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Chapter 1

What Is Graphic Design?

I believe design is an instrument of organization, a means of relating objects to people, a medium for persuasion, and a way for humans to cope with the complexity of daily life. I believe there is no “right” way to solve a design problem because I’ve seen other designers solve design problems brilliantly in ways that I would have never thought of. Graphic design is a thinking person’s game where you solve problems by creating a visual language from type, illustrations, images, and other elements.

My goal as a designer is to reach my audience with whatever medium is necessary in order to communicate most effectively. Call me an optimist, but I believe that graphic design can help make the world a better place because when people communicate effectively with one other, we build stronger relationships, reduce misunderstandings, resolve conflicts, and facilitate understanding and growth.

Graphic design is all around us, and we are immersed in its artifacts. As you sit there reading this page, I bet there are no less than ten things around you that a graphic designer has created. From the laundry logo inside your shirt to the operating system on your mobile phone and to the cover design on this book — design is all around us. Yet, for many people, the design and creation processes are opaque and often unappreciated. Sometimes, it isn’t until graphic design fails — like the 2,000 “butterfly ballot” used in Palm Beach County, Florida, where presidential candidates’ names were listed on both sides of the ballot and led some voters to vote for the wrong candidate — that people understand exactly how important good design is.

Fortunately, graphic design is not defined solely by its failures but is celebrated for its many successes. It has profoundly shaped the world by enhancing communication, influencing mass media, building powerful brands, and driving marketing strategies. Beyond these, graphic design plays a crucial role in cultural and social expression, contributes significantly to the economy, enriches education and learning, and champions environmental and social responsibility. Graphic design enhances how we understand and interact with the world around us.

Graphic design can be described as the art and practice of planning ideas and experiences using visuals and text. It can be used in branding, advertising, web design, print media, and other fields to convey information, evoke emotions, and guide visual interactions. Often, graphic designers specialize in a particular aspect of design and hone their skills to master their craft.

Welcome to Graphic Design

Allow me to officially welcome you to the wonderful world of graphic design! It's a fascinating discipline where you are likely to take on the role of artist, hustler, risk-taker, mathematician, creator, innovator, collaborator, typographer, scientist, composer, iconographer, technology guru, social observer, businessman, and so much more.

I've been working as a graphic designer for more than 30 years, and I love the discipline as much today as I did when I first started. Graphic design is a career path that is flexible, constantly evolving, and necessary. The work we do is both beneficial and broad in so many ways. It's a journey that will require you to continually learn, grow, and adapt. For some, ever-present change can be frustrating, and for others, it embodies a spirit of freedom and personal expression.

I'm not going to lie; there will be moments when the road may get bumpy, but with each project, client, and experience, you will get stronger, faster, and conceptually deeper while navigating the terrain more confidently with less effort. There's likely not going to be a moment where you feel that you've arrived at the goal line, but the journey is amazing, and I highly recommend it to anyone.

No matter if you're reading this because you have a design problem you need to solve or if you're considering a career in graphic design, graphic design is an empowering process and discipline. You have the opportunity to create and communicate using visual language and connect with others. Not only that, but graphic design is damn fun.

So, allow me to be the first to welcome you and encourage you not to just dip your toe in. Jump on into the wonderful world of graphic design. I've been expecting you!

Specialization in Graphic Design

There are many subsets in the graphic design discipline, though some graphic designers will often specialize in a particular area. Perhaps an area aligns with your specific interests, or maybe you will choose a higher-demand area that commands a higher salary.



TIP

If you're interested in researching graphic design salary ranges, then you might want to search for "design salary survey." One of my favorite design salary survey resources is Aquent, a staffing agency in Boston, Massachusetts, that specializes in placing employees in creative industries. Its salary survey can be found online at <https://aquent.com/lp/salary-guide>.

Specialization can help graphic designers stand out in a crowded market by offering unique skills and services and can help differentiate them from other designers in the field. Here are six areas of specialization within graphic design:

- » **Branding and logo design:** Branding and logo designers often focus on creating visual elements to represent or promote a brand. This can include creating logos, color palettes, typography, and brand guidelines to create a cohesive and recognizable identity that resonates with a particular audience.
- » **Web and digital design:** Web and digital designers often focus on creating websites, apps, and digital interfaces. This includes user experience (UX) design, user interface (UI) design, and creating layouts and graphics that are optimized for digital platforms.
- » **Print design:** Print designers often focus on creating design solutions for physical media such as postcards, magazines, books, brochures, posters, and other printed media. Print designers pay particular attention to layout, typography, illustrations, and photography and work with printers to create their design solutions in a physical form.
- » **Illustration and motion graphics:** Designers specializing in illustration create illustrations, create visual stories, and enhance communication for a variety of mediums, while motion designers create kinetic design solutions to create animations, animated graphics, video content, commercials, and advertising.

- » **Exhibition design:** Exhibition designers often focus on designing physical spaces, signage, wayfinding systems, exhibitions, and retail environments. Exhibition designers create visually engaging and functional spaces that enhance a user's experience.
- » **Packaging design:** Package designers often focus on designing packaging for products that are both aesthetic and functional. Package designers work to create attractive, protective, and informative packages that align with a company's brand guidelines.

Despite specialization in the design discipline, many of these areas share a common foundation, particularly with using the design principles (discussed in Chapters 6–8) to solve design problems. Also, many of these different areas of specialization use similar hardware and software but may use additional software to expedite certain workflows and tasks.

Assessing Design Education and Training

Many people interested in graphic design struggle with understanding what education and training they need. If you want to work in the design profession, do you need to go to college and get a degree in graphic design?

The short answer is that while a degree in graphic design can be beneficial for a career in the field, it's not strictly necessary. I won't lie; there are some big advantages to going to college and majoring in graphic design, but you can have a successful career without a degree.

One of the biggest advantages of studying graphic design is that a credentialed program will offer structured learning in design principles, typography, theory, and software skills. A good design program may also offer students networking opportunities, access to design labs, software, printing, and other resources like graphic design critiques to help improve your work that can be difficult or expensive to pay for independently.

That said, there are a variety of online courses, tutorials, and books that someone who is motivated to do so could use to teach themselves about the art and practice of graphic design. Self-motivated individuals can also freelance and gain practical experience. Also, starting in an entry-level position can provide on-the-job learning.



I'm a big fan of designers, no matter their level, using their skills to solve design problems. There are opportunities to help people who can't pay expensive design fees while growing their skills at the same time. For example, I designed a cookbook for my church to help raise money to upgrade their playground equipment. Members of the church shared their favorite recipes, and I designed the cookbook for them. The money we raised selling the cookbook was the primary source of funds used to upgrade their playground equipment. Opportunities to grow your skills as a designer and help someone out in the process are all around if you look for them.

All in all, a degree in graphic design offers a lot of advantages, but it's not the only path into the design discipline. Some really good designers have entered the discipline through other means, but majoring in graphic design in a credentialed program is likely to expedite your graphic design journey in some significant ways.

Evaluating Freelance and Agency Experience

Almost all of my graphic design students get their degrees and either go to work at an agency, become entrepreneurs or freelancers, or go on to a graduate program. So, let's investigate some of these options.

Small, mid-sized, and large agencies

Your experience working at an agency can differ, depending on the size of the organization.

- » **Small agencies:** Small agencies are usually great at providing their clients with personalized service, lots of flexibility, and lower costs but may have more limited resources, leading them to focus on local or niche markets. Small design agencies sometimes ask their team to wear a number of hats, which can be great if you're interested in learning the ins and outs of the discipline. Many small agencies can produce high-quality work and are often flexible and adaptable enough to adapt to client needs quickly.
- » **Mid-sized agencies:** Mid-sized agencies often have a larger team with more specialized roles. Mid-sized agencies strike a balance between personalized design services and organizational structure, like having a dedicated account

manager or a project lead. Mid-sized agencies generally have access to more tools, technologies, and resources or have dedicated departments for frequently used design services. Additionally, mid-sized agencies often strike a balance between structure and flexibility. While their prices may be higher than a small agency, they usually have competitive pricing compared to larger design agencies.

» **Large agencies:** Large agencies have extensive resources and specialized expertise in high-profile and complicated design projects. Large agencies usually have a large team with very specialized roles and may have multiple offices in various strategically chosen geographical areas. Large agencies often provide clients with more formalized interactions to complete long-term, complex design solutions on a large scale. Large agencies are often less flexible than small or mid-sized agencies but are highly efficient in how they handle large volumes of work. Large agencies have extensive resources but command higher prices for their work due to the scale of projects, their expertise, and the level of resources at their disposal.

Freelance work

Working as a freelance graphic designer is an excellent way to control what projects you work on and when. For a lot of people, this flexibility allows for a better work-life balance. Also, choosing which clients you work with can lead to more satisfying and creatively rewarding work. Most of the clients that I've freelanced with were really cool clients, and I've largely found this work really interesting and engaging. In fact, the diversity of clients that I've worked with over the years has really helped me diversify the work in my portfolio and gain experiences in a variety of disciplines. I remember working with a scientific company on a website that hosted scientific datasets that scientists would use to run analyses. At one point, I had to talk with a Russian scientist living in Siberia about gene therapies and cloning. Needless to say, I did not have that on my beginning-of-the-week bingo card!

Aside from the niceties of freelance design, designers work temporarily or on specific projects or tasks for an agency or directly with a client. Typically, freelance designers charge an hourly rate, a flat rate, or a retainer fee and work for clients on an as-needed basis. Because of this, freelancers set their own rates and potentially earn more than they would in a traditional job at an hourly rate. Keep in mind that freelancers have to pay for their own healthcare and contribute to their own retirement savings because a company does not do this for them.



TIP

I encourage many of my graphic design students to freelance as a side hustle. One of the biggest tips I would give is to begin your freelance career by working with a few people that you know and trust first to get your freelancing legs underneath you before working with clients that you don't have some type of relationship

with. Start with small jobs for people you know and build up your network (and client list) slowly until you gain confidence.

I absolutely love working with clients in my community and helping them solve some of their graphic design issues. In fact, if you're not sure about what to charge a client, you can think about bartering for goods and services. I've worked with a number of my favorite restaurants, and instead of being paid in cash, we set up a tab so I can eat a certain number of meals for free. I've also bartered for hang gliding lessons, triathlon training, and scuba certifications. Freelancing is a great way to get to know the members of your community and to help them out! I promise you — nothing feels better than walking around your town and seeing your design work in the local storefronts and thinking to yourself, "I did that."

Use a contract

Allow me to give you some of the best advice that you might receive if you're interested in freelancing — use a contract. A contract is crucial for freelance designers because a contract:

- » Creates clarity by setting designer and client expectations
- » Provides legal protection in case a dispute arises
- » Sets key time frames and compensation terms
- » Sets the scope of a project
- » Demonstrates your commitment to professionalism
- » Defines confidentiality and copyright/intellectual property terms
- » Specifies how the agreement can be terminated

While I'm not an attorney and not qualified to offer legal advice, the following sidebar shows a simple contract I use for my own freelance agreements. If you adopt it, then you should show it to an attorney because local and state laws may require you to add or remove certain language to make the contract legally acceptable. That said, you can see how a contract can be used to create clarity between a freelance graphic designer, ABC Designs, and a fictitious client, XYZ Client.



REMEMBER

Even if you're working with someone you know and trust, you should still use a contract. Contracts aren't traps; they are documents to help both parties know what the expectations are.

SAMPLE FREELANCE DESIGN CONTRACT

Today's Date:

Client's Name:

Client Email:

Client's Phone:

Client's Address:

PROJECT: Give the project a name (e.g., *T-shirt Design for XYZ Client*)

SCOPE OF THE PROJECT: Describe the project in detail and make sure to indicate the scope of the project and what needs to be done to conclude the project. (e.g., *ABC Designs will create two-color vector artwork for XYZ Company to be screen printed on a light gray t-shirt. ABC Designs will deliver three concept sketches for XYZ Client to approve, along with two rounds of edits. The artwork will be created with Adobe Illustrator and the file will be delivered as an Illustrator EPS file and delivered to XYZ Client's screen-printing company on a USB drive.*)

DETAILS: Describe what the client is getting for their money. (e.g., *Proofs will be delivered to XYZ Client within seven days after ABC Designs receives a 50 percent payment and all associated content. This estimate includes the initial client meeting, research, sketching, concepts, design, and production, and one round of revisions.*

This estimate is based on the scope of the project defined above. Changes to the scope of work may result in changes to delivery time and price. Additional expenses (such as illustration, photography, shipping expenses, etc.) will be itemized on the final invoice. This estimate is valid for 30 days from the date listed above. The fees for the project may vary as much as 15% from this estimate.)

ESTIMATE: \$325.00

Sketching & Concepts: 2½ Hours @ \$50.00

Design Work: 4 Hours @ \$50.00

TERMS & CONDITIONS:

- **Sketches:** The fee above includes three pages of concepts; additional sketched concepts may incur extra fees.

- **Final artwork:** The fee quoted includes one digital file of the final artwork. Any changes to the final artwork, once it has been approved, may incur an additional cost based on the extent of complexity.
- **Rights:** Upon full payment of all fees and costs, the rights to use this design transfer to the Client listed above. Until full payment is made, the Designer retains all rights to this work.
- **Credit:** The Designer retains the right to display this project on their portfolio website.
- **Overtime:** Fees quoted are based upon work performed during the course of regular working hours. Overtime, rush, holiday, and weekend work by the Client's directive will be billed at a rate of \$100.00 per hour.
- **Billable Items:** In addition to the fees and costs estimated, costs incurred for additional services and shipping are billable to the Client. Whenever applicable, state and local sales taxes will be included. Travel expenses will be billed additionally, at cost.
- **Purchasing:** All purchases made on Client's behalf will be billed to the client. In all cases, prices may reflect a small markup of 5 percent. Charges for insurance, shipping and handling charges are additional. In the event the Client purchases materials, services, or any items other than those specified by the Designer, the Designer is not liable for the cost, quality, workmanship, condition, or appearance of such items.
- **Schedule of Payment:** 50 percent of the project estimate is due at the beginning of the project and the remaining 50 percent is due when the project has been approved and is delivered to the Client. Invoices are due upon 30 days of receipt. A 9.9% per month fee will be applied to payments that have not been received within 60 days of the project's delivery.
- **Termination Policy:** Client and Designer may terminate this project based upon mutually agreeable terms determined in writing. The termination of a project already underway by the client may be subjected to a "kill fee" and services rendered by the Designer will be invoiced and billed to the client.
- **Term of Proposal:** The information contained in this proposal is valid for 30 days. Proposals approved and signed by the Client are binding and begin on the date of Client's signature.

If the information in this proposal meets the Client's approval, the Client's signature must appear below to authorize the Designer to begin work. Please return a signed copy of this proposal to the Designer.

Designer / Date: _____

Client / Date: _____

Pricing Your Work

Setting your rates involves several key factors to consider. If you're new to the graphic design profession, then focus on developing your graphic design skills first; once you're ready to work with a client, it's time to think about what these skills are worth.

Hourly rates

Many freelance graphic designers charge by the hours they work on a project $\times$ their hourly rate, but how do you determine what your hourly rate should be? Too low and you'll feel taken advantage of and too high and you might price yourself out of jobs. In order to determine what your hourly rate should be you'll need to account for your experience and skill level. Beginners usually charge less than those with more advanced skill levels, and those with more experience are likely to demand higher prices than those without.

Your geographical location and market rates can also affect your hourly rate, so a freelance designer in Alabama is likely to charge less than a freelance designer in California just because there is a difference in the cost of living, competition for jobs, and expectations for what this work is likely to cost.

Along these same lines, the types of clients and their budgets can affect your hourly rate. For instance, if I were working for a health insurance company, then I'd charge them a higher rate than if I were working for a veteran's fundraising campaign to support local veterans with counseling needs. The health insurance company can afford my services, but I would likely reduce my fees when working with veterans since my dad was a veteran, and I want to help out veterans who are in need of counseling services.



TIP

When you set your rates, try to contact a peer who is working at the same level in your geographical area and talk with them about their hourly rates. I don't want to undercut them, but I want to make sure that my rates aren't too high or low. Also, as a freelance designer, sometimes you have to pass on certain jobs, so having a designer whose work you respect allows you to direct work their way in the event that it's not a good fit for you. As an informal agreement, you can ask your peer to return the favor if the situation is reversed.

Some might say that having a sliding hourly rate is unfair, but I don't think that's the case. I try to treat all of my clients fairly, and once I determine my hourly rate on a case-by-case basis, I'll stick with it and honor my agreement. I don't have any issues with discounting work in order to work with certain clients or projects that I might be particularly interested in working with or projects that I find highly fulfilling.



TIP

If you're a good designer and comfortable freelancing, then you may also want to reach out to local design agencies and let them know. I've been brought onto design teams temporarily when there is a lot of work to complete and have also been connected with clients when the jobs are too small for the design agency to complete at the specified budget.

Flat-rate pricing

Flat-rate pricing is another common pricing strategy where clients are given a flat rate for a freelance designer to complete a project. Flat-rate pricing involves a fixed fee for the entire project — no matter how long it takes the designer to finish it.

Flat-rate pricing is ideal for projects with clearly defined deliverables and a narrow scope of work. A few common graphic design-related projects that you could assign a flat-rate fee for include logo design, business cards, posters, or brochures. If you have completed one of these types of projects previously, then you probably have a good idea about how long it will take you to complete the project and how large the project is likely to be.

Let's pretend that a client wants me to make a new business card for them. Since I've done a project like this before, I have a good idea about how much time this will take, but I want to give my client a solid number. I tell the client that I'll design a new business card for them for \$100, plus the cost of having the business cards printed. If they agree to the deal, and it takes me 10 hours to complete the task, then I will have made \$10/hour. If I hustle and it takes me one hour to complete the task, then I will have made \$100/hour. Regardless of the amount of time it takes to complete the task, the customer will pay only \$100, plus the cost to have the business cards printed. They don't have to worry about the time it takes to complete the project.



TIP

Flat-rate pricing is useful when the designer and the client benefit from the predictability and clarity of the project scope. It allows the client to budget for the project, and the cost they will pay is unlikely to change much during the course of the work.

Flat rate pricing can also be beneficial when the value of a project is greater than the number of hours put into it. Take designing a logo, for example. Let's pretend that it took you 10 hours to complete a logo from start to finish, and your hourly rate is \$25/hour. First, charging \$250 for a logo is incredibly low. Second, the value of a logo is significantly higher than \$250. Logos are used on everything a company might produce, from business cards to signage and from apparel to promotional items. The value of a logo to a company is significantly higher than \$250, so this is one example of how flat-rate pricing might be advantageous over an hourly rate for certain types of projects.

Retainer agreement

A retainer agreement is a contract between a graphic designer and a client that states the client agrees to pay an upfront fee to reserve the designer's services over a set portion of time — basically retaining their services and availability.

This arrangement can benefit both the designer and the client by ensuring a designer's availability and time. The designer may agree to work for a slightly reduced rate since a retainer agreement provides a guaranteed income and a predictable workload. In return, the client is ensured that their work receives priority over other competing work the graphic designer may also be working on, and often receive these services at a better rate.



TIP

If you decide to use a retainer agreement, then clearly specify the retainer fees, the duration the agreement is in effect, and how either party can end the agreement. Once again, a good contract will make all of these expectations clear to both parties.

Rejecting Speculative Work

Speculative work, or spec work, is work that a graphic designer does without guaranteed payment. Sometimes, a client may ask a designer to produce concepts as part of a pitch or submission, choose the best submission, and will only pay for this work if the designer's concept is selected.



REMEMBER

You should be critical of speculative work because it increases the risk of exploitation, inequitable environments, and the chances that your concept will be ripped off.

Researching and refining concepts takes time, so asking a designer to do this for free is unrealistic. Also, what would prevent a client from stealing a good concept from one graphic designer and presenting the concept to a different designer to execute?

Let's pretend that I am an organization that holds conferences twice a year in different cities and I need someone to create a logo each time. Even though I charge each conference registrant \$300 to attend my conference and hundreds of people attend, I don't want to pay for a graphic designer to create a logo. Instead, I'm going to get my logo by creating a logo design competition. This way, if I see a

logo I like, then I will declare this student the “winner” and give them \$100. If 40 graphic design students enter the competition, then I’ll be able to choose my favorite logo from the 40 entries, and there will be one “winner” and 39 losers. The student designer who’s been chosen may feel like a winner, but the 39 other graphic designers never hear back and aren’t compensated for their time and effort.

Speculative work doesn’t guarantee payment or acknowledgment and may create situations where graphic designers take shortcuts or steal ideas from other designers because they know they are unlikely to receive compensation. The logo that looks amazing might be a concept that is ripped off from someone or something else rather than a solution that was developed from scratch. It might look good from afar, but it’s far from good.

My two cents on speculative work are to simply not engage in these “opportunities” because they are unfair to graphic designers and the graphic design profession. Could you imagine asking 40 chefs to cook you a meal and only paying for the meal you like the best? Of course not! But for some reason, graphic designers are asked to produce and engage in speculative work more often than I care to admit, and it’s simply an unhealthy and unfair practice that should simply be avoided.

