

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

*A Graphic
Design
Student's
Guide to
Freelance*

Ben Hannam

A GRAPHIC DESIGN STUDENT'S GUIDE TO FREELANCE

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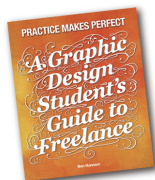
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Accessing Digital Files Online

There are several business forms that you can access online and use to help protect yourself, manage your work flow, and prepare a budget. You are free to modify these documents to fit your needs. However, before using these documents you should consult with a business attorney to make sure they provide you with ample legal protection for your region. To access these forms, you must go to www.wiley.com/go/graphicdesignstudentguide

Files Available For Download

Job Proposal Form
InDesign CS3+

Monthly Budget
Microsoft Excel 2008+

Proof Approval Form
InDesign CS3+

Job Jacket
Adobe Illustrator CS3+

Invoice of Services
InDesign CS3+

Model Release Form
InDesign CS3+

Time Sheet
InDesign CS3+

Vendor Contract
InDesign CS3+

Master Client List
InDesign CS3+

Retainer Client Contract
InDesign CS3+

Master Job Tracking List
Microsoft Excel 2008+

Request For Proposals
InDesign CS3+

Archive Your Work
Apple Macintosh OS X

Preface

For the last four years I've required the students entering my Introduction to Graphic Design class to work with a paying freelance client. I'm one of those annoying teachers who love seeing their students achieve more than they thought possible, and I'm okay with pushing my students beyond their comfort zones.

I was pushed hard at Virginia Commonwealth University, and while it was occasionally painful, it was a time when I experienced tremendous growth as a graphic designer. Sometimes we have to be reminded to work outside our comfort zones because it's easy to become complacent and only embrace the opportunities that are easy for us to complete. It doesn't matter if the change takes the form of writing your first book, experimenting with a new design methodology, or working for your first freelance client. These are all opportunities for growth.

In order to get outside of our comfort zones, we occasionally need a little nudge from behind or must gather our courage and take a running start. Just like entering a cold pool on a warm summer day, once we acclimate ourselves to the initial shock of entering the chilly water, we adjust quickly to our new conditions. As a student in a graphic design program, the question you need to answer is, "Are you ready to try something new, or do you want to maintain the status quo?"

This book is written for students who are willing to try something new and who are interested in learning more about working as a freelance designer. Throughout this book I have tried to strike a balance between encouraging you to work outside your comfort zones and helping you to minimize your chances of a less than successful outcome. The bottom line is that while I can help you lay out a strategy to work with clients, you have to provide the common sense, motivation, and work ethic. For many of you success will be determined by the amount of energy you are willing to put into your freelancing endeavor.

I asked my students how they felt when they learned that they were going to have to work with a client; 50 percent of the class said they felt nervous, 40 percent said they felt confident, and 10 percent said they were ambivalent about the idea. Strangely, it's the students who said they were ambivalent about the idea who worried me the most. Working with a client isn't something to be taken lightly, and a measured amount of fear is to be expected. Similarly, being confident in one's abilities can help a student power through indecision and lead to success. It's the "not caring" mentality that I believe is the biggest predictor of a less-than-successful outcome.

I can offer encouragement for those students who are intimidated by working with clients, and I can help those who are ready to hit the ground running understand why it's important to develop a plan before leaping into action, but I can't make someone who is ambivalent suddenly begin to care. No matter how hard I try, I can't push a rope. But I can certainly use one to rein in motivated students. Without self-motivation, you will be dead in the water.

Chances are good that working as a freelance designer isn't going to be as traumatic as one might think. When I polled my class to see if I should continue to require classes to work with a client over 90 percent of my students said "Yes, absolutely!" Not a single person replied "No." It's clear by this response that my students valued the experience, but their response certainly didn't mean their experience was problem-free. In fact, 80 percent of my students described working with a clients as "problematic at times, but successful overall," and I think this is indicative of the design profession as a whole. Rarely have I ever worked on a project where I did not run into some kind of snag. As students gain more work experience they realize that there are times when they will need to be firm, times when they need to be accommodating, times when they need to accept constraints, and times when they just need to break all the rules. Perhaps one of the most difficult lessons to learn is when to fight for something and when to give in.

It can be incredibly difficult, without actually working with a client, to develop the sensitivity to know when you should dig in your heels and when you should be flexible. The small nuances of the designer/client relationships simply can't be learned in the artificial reefs of academia. While academia provides students with the freedom to take risks and fail with minimal repercussions, there is a great deal you can learn through the firsthand experience of working with a client. Business is about relationships, and business relationships are difficult to fabricate in academia and remain authentic. It's important to realize that a school and a

design agency have very different goals. While the school's goal might be to equip students with knowledge, an agency's goal is to make a profit. When organizations have different objectives, it is not uncommon for them to take different paths to reach their goals—which is why there is a gap between academia and professional practice.

Many graphic design programs try and bridge this gap by requiring you to complete an internship or by offering a Professional Practices class. These are fantastic opportunities that you should take advantage of, but when you freelance, you are working as a professional, and you must weigh the risk versus reward scenarios before you act. There is no safety net, no umbrella of academic protection, and no Command + Z to press if you get in over your head—your successes and failures are yours alone. While there may be plenty of people you can turn to for advice, the decisions are yours to make. If you make good decisions, then you will reap the rewards, but if you make bad decisions, then you will feel the consequences. It's extremely difficult to create this type of experience within the walls of academia.

I've worked as a consultant, a creative director, a graphic designer, a small-business owner, and an educator. I've hired and fired interns, graphic designers, illustrators, writers, photographers, and computer programmers, and I've learned that there is a big difference between my expectations as a teacher and my expectations as a business owner. By choosing to freelance, you help close the gap between your academic experiences and your professional experiences, learn more about the disconnect between academia and the design profession, and make yourself a better designer in the process.

I want you to succeed in both your academic and freelance endeavors because both will help you understand the design profession better. I tried to write the type of book I wish I had read when I was still a student in college, one that is encouraging, and yet realistic with its goals. I remember how proud I felt when I walked around town and saw my freelance work in restaurants and local businesses. I hope you get to experience this feeling of accomplishment for yourself.

I tell my students that if they can work with a client once, then they can do it again. Every time they work with a client (even if they fail), they'll learn a bit more about the design profession—and a bit more about themselves. I have no doubt that this experience can yield the same results for you. Good luck!

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to the many individuals who have made this book possible. Many of my views about graphic design and life have been shaped by my conversations with friends, family, colleagues, and students, and I am deeply grateful for your hard work, kind words, constructive criticism, and encouragement.

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My first job after graduating college was at a local printing company. They hired me to prepare files for printing and to do some graphic design work when it was needed. I remember being nervous, but feeling confident that I'd do well. In fact, I felt so confident in my graphic design abilities that I was already calculating ways I could approach my boss to talk to him about giving me a raise. I hadn't even made it through my first day, and I was already thinking about strategies to convince my boss that I was worth a lot more money.

When I arrived on my first official day of work, the secretary gave me a quick tour of the facilities, introduced me to everyone as the "new guy," led me to a computer station, and wished me luck.

My job was simple enough. People sent in their files to get printed, and my job was to open the files on the computer and print out color separations on a special printer, which printed on film instead of paper. As film came out of the special printer, it spooled into a light safe canister, and it was my job to take the canister of film to a darkroom and run it through a processor to develop the film. After the film had been developed, I gave the film negatives to a person called a "stripper," who registered the cyan, magenta, yellow, and black separations to make an impression on a metal plate that was treated with a light-sensitive coating. After the metal plate had been "burned," it would get delivered to the printing press operator, who would prepare the printing press.

Eager to make a good impression, I tried to work quickly, but within minutes I was informed that I had done the job incorrectly. The stripper told me that I had forgotten to include "traps" and that I would have to fix my error and reprint the job correctly. I blushed as I confessed to the stripper that I didn't know what a "trap" was. She sighed loudly and stared at me indignantly.

“Trapping,” the stripper explained, “is an overlap that prevents the appearance of tiny gaps of white space, which are caused by small misalignments on the printing press.” I had never heard of this term before and asked the stripper to explain it again slowly. The stripper sighed and said, “You have to set your traps in your computer document before you print them out. There is a window in QuarkXPress that lets you set them, but I don’t know where to find this window. Didn’t they teach you this in school?”

I spent the next several hours with my nose buried in a QuarkXPress manual trying to learn about traps. I felt humiliated that I had dropped the ball. Production came to a halt as everyone waited for me to figure out what I was doing, and I felt like crawling under a rock! The stripper’s comment “didn’t they teach you this in school?” kept going through my mind.

When 5:00 p.m. finally arrived, I walked out to my car and began to replay the day over again in my mind. “So much for asking for a raise,” I thought to myself, and I was angry that my teachers hadn’t covered something as fundamental as trapping color in any of my graphic design classes. I began to wonder what else they hadn’t told me and hoped that this was an isolated incident. The feelings of confidence that I felt on the drive into work were gone, and I thought long and hard about quitting and never returning. If my bank account hadn’t been dangerously low, I probably would have quit that day. But there’s nothing like desperation to keep you motivated.

Sometime later that evening, I decided that I was going to stick with the job and learn from the experience. Even if I got fired, at least I’d learn something new about the printing process.

Filling in the Gaps in Your Education

The truth is, no matter how hard your teachers try, they aren’t going to be able to cover everything you need to know about graphic design in four years of school. Now that I’m a professor, I can see firsthand how difficult it is to prepare my students for the many challenges they will face as graphic designers. There is a Chinese proverb that states, “Give a man a fish, and he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he will eat for the rest of his life.” That’s why I’m writing this book. I want to help you create your own freelance graphic design business, so you can use this experience to fill in the gaps in your education. I’m going to show you how to find clients and earn a little extra money while you’re in school. It’s my

“How do I fill in the gaps in my education when I’m not really sure what they are?”

hope that through this process you’ll continue to learn about the graphic design profession and help you identify your personal goals.

Before you get freaked out or too fired up about the idea of starting a free-lance business, you need to do a little planning to make sure that you don’t get in over your head. Starting a business can be risky, and I am going to try to help you minimize your chances of a less-than-successful outcome. It’s important to strategize and understand your role as a business owner and freelance graphic designer and to get a feel for the business environment you’re planning to enter.

I hope you’re a tiny bit uncomfortable with starting your own freelance business, because it’s not something to be taken lightly. But with planning, discipline and patience, you can do it! Let’s face it. You’re going to have to do some “outside the classroom” learning anyway, so why not dictate the pace of these lessons and make a little money on the side?

Most graphic design programs seem to either try to cover the most important aspects of graphic design and then touch upon specialties that might interest you, or they focus on a particular aspect of graphic design and help you become extremely proficient in this one area (e.g., website design, print design, advertising design, typography). In either case, you’re going to have to tackle some self-initiated projects to deepen your graphic design skills. You might be thinking to yourself, “How do I fill in the gaps in my education when I’m not really sure what they are?”

Reading books and magazines about graphic design can be helpful in determining which techniques and skills you might want to hone. Internships can be a great way for you to bridge the gap between academics and real world experience. Professional organizations like the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA), the Graphic Artists Guild (GAG), and the Art Directors Club (ADC) can also be great resources for information, trends, and inspiration. Both internships and professional organizations give you an opportunity to meet professionals in the graphic design community and can provide a variety of learning experiences that you can add to your résumé. However, I’ve always learned the most by rolling up my sleeves and getting my hands dirty. While I recommend that you secure an internship sometime during your college career and become active in a professional design organization, I think it’s important for you to freelance as well.

Freelancing is a great way for you to test the waters for a career in graphic design, to make a little money, and to fill in the gaps in your education. The key is to keep it simple, start slowly, and build momentum over time. By starting your own business, you'll gain experience and begin to understand how the projects you're working on in school have been designed to prepare you for problems you are likely to encounter in the profession. It's my hope that you will bring your freelance experiences back into the classroom and share them with your professor and peers in order to enrich everyone's academic experience.

This book is written to serve as a guide on your graphic design journey, but you need to realize that there are many paths to success. Running a freelance company can be anything but formulaic. The best advice I can give you is to keep an open mind, to be honest with yourself about your strengths and weaknesses, and to seek the advice of people you trust along the way. Ultimately, the decisions are yours to make. But taking the time to look at your business through the eyes of people whose opinions you respect can be invaluable.

What Is Freelance?

A freelance graphic designer is someone who is self-employed and not committed to an employer for the long term. A freelancer designer sells his or her services and generally enjoys a greater variety of projects than the typical company employee, although a freelancer's income may fluctuate more than a company employee's does. The uncertainty of your income is perhaps the biggest drawback of working as a freelance designer, but having the ability to choose when you work, the projects you work on, and the rates you charge your clients are perks that many designers appreciate and take advantage of when possible.

Don't Wait until You Graduate

While it might be tempting to wait until you graduate before you begin to freelance, there is no reason why you can't start now. In fact, starting a freelance business while you're in school will help you develop your business skills and establish a few industry contacts. If you start freelancing now, then by the time you graduate college, you'll potentially have less debt, an established client base, and a more thorough understanding of the graphic design profession. Freelancing isn't suited for everyone, so reading this book might be able to give you an idea about

what you can expect and help you make a more informed decision about whether freelancing might be a good option for you.

Having a diploma in your hand and four years of college under your belt isn't a magic formula for success, so don't be afraid of getting started sooner rather than later—the risks are virtually identical no matter when you start. Business is essentially about relationships, and you're going to be ahead of the game if you begin to build these relationships while you're still in school. Having a degree and training in graphic design does have its advantages, but the strongest relationships are forged over time. Don't wait for the perfect moment before you jump in and get started—you might find yourself waiting a really long time before you feel ready.

The truth is, I can't recall a time where I felt that I had it all figured out. Part of your role as a graphic designer is to problem-solve and figure out solutions to a variety of problems. There are no shortage of problems that will stump, frustrate, confuse, and terrify you, but they can be solved through creativity, ingenuity, and perseverance. Overcoming these problems (and your fears) is part of the adventure and are reasons why I think it's so much fun to be a graphic designer. I am always exploring ways to be more efficient with my time, to communicate my ideas more clearly, to become more creative with my solutions, and to grow as an individual.

Businesses want to work with people who will help make them be more successful, so it's important to know your strengths and weaknesses. It's a good idea to make sure you focus in areas where you are strong, while working to improve your self-identified weaknesses. Basically, you are going to start simple, do a great job with a small project, and add in complexity only when you feel comfortable doing so. As the jobs you get become more complex, the amount of money you make will increase, but it's extremely important to start slowly and make good decisions along the way. It's important to not agree to work on jobs that are too big, have deadlines that are too tight, or have clients who are difficult to work with—it's not just about the money you can make. Keep in mind that each business endeavor is a marathon, not a sprint. You're going to want to underpromise and overdeliver instead of the other way around.

A few years ago I brought a client into my classroom to work with my class. The client described his needs, and each student developed several concepts as a potential solution. One by one each student presented their concepts to the client, and the client shared his feelings about the designer's direction. Two weeks later we met with the client again, but I gave the next round of presentations an interesting twist—I gave the client permission to fire the student designers.

If the student designer had ignored the client's feedback or did not produce enough work between Round One to Round Two, then the client had the option to fire the designer and the student would have to write a research paper instead. After announcing this change to my students, I noticed that they seemed more worried than usual about the critique. I wondered out loud if it was because they didn't want to write a research paper or if they hadn't given the project their full attention and were about to be called out on their lack of effort.

Almost half of my class was fired by the client, and my students suddenly felt the gravity of being ill-prepared for this particular meeting. One of my students who had been fired by the client wrote in her paper, "Throughout this whole process, the designer should guide the client in decision making. Designers have the upper-hand in the visual world and should offer the client advice on what is visually appropriate and what design will be the most effective. This diminishes the chances of a disastrous outcome and helps the process run smoothly."

As I read through my student's papers, I discovered that the common theme from students who had been fired was regret. My students regretted not being prepared and didn't want to make the same mistake again. I didn't want my students to get fired by the client, but I wanted them to understand that if they didn't do their job correctly, they would have to deal with undesirable consequences.

The experiences you gain through freelancing will help you understand the graphic design profession better, challenge you to work more efficiently, and help you realize how important it is to establish boundaries. Just like my student who was fired and suddenly realized that she had a few areas that she could improve, you will undoubtedly know your strengths and weaknesses much better by having worked as a freelance designer. You shouldn't be afraid of failing, you should be afraid of "not trying." I hope that you have discovered a profession that will be rewarding, fulfilling, and challenging to you—as well as respect.

About This Book

The information in this book is divided into four different sections. Each section is color coded, so that you can find the information that is most relevant to you quickly and easily. Information that is helpful to all levels of students is red, information for Beginner designers is green, information for Intermediate designers is blue, and information for Advanced designers is purple. These color bars are located on the outside margins of this book.

Since this book is written for students, it makes sense to divide the book into sections that correspond to particular skill levels. The goals and expectations at the Beginner level are easier than those at the Advanced level because you must first establish a foundation and develop a healthy work ethic and good habits that you can build upon later. As you build upon this foundation you will begin to add in complexity as you feel comfortable doing so. Work within your comfort zones at first and mix in more complex projects slowly over time.

Foundations are important. If the foundation of a building is laid incorrectly, there is a good chance that when the building is completed it will be plagued by problems. Similarly, it would be easy to skip over the Beginner sections of this book and begin with a chapter that has a more rewards. But don't do it! What you skip in the pages of this book are the curve balls that your clients will throw at you later on. Everyone's freelance graphic design business experience will be different, so don't try to keep up with your peers. Execute your own game plan instead.

There are several great books available to help you set up a freelance business, but there aren't many books that have been written to help students navigate the freelance experience. I've seen students get taken advantage of by clients because they wanted to freelance but weren't sure how to protect themselves, so I wrote this book in order to assist you and make your freelance design experience go a little more smoothly.

I receive many e-mails that say "I need a designer. Can you recommend someone? This would a great project for a student portfolio." My past experiences have led me to believe that this roughly translates to "I need a designer, and I don't want to pay for their services." My response to these types of requests are always "What's your budget? Because my students get paid for their graphic design services," and it becomes apparent which of these requests are legitimate and which are simply from people looking for someone to work for free.

The skills you are learning in school are valuable, but you may not be sure what they are worth yet. In fact, you may be pleasantly surprised to discover what people are willing to pay for your services. In the Beginner through Advanced chapters, I've included some examples of freelance work that other students have completed. You will be able to see from these examples how much they charged their clients and hear about their freelancing successes and frustrations. I hope that you can use this information to your advantage. Learning from the successes and failures of students in your situation may help you make informed decisions when it comes to freelancing.

"You can pick your clients as well as the projects you work on. Don't overcommit yourself or let your academic work suffer."

I tend to be relatively conservative when it comes to financial and business matters, so I try to minimize my risk and avoid promising a client more than I can realistically deliver. Fear is one of the biggest enemies of the creative mind, and fear is extremely hard to compartmentalize.

If freelancing begins to stress you out, then these feelings may also creep in and effect your academic work. Instead of creating a situation in which there is no place you can turn, slow down and work at a slower pace until you feel more comfortable. Another way to alleviate feelings of stress are to work on smaller, more manageable projects.

The point is that you can pick your clients as well as the projects you work on. Don't overcommit yourself or let your academic work suffer. If you use common sense and try to keep your academic and freelance commitments in balance, you're going to have a great experience. You'll look back and be amazed how far you've come.

