careerhackers

The Career Hacker's Guide To

Design Careers

Design: it's everywhere, yet most people rarely notice it. Do you?

Are you the type to catch those little details?

To notice people's shirt designs?

To feel frustrated by something that should be simpler to use?

If so, you'd probably make for a fantastic designer!

You may have heard of at least a few different kinds of design jobs, and maybe you're considering (or currently) getting a degree in something like graphic design, graphic information technology, design studies, etc.

You've probably been told that, to get into graphic designer jobs, you need a good portfolio and some kind of experience. The portfolio part is definitely true—any design project you create now, even for free, will help you land jobs later.

But the part about experience isn't quite accurate. You can get jobs in design right now, without experience. You just have to hack them.

Quick navigation

So . . . what is design, anyway?

The term "design" can be easily misconstrued. To some, the word "design" might mean the way something appears–like the packaging on your favorite bottle of cold brew. To others it might mean the act of creating something beautiful–like an artist laying brushstrokes onto a canvas. While neither interpretation is wrong, they're both incomplete definitions.

Design is not just whether something looks appealing. At its core, design is the science of organizing information as effectively as possible. Webster's has a great definition, too: "It is the invention and conduct of the subject; the disposition of every part, and the general order of the whole."

Design is impacted by every element of its makeup, from the typeface and color scheme to the simplicity and channel.

If what Marshall McLuhan once famously said holds true, that "The medium is the message," well, then design determines the effectiveness of a medium. Good design strengthens the message, while bad weakens and distracts from it. The best design transcends its medium, communicating the message so well that it becomes invisible.

> " Design is the method of putting form and content together. Design, just as art, has multiple definitions; there is no single definition. Design can be art. Design can be aesthetics. Design is so simple, that's why it is so complicated.
>
> — Paul Rand

The power of design reaches back through human history, offering countless examples of its impact. From the austerity of the pyramids as a [symbol of the power](#) of the Egyptian empire to the simplicity of the [keyboard-less iPhone](#) as a symbol of the seamless integration between humans and technology, great design can create significant cultural impact.

Today, design spans across countless mediums, too. From print to digital and physical product to user interfaces, it offers a broad array of career paths. And if any of that resonates with you, then read on, because this resource page was designed just for you.

Career paths in design

The design industry covers many different kinds of jobs. The good news is good design jobs are in high demand and don't necessarily require a degree from a design school. Of course, you can learn a ton in a good design education program, and we're not knocking school—at all.

Here at CareerHackers, we're simply big fans of showing your work, showing your skills. And the most common design roles these days typically involve some kind of technology, which are both good to learn and good to show publicly so future employers can see.

Graphic Design

This is one of the most common types of design. Graphic design simply means creating graphics, like anything you might see on a t-shirt or social media. It's also referred to as visual communication design, graphic arts, and traditional design. It's heavily associated with typography and color theory.

Physical Product Design

Physical products are anything from furniture to cars, blenders and other kitchen utensils to high-tech smartphones and cameras, and more. These types of products are created with computer-assisted drawing (CAD) software and even 3D printing nowadays.

Digital Product Design (UX/UI)

Digital products are web apps, mobile apps, Chrome extensions, that sort of thing. As you're probably aware, they are extremely

popular these days—doesn't it seem like everyone's building some kind of app?

When companies build an app, they follow a whole process that involves sketching, wireframes, high-fidelity mock-ups, and prototypes. This is the universe of digital product design: user experience (UX) design and user interface (UI) design.

Web Design

You don't have to be a web developer to do web design—which specifically refers to layout design on the web. This includes creating websites and webpages that communicate information clearly and are pleasing to the eye (without distracting users from what they are trying to accomplish on the site).

Often, web designers create websites and apps using HTML, CSS, Javascript, and other coding languages/frameworks like

Ember. There are also no-code web design tools, including Webflow, Wordpress, Squarespace, and more. There are even app building tools that don't require you to write code: Bubble, Boundless, Adalo, and more.

Game Design

Game design refers, of course, to games. In modern context, this means video games (digital experiences) rather than only traditional games like board games. This type of design work requires a lot of specialization and an understanding of how games are played. It's similar to UX design in that you have to think about the user's journey through the product, rather than just how it looks.

Interior Design

Interior design is all about how the insides of buildings look—your living room, corporate offices, hotel lobbies, restaurants, and other public spaces all fall into

this category.

Interior designers are specially trained to use 3D computer-aided design (CAD) tools—like Revit and SketchUp—to create construction drawings and plan the interior layout, electrical, lighting, and more. They sometimes work closely with architects, and they're no strangers to building codes and public safety codes.

Landscape Design

What we call landscape design is the art and science of combining nature with human-made elements. It includes gardens, courtyards, parks, downtowns, anything outdoors. It overlaps significantly with landscape architecture, and has [its own design principles](#).

Fashion Design

Yes, design applies to the clothes on your back, too—and it's a [multibillion-dollar industry](#) these

days. Fashion designers, costume designers, textile designers, and more will use tools like Digital Fashion Pro to create the digital blueprint that will be used in the manufacturing process and to help visualize how shapes, patterns, and materials will look in real life.

Other Kinds of Design

Design is a vast, all-encompassing field—we could write an entire book detailing all the different kinds of design. Instead, know that there are many sub-categories of design, including instructional design, interaction design, and design thinking, as well as fine arts and related fields that aren't *technically* design. (If design is the science of organizing and communicating information, the flip side is the art—creating freely, without necessary regard to best practices.)

On the next page, have a look at the positions themselves—the kinds of titles you can use to find designers on LinkedIn to connect with or discover job listings and salary information. Of course, you can choose to become a freelancer as well—freelance designers can make a lot of money:

Positions

Entry-Level Positions	Mid- to Senior-Level Positions	Director/ Manager Positions	VP Positions	C-Suite Positions

Common Roles

Entry-Level Positions	Mid- to Senior-Level Positions	Director/ Manager Positions	VP Positions	C-Suite Positions
Design Intern, Junior [Product] Designer, Freelance Designer	Graphic Designer Motion Designer UX/UI Designer Production Designer Illustrator Web Designer Senior Product Designer Senior UX Designer Visual Design Lead	Art Director Design Director Creative Director (CD) Design Manager Customer Exp. Manager	VP of Product VP of Design Head of Design	Chief Creative Officer Chief Design Officer Chief Brand Officer Chief Product Officer Chief Experience Officer

Average Years of Experience

0-5	5-10+	5-10+	10+	10-20+

Average Income

$30k-$51k Mean: $39k	$53k-$134k Mean: $82k	$48k-$154k Mean: $86k	$105k-$268k Mean: $184k	$70k-$332k Mean: $153k

How much money do designers make?

Much like any other career path, income as a designer varies by industry, product, company stage, experience level, and many other factors. But, if you follow a traditional trajectory, a career in design offers substantial upside. Not to mention, as you build your toolset of design skills, there is often ample opportunity to venture out beyond a day job and earn an income offering those same skills in a consultative or freelance basis.

But while we're on the topic of income, here's a breakdown of some of the most common income ranges by experience level, courtesy of Payscale.

Average Income

Entry	Manager	Director	VP	C-Suite
$30k-$51k	$53k-$134k	$48k-$154k	$105k-$268k	$70k-$332k
Mean: $39k	Mean: $82k	Mean: $86k	Mean: $184k	Mean: $153k

See more details on the Payscale reports for entry, manager, director, vice president, and C-suite design salaries.

How to get started in design

If you're looking to get into design, it's a really good idea to start by seeing what other designers are doing. Walk into a local agency (you can find many at AgencyList.org and Portelo.co or a search on Google Maps), introduce yourself as an aspiring designer, and ask if you can have a tour/introduction.

You can also search LinkedIn for agency owners, creative directors, and other professionals (using the list of titles above) and send them a connection request with a personal note explaining why you're reaching out and asking if they'd be open to giving you advice on how to get into the industry.

The best time to break into the industry is while you're still studying—in school or anywhere.

Getting started early gives you a realistic and unabridged window into the world you're entering. This is [how I broke into the design industry during school](#) several years ago, and it works just as well today.

Getting started in design is as easy as starting a free trial of [Adobe Creative Cloud](#) (or one of the many other tools down below) and playing around. The possibilities are endless. So pick something small to start with.

Try designing a simple logo for yourself in Illustrator, creating a one-page flyer in Canva, or building a multi-step user flow in Figma. Try sketching some wireframes in a sketchbook or putting together a short video edit in Premiere Pro or Rush.

Always remember: it's more important that you start (even if you end up throwing away what you made) than to try to make something perfect the first time. Let yourself scribble, test, erase, delete, undo, redo.

Design is a highly creative process, so knock out some side projects, and ask for feedback from other designers whose work you respect.
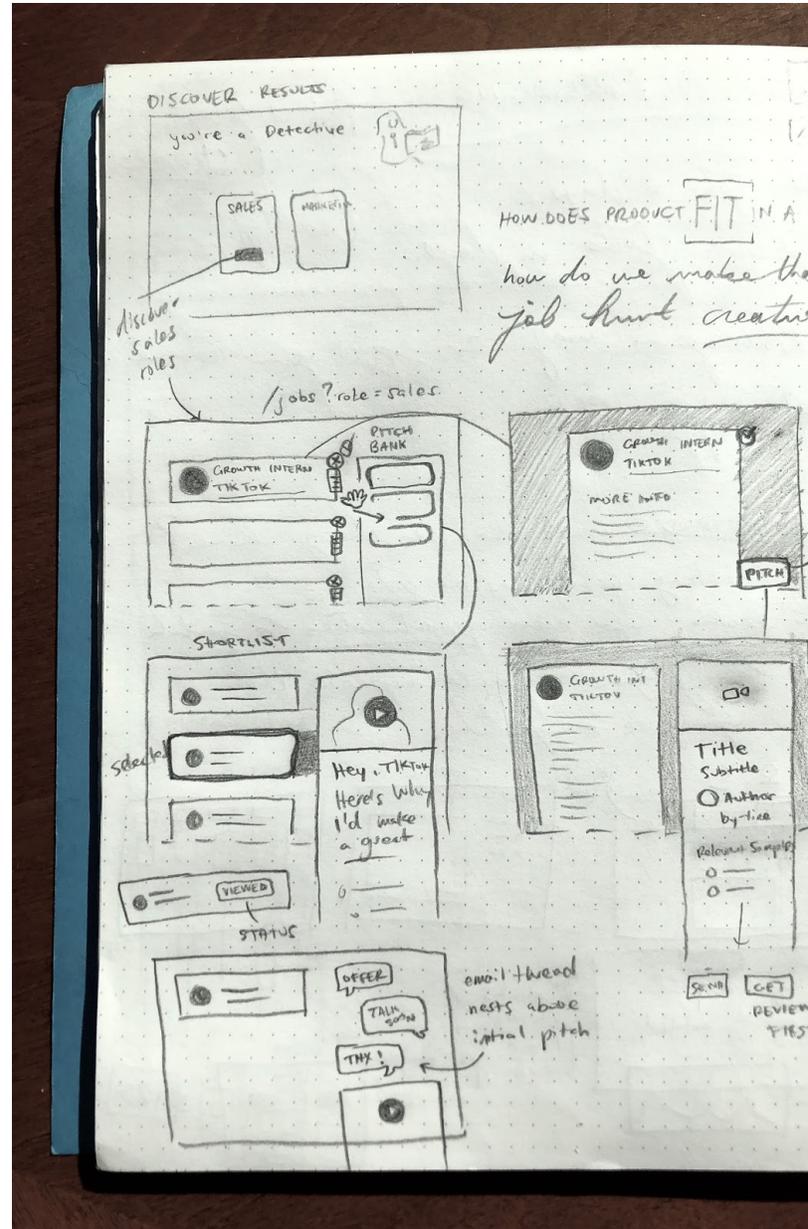
> " Design is the fundamental soul of a human-made creation that ends up expressing itself in successive outer layers of the product or service.
>
> — Steve Jobs

The skillset for a career in design

Design isn't just about the creation of something beautiful. Designers are the people who notice and build, who rethink how things can and should be presented.

- Eye for detail

- Connecting the dots with multiple perspectives and ideas

- Desire to innovate and craft new solutions

- Accountability (working with deadlines)

- Communicating well and clearly explaining decisions

- Collaborating well

- Actively learning

- Experimenting

- Taking feedback

Here's a list of useful skills you might have or need in your skill set as a designer:

- Personal sense of what looks good and what does not

- Adaptability

- Big- and small-picture thinking

- Observational of the world around you

- Ability to visualize ideas

- Problem-solving

- Understanding principles, without (necessarily) following the rules

- A desire to create

The successful designer's toolkit

Beyond soft skills, designers use a mixture of software and web tools to bring their ideas to life. We've highlighted some of the top tools designers use daily (sometimes, those tools might just be a good ol' pencil and paper.) Dive in below—and try clicking on the categories to see more. Click any tool to see the website.

Web design

Graphic design

Prototyping

Motion design

3D modeling

Resources for learning more about a career in design

Learning design is really easy nowadays. As with all things, the web has countless amazing resources for learners like you.

Below is a growing list of the top resources to get you started in the world of design.

We'll keep it simple for now and build this list out over time. You can subscribe to our content updates at the top and bottom of this page to know when we release more.

Online Resources • Books • Leaders

The best online design resources to start your career

Here are some of our favorite design resources—including podcasts, online courses, videos, publications, and more.

The best design books to start your career

Books are one of the oldest forms of knowledge. We can learn so much from timeless classics and more modern writings like these:
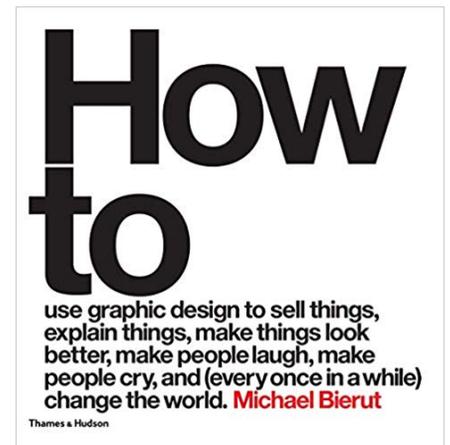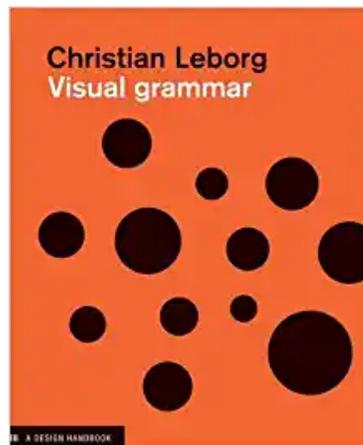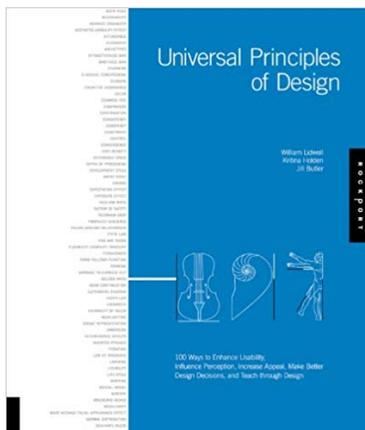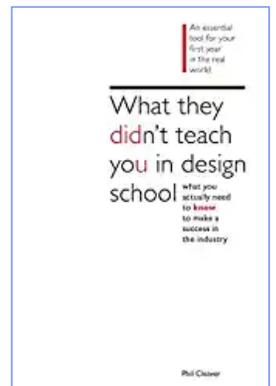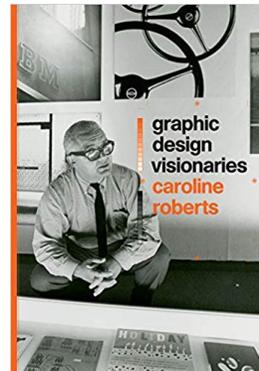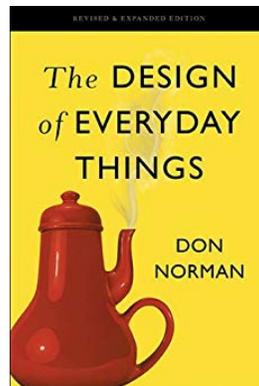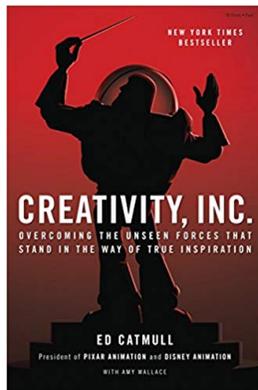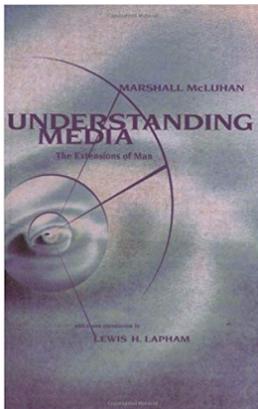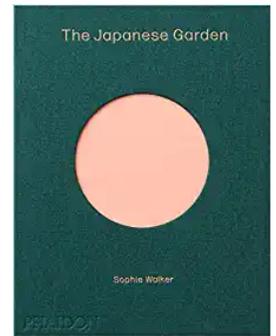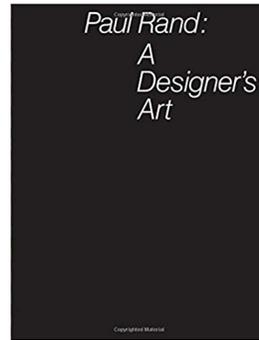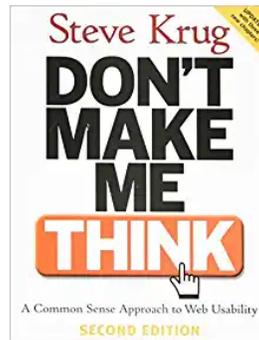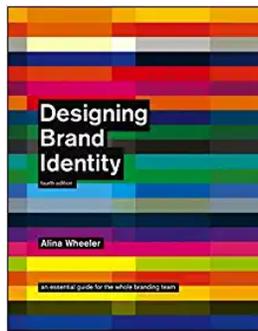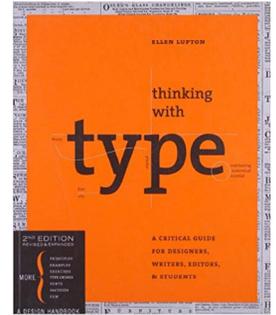
The best design leaders to follow as you start your career

Some say you don't need mentors, you just need heroes. Here are some heroes of the design world we think are worth following!

Remember, textbooks and YouTube can only teach you so much about design. Get to know some graphic designers or artists—LinkedIn or a friend can be a good place to start!

Spend time with them. Ask them as many questions as you come up with—each will have varying opinions, but those conversations will help you understand more about what type of design you enjoy and what you agree or disagree with.

As a starting point, you can reach out to us with questions!

Mirko Santangelo

Michael Janda

Chris Do

Dain Walker

Ales Nesetril

Jony Ive

Matthew Halliday

Kalypso Kichu

Know someone who should be on this list? Tweet their name and why you like them to us @HackingCareers, and we just might add them.

Trend-setting agencies and companies that excel at design

There are so many companies who do great marketing. Here's a quick list of some of our favorites—and why we like 'em so much.

A lot could be said for Apple, but their design speaks for itself. Whenever you see an Apple product, film, or even packaging, you know it's Apple—that's how consistent and clean they are. But they don't confine themselves to what's been done before—every year, you'll see something that pushes the boundaries of design, whether it's their site, product, or a new operating system.

Everything about Tesla screams bleeding edge. In fact, the edges on the new Cybertruck are a great representation for just how edgy Tesla (and Elon Musk) really is. Tesla is shaping trends for the future of transport in every sector, and they're doing it with a meticulous, research-backed focus on the best possible passenger experience. The eye-catching design is just a bonus.

MetaLab builds user interfaces—they've helped Slack, Google, Amazon, Uber, and more design the apps we use daily. They're definitely worth checking out as leaders in the design world.

Webflow is a no-code tool that helps you break the code—and design—barrier. They've nailed their visual and UI design, and they're also some of the ones leading the charge in teaching anyone how to design amazing websites.

One of the best design easter eggs in Slack is the ability to customize the app's entire color palette simply by typing out HEX values in a Slackbot message. (You can even change the icon color of the app on your phone.) These small details have helped Slack earn a special place in the hearts of millions upon millions of users.

Airbnb's user experience makes you feel at home. If you open their app or website and navigate through it, it's easy to see their design team thought of you as a user and how you would use their product. Instead of only focusing on clean visuals, they also care about how the design takes you where you want to go.

Fibery is experimental. It's the only website we know of that randomly redirects you to one of several landing pages when you go to their website. It's a unique case study in split testing and beautiful design, so beautiful you can't stop scrolling.

Known for their experimental taste in app design, Spotify has always felt like the rebel of software. It was black when everything else was white. Its bright green flashes defiantly in the face of other music apps. But it's also an app millions of people use daily—and they've been able to accomplish that partly through the ease of their app and the way their design helps you discover and listen to your favorite music

The beauty of Superhuman's design isn't just in its minimal interface that puts your email first. It's really in the nonvisual dimensions: the philosophy behind the product, its opinionated approach to email, and the way in which you ~~interact~~ *play* with it.

"Come on in, take your shoes off, and join us." That's what Notion's ultra-minimal design gently offers when you open it. And just like Superhuman, the gestures and shortcuts are what give the user such a rich experience. Notion is truly a case study in world-class UX.

Design career success stories

Sometimes the best way to learn is to hear how others managed to succeed (or fail), and a story can provide unique insight into a certain process. Below are some great stories of people just like you turning their design career dreams into reality.

Matt LeGrice

Matt was the person who doodled in class and loved sketching logos for companies. But it wasn't until a snowboarding accident that he built his portfolio and started reaching out to local businesses to gain clients. Now he's helping brands stand out full-time. Read his story.

Tatiana Bischak & the 365-Day Challenge

Over the past couple of years, Tatiana's worked with some incredible companies and people—full-time and freelance—all through introductions from people she met because of design and her substantial portfolio. Check out her story.

Jérémy Chevallier

Before actually having any official design education, I did everything from rebranding the company (my logo and tagline are still in use at the time of this writing, seven years later) to designing app flows and screens, designing marketing brochures, and even writing copy for those brochures. Read how I hacked my way in.

Final resources

Congrats on making it this far!

Subscribe to the Daily Job Hunt newsletter. Join 200,000+ readers and get a kick in the inbox every morning.

Read the Career Hackers Manifesto: The core principles of discovering and doing what makes you come alive.

And check out the other career-hacking guides in this series: