

The Graphic Design Portfolio

Making a portfolio has a goal like any other design project: you are trying to communicate a message (the nature of your skills and creativity) to a particular audience (experienced designers and art directors, potential employers). Keep the **message** and **audience** in mind when making choices about creating the portfolio.

Also consider, as with any design project, the means of production and the function of the portfolio. The format and materials should be something you can produce, and update, without driving yourself crazy or going into debt. And it needs to function in a way that suits your needs. If it's too heavy for you to lift, it won't be functional.

General aims

The portfolio should be a cohesive presentation of only your very best work, demonstrating:

- your skills in composition and typography
- your understanding of problem-solving
- your ability to develop meaningful ideas
- your technical/production abilities.

Some potential employers may offer you the chance to present your portfolio in person, while others will ask you to drop it off at their office for them to look at in your absence. In either case, the portfolio should be accessible, both physically and intellectually. It shouldn't be too cumbersome to look through the work and understand who you are and what the work is about. It should engage the viewer visually and conceptually.

Always present pieces so people see the work, not the presentation vehicle. If the work is badly presented through over complex or untidy craft, this will distract greatly. Also consider that the portfolio is always a work in progress. As you make new work, you will want to add it to your portfolio, especially in the first few years of your career.

What to include

Your portfolio should contain roughly 10 to 15 pieces. A little more or less is fine, the number is not important: the idea is to show your strongest work. Designers and creative directors reviewing your work will not want to see a vast quantity of work but rather a careful editing of your very best, presented simply and thoughtfully.

In choosing work, try to show the breadth of your abilities by including a variety of forms, styles and materials. Include work from your design classes; this work may need to be revised, as your type and layout skills have improved.

You may include freelance work done outside of class, again looking for strong design in the areas listed above and a breadth of work. Don't include twenty flyers for your band that all look pretty much the same. Employers may be interested in seeing that you have some production expertise from an internship or job, even if the work was not terribly creative. Unless it is really strong conceptually and visually, do not present this work with your more creative projects; include it in its own plastic sleeve or otherwise separated from your design projects as an example of your practical experience.

In the early stages of your career most employers want to see how your ideas develop, not only finished pieces. It's a good idea to include some process work, either in the portfolio itself, or as a separate sketchbook or process documentation book for a specific project or projects.

You may also show work outside of design such as photography, screen printing, book arts or writing. These choices should be made based on what kinds of activities you want to pursue with the portfolio: photography might be relevant if you want to work at a magazine, where you have to art direct and edit photography, for example. Non-design work should be chosen for its high caliber and should demonstrate something significant about you as a designer, beyond simply general art-making abilities. You want to be seen as a potential employee, not a model art student.

Portfolio books I recommend using a store-bought presentation book, with plastic sleeves that hold laser-printed sheets. Another option if you don't want to invest in a book is a clamshell box, with work mounted on black boards inside. It's not as slick-looking and is a bit more cumbersome for people to look through, but an advantage is that the work looks better when it's not under plastic. Yet another option is to create a book by hand, though of course this method is not easily amendable.

A good manufacturer of presentation books is Pina Zangaro (pinazangaro.com) and good sources for portfolio and presentation supplies are:

Pearl Paint (in NJ and in NYC);

Sam Flax (two locations in NYC and www.samflaxny.com);

Charrette (locations in NYC and www.charrette.com);

Art Supplies Online (www.artsuppliesonline.com);

Light Impressions (www.lightimpressionsdirect.com).

Presentation format Design a simple page format to display your work. It should be uncluttered and inviting. Think about the best way to show each piece. Will it be flat artwork (ie: a digital file) or a photograph of the finished piece, or a combination? For complex pieces, you may decide to show only parts, such as a few spreads of a book. The work should be as large as possible without overpowering the page. An appropriate size and position and view of the work needs to be considered for each page.

Consider how you wish to label the work. It's common to accompany each piece with a project name, dimensions and short text; the type should be simple and clear, and the placing consistent. Descriptions of projects should be brief, stating the problem, and avoiding the obvious ("This is a series of 3 book covers" doesn't tell the viewer much that they can't figure out for themselves.)

The order is important. Strive for a lively sequence, mixing up simple and complex projects. Begin with one of your strongest pieces that doesn't need explanation. The last piece should also be particularly strong.

The complete package Your name should appear on the outside of your portfolio (the book itself and/or a carrying bag if you decide to have one.) This is the final part of putting the package together. You might design a name tag to attach to the bag, and/or to put on or in the presentation book. The typography should correspond with the portfolio format and your resumé.

Inspiration For examples of design portfolios, take a loof at <http://thawstudio.wordpress.com/portfolios/> Although you are producing print materials, these sites might prompt ideas about how to organize and present your work. More examples of portfolio PDFs are in the course folder.

The AIGA publishes *Transitions*, an on-line publication specifically for students moving into the professional world. Some of the articles in the archive at www.aiga.org/transitions:

Building a Portfolio

Work in Progress: The AIGA Minnesota Guide to Interns and Internships

Questions to Ask Yourself Before Entering the Workplace

Ten Common Mistakes in Resumes and Cover Letters

Graduates on the First Job Experience

Resumé

The designer's resumé differs from that of other professions. It is both a concise statement of your education, experience and skills as well as evidence of your design abilities.

The design should be functional and appropriate to the task of communicating the information. This is not the moment to demonstrate the depth and scope of your creativity, with lots of imagery or flourishes; your resumé should be clean, legible, and simply designed. It should demonstrate skill in typography.

The resumé is an information design piece. Use typographic contrast, composition in space and perhaps rules to create hierarchy and to make the information accessible. Avoid bullets, and excessive indenting.

Consider using only one or two typefaces.

Think about ways to make the information clear and easy to understand, both through the writing and the design. Write and design it in a consistent manner, taking care to treat similar elements in the same way.

content

Write the resumé with care; it should be concise and clear. Avoid adjectives, use action verbs. If you have any even remotely design-related experience, include it. You may list at most two or three non-design related jobs; choose those that show you can handle responsibility, or are familiar with the workings of an office.

It is not necessary to include a "Job Objective" unless you have something interesting to say about this. In most cases, you can talk about your objectives in a cover letter.

paper

Use a quality white or off-white paper stock (not standard laser paper) that looks clean and neat. Do not use "linen" paper.

samples

See examples of design résumés in my course folder on the server.