanding of a company's background and history when a client approaches you with a project. Understanding how business leaders think will help you create the kind of strategy that they can understand and appreciate. Knowing how graphic design works hand-in-hand with the marketing and sales teams allows you to be relevant and invaluable to a company. As you continue to learn and grow, expand your horizons to include the aspects of business and marketing that will improve your ability to effectively design and support the brand.