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An open letter to design students

What I wish I could tell everyone who's just starting out.



Unfortunately there's no instruction manual on how to follow your dreams.

If you're a student of design, I think you should feel super lucky and excited. Whether you're in school, or learning on your own, I hope you feel the sense that you're awakening a deep passion for a craft that will give you an endless, lifelong challenge.

I fell in love with design in college, having never heard of graphic design before my second year. Today, I continue to love design as a never-ending process of absorbing the world and reimagining it in my own way. Design has made me a permanent student of a craft, of culture, and even myself. I continue to love it ten years in.

I also remember how incredibly hard it was to break into the industry. There are so many things I wish I could tell my earlier self. Now, it's advice that I'd like to offer young designers. Without wasting your time on any clichés, here are some thoughts I wanted to share, whether you're new to design or someone who's always trying to learn.

On Design

I used to spend a lot of time trying to provide a definition for design, and I think it's the place for every new student of design to get lost in its depth. It's a deeply philosophical question that helps open the door to new ideas. In the end, I decided that design is a process of internalizing the world around us and externalizing our thoughts on what it should look like. You'll find your own answer, and I think that's the most exciting promise a career in design can hold.

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On Portfolios

In the beginning of your career, your portfolio shouldn't just capture what you've done, it should capture what you want to do. I look at every portfolio sent to our studio and I rarely see students step outside of class assignments to design (or redesign) things they're passionate about. If you're putting your first portfolio together, ask yourself if you see your dream project in the work you're showing. If you don't have it, do it, and put it in there.

The worst conversation you can have with a creative director is to tell them you're passionate about a type of work you can't show. The only thing worse is showing something uninspired. Believe in the purpose of your portfolio even if you know your skills and experience still have a long way to go.

On Jobs

Getting your first job is really hard, especially if you don't have the financial support to take your time finding one. That was me, boxed into a really tight financial window where I had to have a good job to make ends meet. The anxiety can be heart breaking, trying to get a foot into an industry so you can keep following something you're passionate about. Unfortunately, I can't say anything that makes this part easier.

What I can tell you is to know the landscape. Write down every design firm in your city, or wherever you want to go. Know everything about them you can, and be able to compare and contrast every studio and agency. Look at how each studio differentiates on the subtleties between product design, web design, marketing, advertising, and branding. Look at how they talk about the industry, culture, and world around them. Once you know the lay of the land, make a list of every firm in order of where you'd like to work.

I made a list of 100 studios for my second job. I applied to all of them. Three responded. Two offered me interviews. One offered me a job.

When interviewing students or new graduates, I often feel their entire preparation for the interview revolves around satisfying the interviewers.

On Interviews

Interviews are a window into a company's culture. The attire, agenda, questions, and conversations give you a very, very brief taste of what a company might be like from the inside. When interviewing students or new graduates, I often feel their entire preparation for the interview revolves around satisfying the interviewers.

I'd really encourage you to politely interview the company that's hiring. Ask about how they get new clients. Ask about how they manage projects. Ask who you'll work under and how you're expected to grow in the company. Think about ways to open that window a little more with each question. Ideally, you want a job that's a great fit, whatever that might be. If you get an offer, you'll know much more about whether it's the right move.

On Career

Saying career a lot makes me sound like an old corporate robot. There was a moment when I did get very excited about having an important title. And if you want it, that's great, and your career can be about management and inter-organizational skill. When I looked deeply into what made me happy, I realized that my career would mean more to me if I focused all my energy on the people and projects I could impact in a positive way.

I'm not sure what your career is going to be about—that's for you to tell the rest of the world. It could be about supporting a family. It could be just for

fun. It could be to have an impact on the world around you. I would encourage you to think about the purpose of your career in the context of the rest of your life—it will give your day-to-day a clear context and purpose. It will make the long hours worth it, or not worth it, if that's the case.

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On Industry

There are a lot of problems with everything that was built before today. Cultural and organizational inertia provide safe harbor for inequities and unfairness.

We live in an age when design can reach global scale overnight. What scares me the most about the future of technology is that the industry can wittingly and unwittingly silence the voices of so many talented people who internalize world problems in a completely unique, powerful, and necessary way.

If you're a student, my gut feeling is that your biggest opportunity lies somewhere in upsetting the cultural makeup of the design and technology industries. It can sound scary and intimidating, but I'm hopeful that disadvantage can be overcome with persistence and a change in the culture of the design community.

On Time

For me, working all the time started as a combination of necessity and passion. Eventually, I had the experience of working at places where it was a cultural imperative.

Working too much is one of the few regrets of my career. Fortunately, I've overcome this at what I think was still a pretty young age. I'd encourage more people, especially young people, to question this idea that long hours are a mandatory element in the design career path.

Sometimes you'll have to work hard. Really hard. Don't waste time when you sit down at your desk. Focus and work for as long and hard as you can. Go home when you're tired. Don't work nights or weekends unless it's an emergency. Don't make the same mistakes I did.

The central conflict in business is deciding whether a company should try something new or stay the same.

On Talent

It doesn't surprise me that the students with best grades don't always go on to be leaders in the design field. What passes for talent in school is following directions and solving design problems in a narrow, clinical setting. Solving design problems in the business world requires much more than skill and knowledge. You've probably heard that hard work and persistence trumps talent, but here's why.

The central conflict in business is deciding whether a company should try something new or stay the same. As a designer, you're going to be put in the position of helping companies navigate the complex gradient of change. You will be embedded into organizational conflict and you'll have to be creative and persistent enough to overcome the hurdles ideas face before they reach the world.

The people who can navigate these waters don't always get the best grades. Often, they don't even have a degree. They are good listeners, empathetic, articulate, and hard working. They follow directions but also bend the rules. Don't rest your career on talent, ever. Be hard working, be personable, and be ready for the design process to become a lot more challenging.

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On Failure

Universities are not good at properly preparing students for the realities of failure in a business environment. It's easy to say that failure should come often and fast, but it's painful and terrifying in the real world where the consequences can be humiliating and financially damaging. "Thick skin" is a phrase that hardly scratches the surface of preparedness.

Be entrepreneurial and put your skills out there sooner rather than later. Free-lance on posters and charge a fair price—people will be very honest when they pay for work to be done. Launch a small product, like an app or a shirt, and charge for it. See how people respond.

Everyone in our world is so bombarded by products, objects, and messages that they rarely think deeply about a product they have not been forced to use or asked to pay for. Get a feel for putting things out into the world and you'll grow your sense of *taste*, *wants*, *needs*, and how to balance them.

On Money

Intense anxiety about breaking into a career from a place of financial hardship dominated my first few years in the field. Having little to fall back on made it a necessity that I be paid well enough to live, and it often meant working extremely long hours on hourly contracts. I felt like I was always behind everyone else—people who could do their client work and still have time for cool side projects on the weekend. I was afraid I'd never get there.

If you're lucky, you have the resources to start off without that pressure. If you're on the other side of fortune, the temptation to take a higher paying but less creative job is extremely powerful. The best outcome is when you can be paid a lot to do creative work that you really enjoy, but that might take a while. Try to stay strong and don't be ashamed to strike a balance.

Getting used to the big salaries and comfortable benefits that come with the big companies will make it harder for you to strike out on your own.

On Dreams

Some people are cynical and think having dreams is something you stop after you "grow up." One of my dreams in the very beginning was to start a design studio. I was reading [this book](#), the light flicked on, and I knew it was something I had to do. But when the time came in my career, I told a lot of former colleagues about my vision for a studio and I was surprised to receive immense negativity. Lots and lots of people told me what I wanted to do couldn't be done.

To be honest, I still have no idea if they're right or wrong. Maybe I'll fail, because I still have big dreams. I hope that you're so passionate about design that you've got your own dreams. I usually ask people who interview at our studio what they'd like to accomplish in their career, and very often I get a sense that most people are afraid to say it out loud.

Don't be cynical. Be tough and believe in yourself. Have a vision and go for it. Focus on taking in the things that make you stronger and brush off the things that hold you back.

