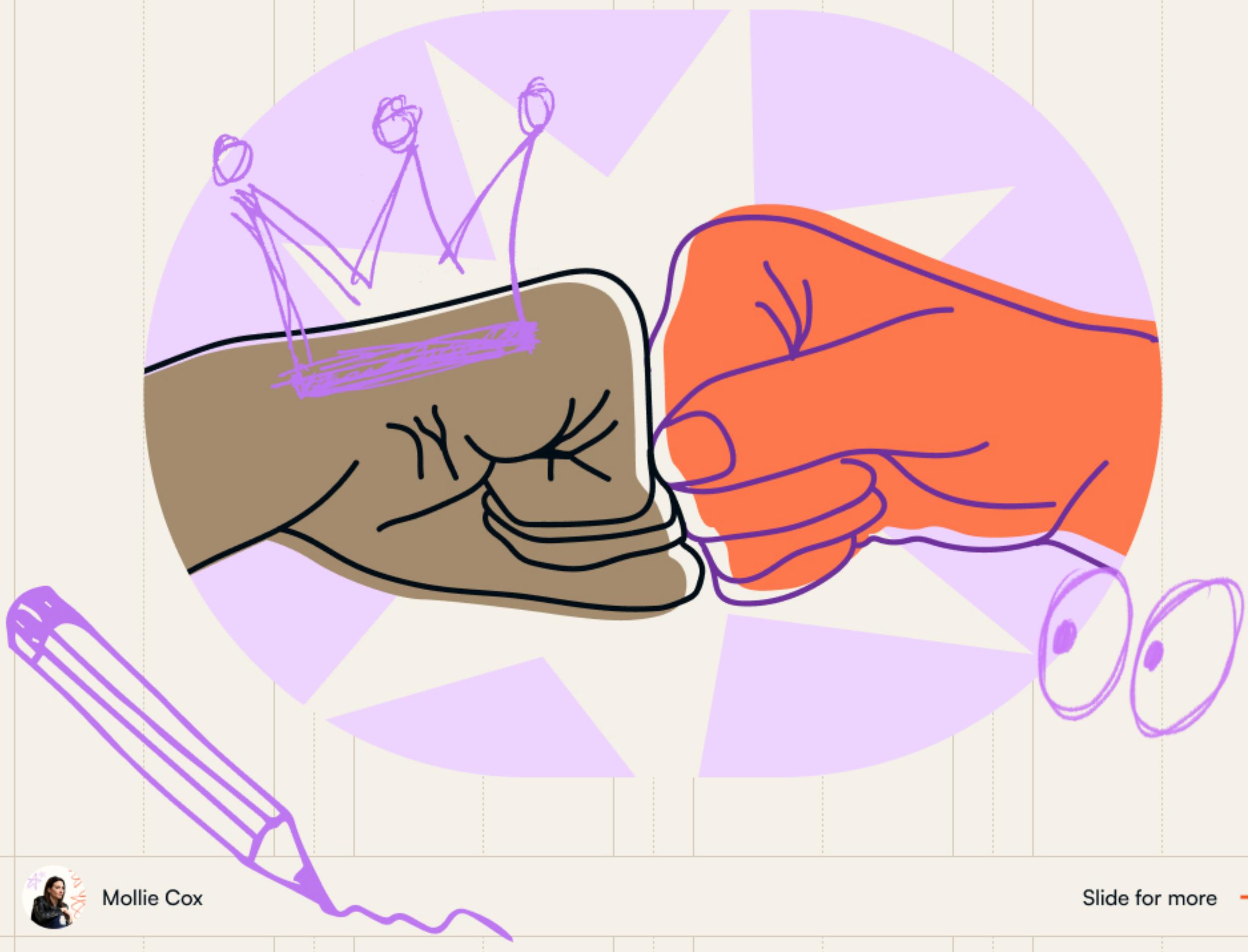


PORTFOLIO TIPS

2024

Design Portfolio Playbook



Mollie Cox

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Disclaimer before we start:

I am only one person.

I have looked at thousands of portfolios over time.

Based on questions I receive, feedback I give, and conversations I have with other hiring managers, these are my tips for evolving your portfolio.

However, there is never one right way to do your portfolio!

Remember that portfolios are only one step of the process.

At the end of the day, be you, go with your gut, and let your work shine.



THE SITE



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How I review a portfolio.



HIRING MANAGER POV



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Review Process Start to Finish:

I have about 1-3 minutes per portfolio.
Definitely more if you engage me.

- I click on your site from your resume.
- I land on your home page and ensure the nav has what I need: Work, About, Resume, Contact.
- I read the About statement in your header. What I think: Are they unique? Do they have a brand? What's visually setting them apart?
- I scroll down the homepage to quickly overview work. What's there? Is it intriguing? I scroll the whole home.
- I review the flow, layout, components, and aesthetics. How well did you UX your own site?
- I click on your About link.
- I look through your About page. Who are you? What do you believe? What makes you you? What are your design tenets? I scroll the whole page.
- I click on your work from the navigation.



- I scroll again through your case studies. I like when there is information leading me in.
- I pick one. Usually the first.
- I read the headline. Is it engaging?
- I scroll and look for 3 things: The product. The problem. The outcome.
- Things I think: Where are their concepts and sketches? How did they break down the problem? How many iterations did they go through? What did they learn? Does their work align with our core design needs?
- I visually bounce around if words aren't guiding me. I like fluidity of story.
- I skim again and look for numbers. I want to see data and metrics.
- I click on another case study if I get your process through story and visuals. Look for the same.
- I review your resume one more time.

That's my process.

* I'm one person - this won't be everybody's.



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Portfolio red flags.



My 7 Immediate Portfolio Red Flags 🚨

Hiring Manager POV:

There is a lot of instinct that goes into reviewing portfolios. It isn't an exact science.

💡 *Things to Remember*

- I hire end-to-end product designers.
- I am only one person. This is what I look for.

Taking you behind the scenes, here's what makes me stop and move on:

- ▶ Poor Visual Design: No personal brand. Generic. Very little content. Spacing, alignment, and layout issues. Lacks consistency.
- ▶ Functionality: Does it work? Can I navigate it easily? Can I find the things I'm looking for? Can I achieve my intent? If not, red flag.
- ▶ Lacks Process: I only see the final work. Your process shows how you went from problem to outcome. The final work is important, but your process is the proof.



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- ▶ **Typography:** Fonts and alignment aren't trivial. They're silent tell-tale signs of your UI skills.
- ▶ **Typos:** I get it. Sometimes, they slip through. But let's be honest - they speak volumes about your attention to detail. Be meticulous.
- ▶ **About Me:** If you're a designer with no story, beliefs, or philosophy, then who are you really? I'm not merely filling spots. I'm looking for team members.
- ▶ **Generic:** There's zero personality. The case study has no story and looks like a checklist.

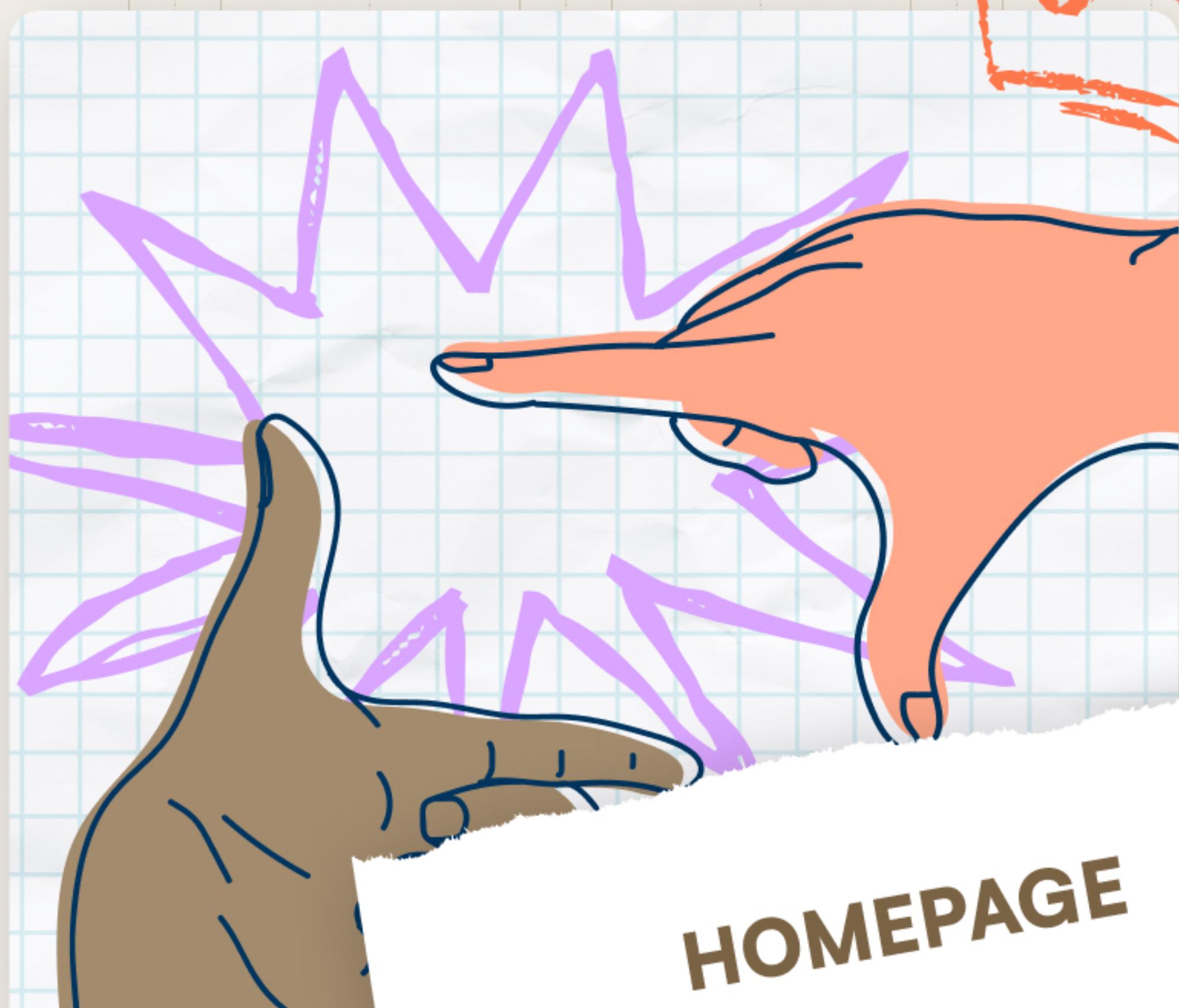
Hiring is a complex task.
It's not as simple as checking off a list.

It's an intricate dance between spotting potential and acknowledging red flags.

Use this as a way to make immediate portfolio improvements.



Write your value.



Stop Undervaluing Yourself.

Writing an impactful portfolio headline is hard.

But you only need **three elements:**

- Beliefs
- Strengths
- Personality

 Don't:

Hi, I'm Mollie. I'm a UX Designer with 2 years of experience.

 Do:

I'm Mollie, a product design leader fiercely passionate about growing products, people, and knowledge. I believe users reside at the core of everything we do, and great design is a moral imperative.

What you bring to the table is unique and unmatched.

This is your **value proposition.**

This is your **opportunity to stand out.**

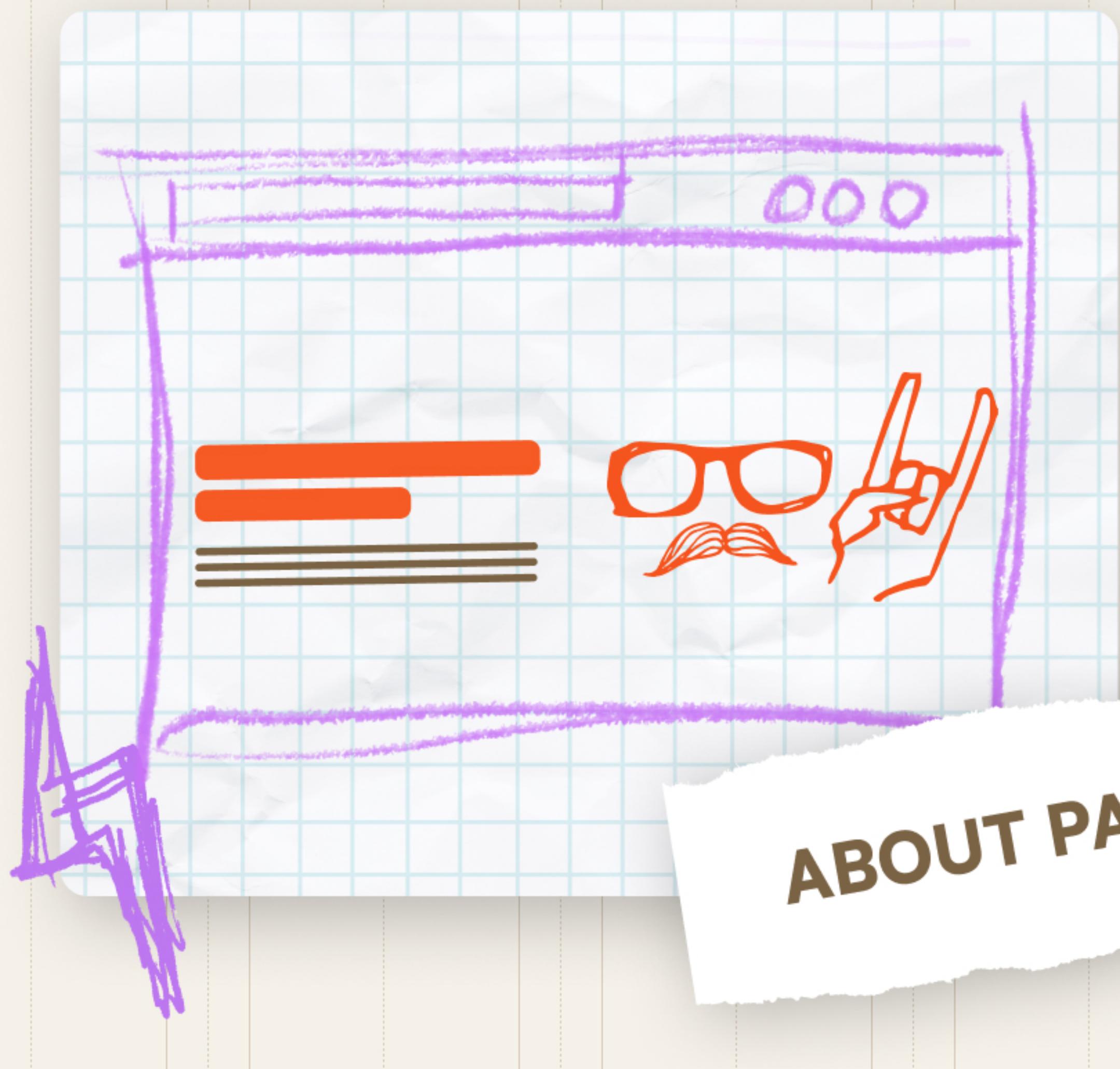
Use it.

Because the first impression is a lasting one.

Don't blend in.
You've got this.



Tell your own story.



10x Your Portfolio with the About Page.

As a hiring manager, I promise you I look at every. single. one. when I review portfolios.

I want a glimpse of what it's like working with you.

3 Tips:

1. Showcase Your Journey: How did you get here? What are your areas of passion? How do you leverage them in your process? Your design story is one worth telling! Be human.

2. Quirks and Passions: What makes you, you? What do you love in life? How does it shape the designer you are today? Have fun.

3. Your Design Values: Showcase the principles you live by as a designer. What are your beliefs? How do you tie them into your work? Show me.

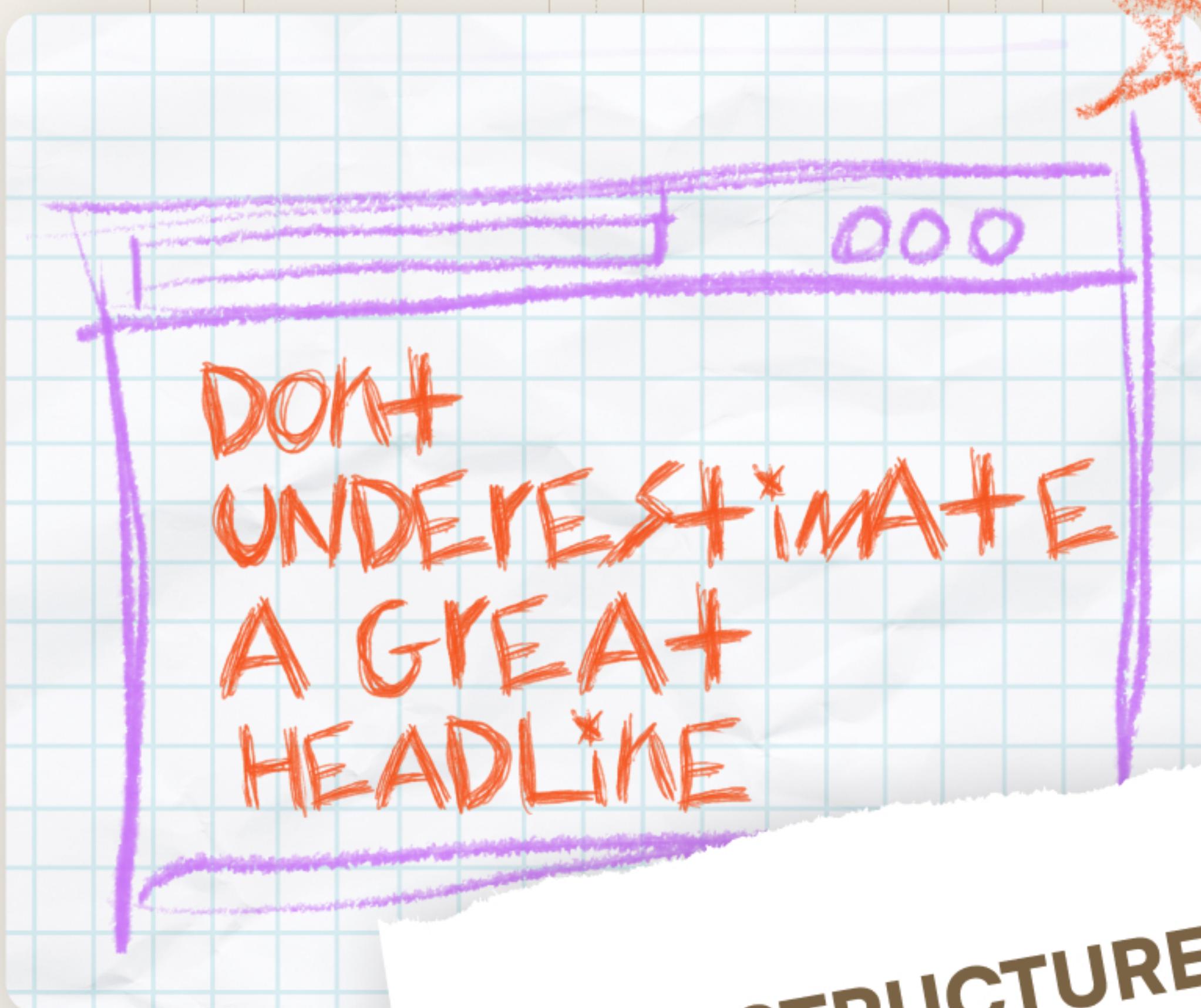
One line of generic 'about me' copy on your homepage isn't sufficient.

I'm not just trying to fill a role, I am trying to find a team member.

CASE STUDIES



Headline by headline.



STRUCTURE

Headlines:

Tell me your case study in 8-10 h2s.

Here's a secret:
I don't read.

Steve Krug was right.
I'm just like every other user.
I skim, and I parce.

I want your case STORY in the ~3 minutes you have my attention.

I want to know these three things:

The Product.
The Problem.
The Impact.

Do this:

Put your site aside.
Forget the aesthetics.

Open up Google Docs and write your case study in 8 headlines.

Creative headlines.

You are marketing yourself to me.

Grab my attention.

(Don't forget the impact)

Next, write the body copy (details).

Last, grab the artifacts that match the story.

I don't need to see every. single. asset.

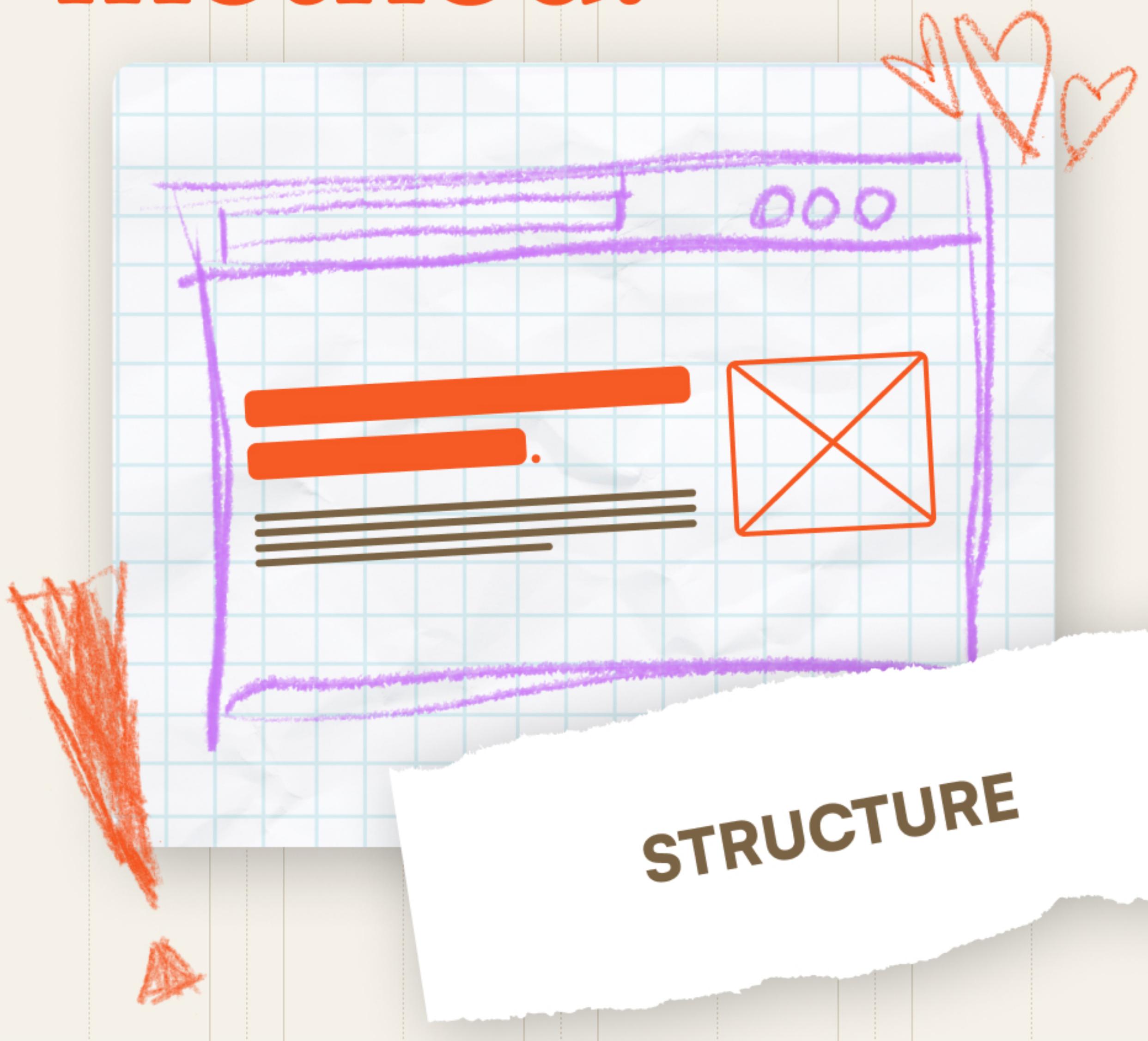
Now, go to your web editor and revise.

Don't start with web designing.

Start on paper.



The 1-3-1 method.



Worried your portfolios are boring to read?

Use this:

The 1-3-1 Method (*8):

One headline

Three lines of body copy

One asset (visual)

[1] Create a headline that engages and creates curiosity, not one that says "Challenge" or "Process." Remember, you are marketing yourself. Be creative.

[3] Write up to three lines of body copy for detail. Remember, we skim and parse.

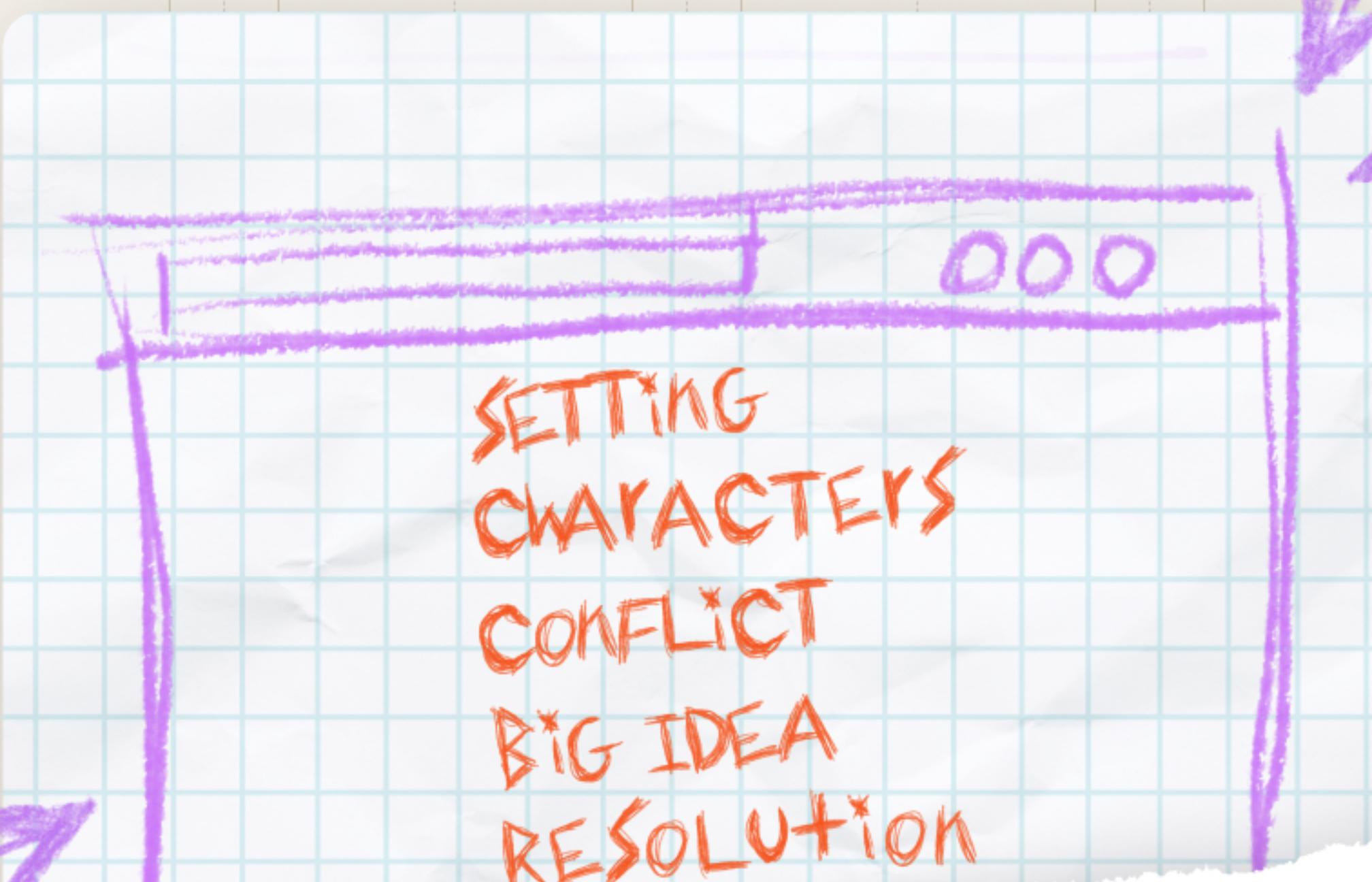
[1] Match your best one to three assets from your process to the section. You don't have to show everything.

[*8] Repeat this up to 8 times.

A great way to concisely tell your case study story and keep your audience reading.

Try this on your next iteration.

Tell a case story.



SETTING
CHARACTERS
CONFLICT
BIG IDEA
RESOLUTION

STORYTELLING



Mollie Cox

Slide for more 

Simple Case Study Tip:

Think of it as a case STORY.

I've reviewed thousands of design portfolios.

The most memorable (and called for an interview) are the ones that concisely tell a story.

I've got 1-3 minutes MAX on a site when reviewing candidates.

Stories are simple.

Studies become a thesis.

Can I read yours in under 3 minutes?

Pro Tip: Use a storytelling framework.

I like "The Big Idea."

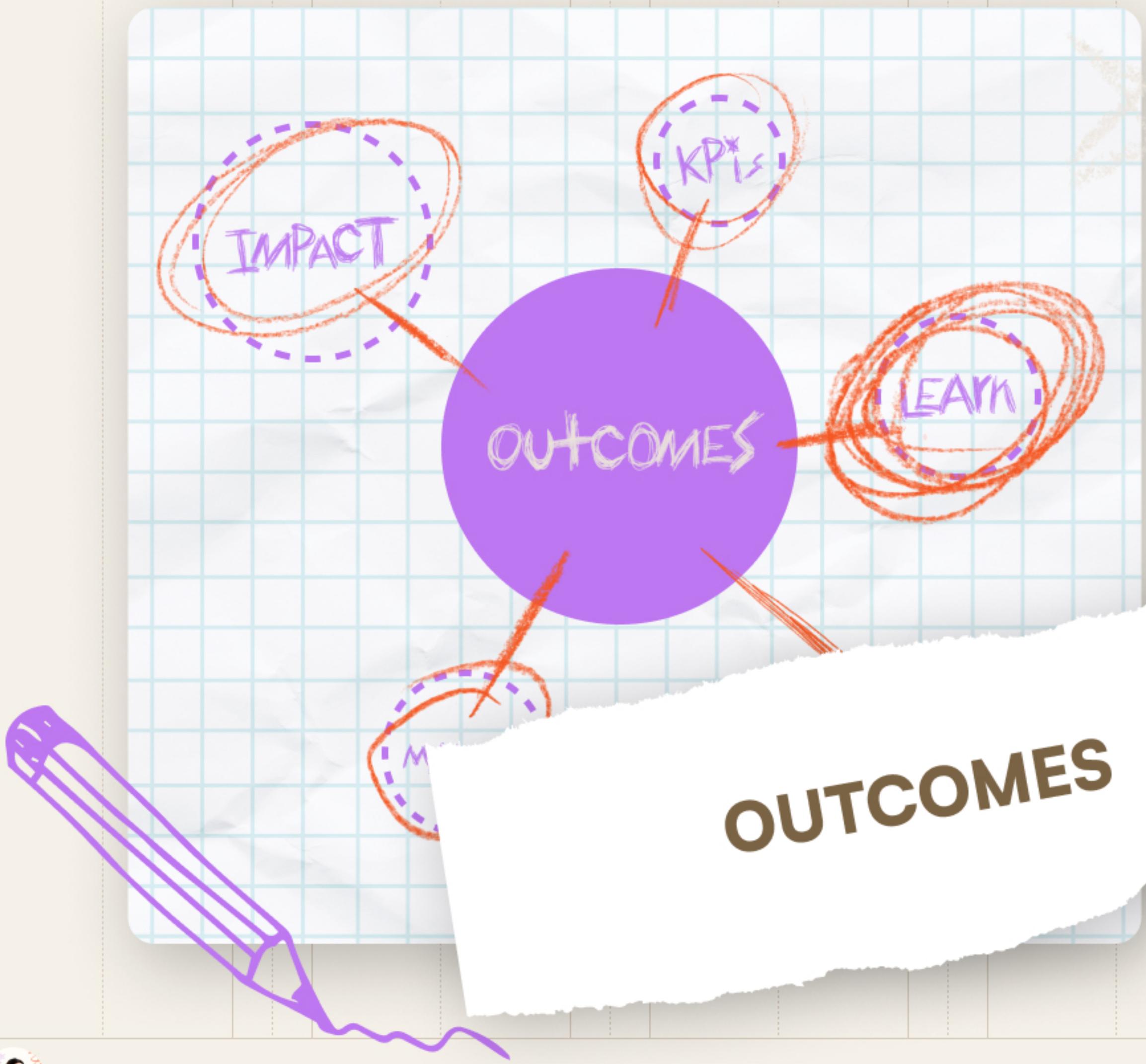
Here's an example:

- 1. Setting** - The Product
- 2. Characters** - The Competition and Users
- 3. Conflict** - The problem
- 4. The Big Idea** - The Solution
- 5. Resolution** - The Outcome

Stop calling them studies and start calling them stories.



Case Study: Outcomes 101.



Writing Case Study Outcomes 101: Nobody cares if your product launched.

They care about the potential.

Writing outcomes for a case study can seem overwhelming, especially when the product is fictitious. Or you have no data.

A compelling case study doesn't always require real outcomes. It's about painting a vision that makes people take notice, especially when dealing with hypotheticals.

Let's start with a simple definition:
An outcome is a change in human behavior that drives business results.



Mollie Cox

Slide for more 

If you don't have tangible results and metrics, use the following ways to highlight outcomes:

- **User Impact:** What's the real-world problem your product solves? How does it make users' lives better? Connect it to your original problem statement.
- **Market Disruption:** Show how your product could shake things up in its industry. If it's a redesign, what's your edge over the competition?
- **Potential KPIs:** You might not have hard data, but you can set realistic goals. Identify the KPIs your product could potentially enhance.
- **Future Scope:** Talk about the big picture. Where can this product go? What's its growth potential? How could it be further fine-tuned?
- **Learning Curve:** Don't forget about the journey. Share the lessons you've learned and the skills you've sharpened along the way.

Remember:

Even if the product isn't real, its potential can be. And that's what you need to articulate.

Outcomes are about changes, potential, and possibilities.

Highlight these in your narrative, and your case study will stand out, real or not.



Write better outcomes.



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Try this if you struggle with defining and writing design outcomes:

Map your solutions to proven UX Metrics

Let's start small.

Learn the **Google HEART** framework

H - Happiness:

How do users feel about your product?

 Metrics: Net Promotor Score, App Rating

E - Engagement :

Are users engaging with your app?

 Metrics: # of Conversions, Session Length

A - Adoption:

Are you getting new users?

 Metrics: Download Rate, Sign Up Rate

R - Retention

Are users returning and staying loyal?

 Metrics: Churn Rate, Subscription Renewal

T - Task Success

Can users complete goals quickly?

 Metrics: Error Rates, Task Completion Rate

These are all bridges between design and business goals.

HEART can be used for the whole app or specific features.

👉 Let's tie it to an example case study problem:

Students studying overseas need to know what recipes can be made with ingredients available at home, as eating out regularly is too expensive and unhealthy.

✓ Outcome Example:

While the app didn't launch, to track success and impact, I would have monitored the following:

- Elevated app ratings and positive feedback, indicating students found the app enjoyable and useful
- Increased app usage, implying more students frequently cooking at home
- Growth in new sign-ups, reflecting more students discovering the app
- Lower attrition rates and more subscription renewals, showing the app's continued value
- Decrease in incomplete recipe attempts, suggesting the app was successful in helping students achieve their cooking goals.

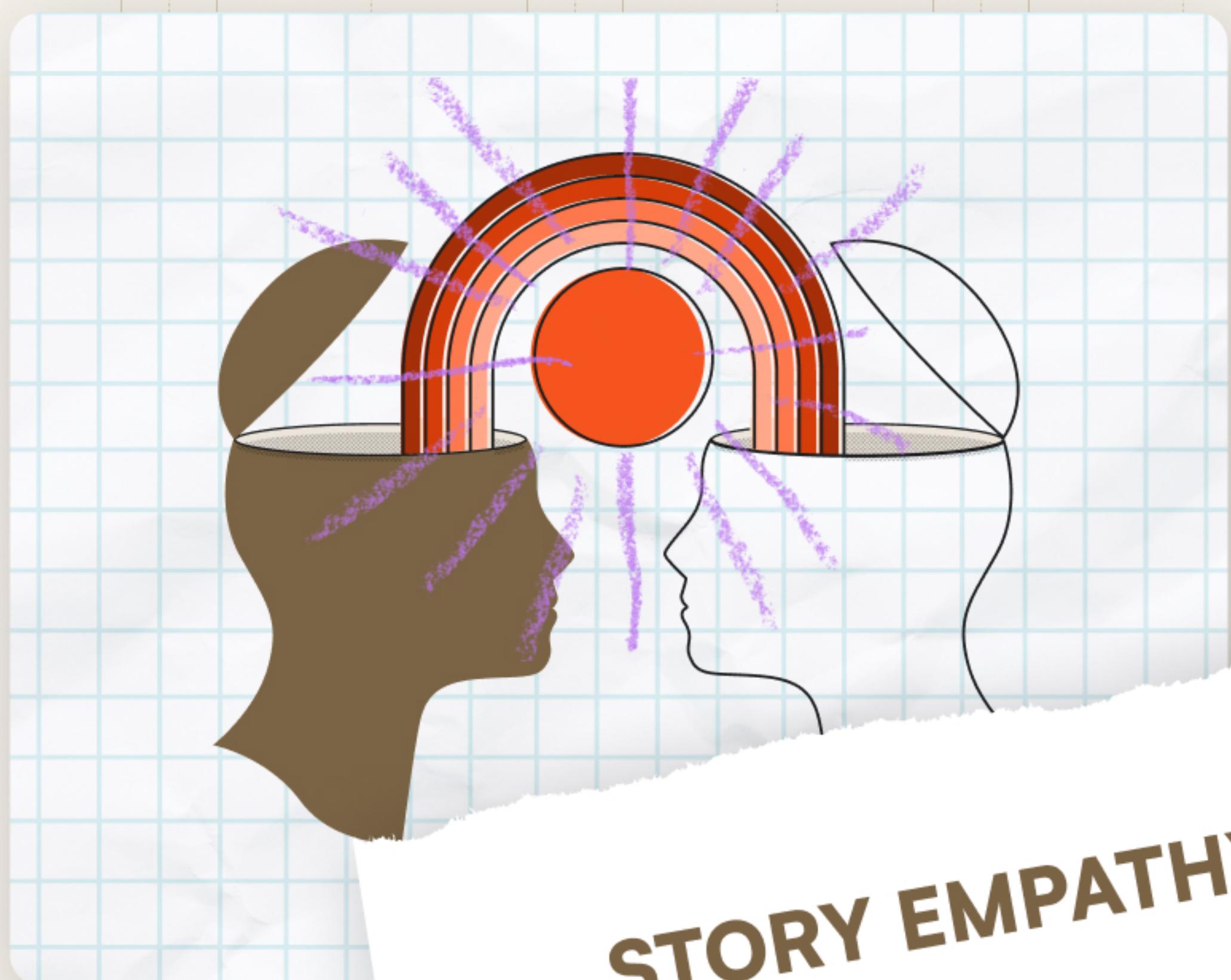
The HEART framework is a perfect tracker of how well the design solved or could solve the stated business problem.

💡 Remember:

Without data, design is directionless.
We are solving real business problems.



Showcase Empathy.



STORY EMPATHY



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Slide for more →

**99.9999% of case studies I see
don't address:**

→ Empathy

Way too much "Next, I did this..."

Not enough "Here's why we did this..."

A well-placed persona image in your study is not a substitute for genuine user understanding.



Some ways you can highlight empathy:

→ **Core Needs:** Begin your narrative by highlighting the user's fundamental needs. Make their pain points the core of your story, just as you did with your designs.

→ **Insights:** Distill the core needs into your primary insights. Showcase these. They guided your design decisions. Let them guide your case study.

→ **How Might We's:** A good way to frame problem-solving based on each insight. These show the uncovered potential.

→ **Outcomes:** Shift your focus from solely what you've learned to how your solution positively affected the user. How did it make their life better?

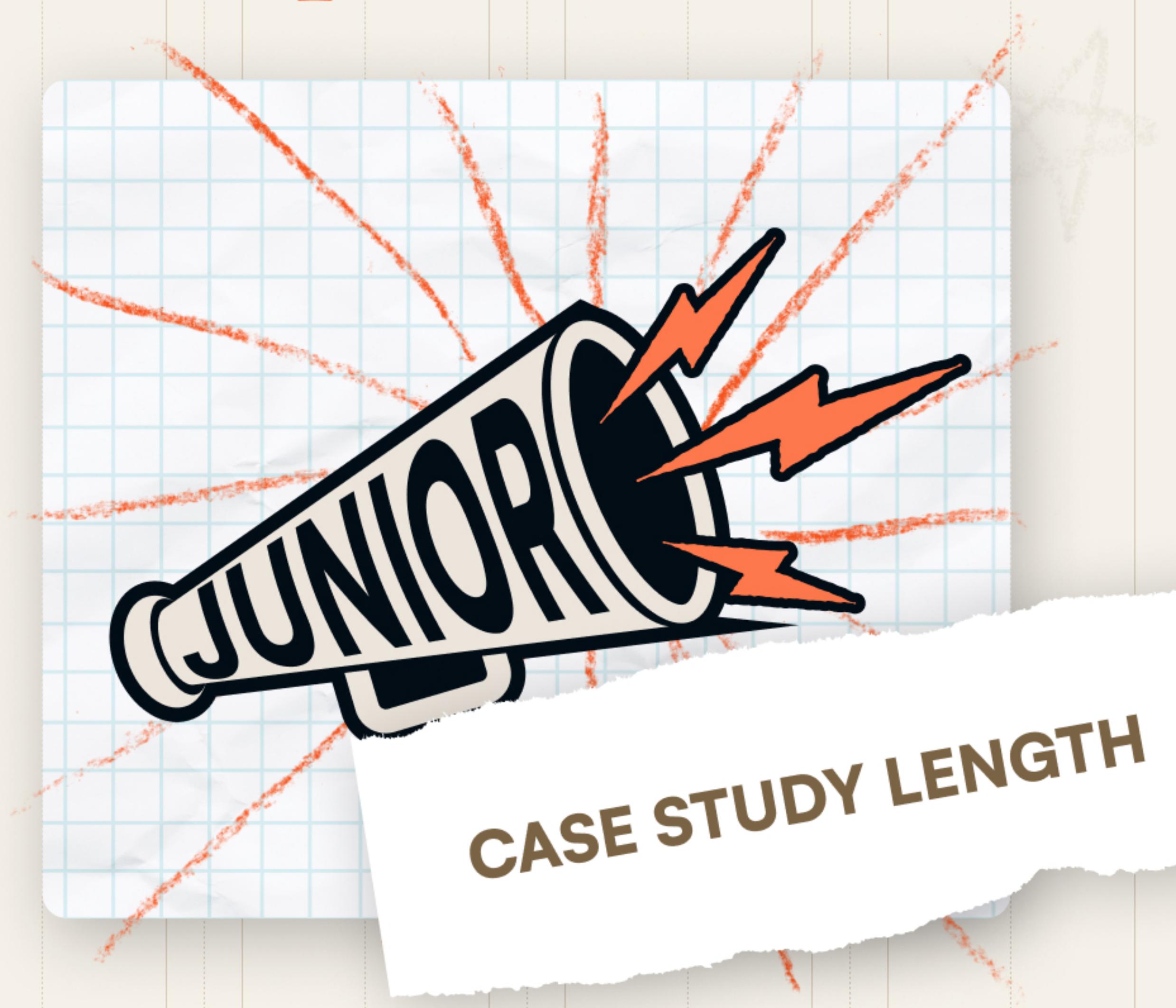
Tell the story through the user's eyes, not merely as a designer ticking off a checklist.

Empathy should have guided every step of your design process.

Let it guide your story, too.



Why you look inexperienced.



Long case studies are a dead giveaway of your inexperience.

Especially when they lack results.

When I see a formulaic, drawn-out case study, I have no doubt you're inexperienced.

Whether you are or not.

And I usually bounce.

Experienced designers can funnel out the noise of detailed process because they regularly talk to stakeholders.

They get in and get out.

They understand what we want to know.

We want to know:

- The Product
- The Problem
- The Results/Outcome.

Process comes between the problem and the result. And FYI

- *There is no perfect process.*

As a designer, you must cherry-pick the best plays to reach the best outcomes.

I don't know anyone who follows a thorough double-diamond on every project. There's simply not time in the real world.



Show the primary insights you solved for.

A great way to outline your case study:

- Headline with result
- Role/Team/Time/Deliverables
- Primary Insight - Activities that solve it
- Primary Insight - Activities that solve it
- Primary Insight - Activities that solve it
- Outcomes/Conclusion

Setting up a case study like this shows you know how to talk to stakeholders.

Setting up every step in the process shows that you just graduated from boot camp.

Let your case study show your potential clients and employers that you're not just a designer but a problem solver - someone who gets the job done and delivers results.

**Because you design for TWO people.
Users and business.**

By excluding the result, you exclude the business.
And that's as junior as it gets.





FEEDBACK



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Slide for more 

Making sense of it all.



Overwhelmed by feedback?

There's a flood of advice.

It seems like everyone has something to say. And yes, it can get very contradictory.

You make a change, only for someone else to suggest reverting it.

But here's the thing:
Feedback is just that - feedback.
It's not direction.

The great thing about feedback is it helps guide decisions, but because it isn't direction, you only have to use what you want to.

-  Take the feedback you want.
-  Throw away what you don't.

Individuals have different preferences.

Feedback comes from a place of experience, knowledge, and opinion.

No one will ever have the perfect answer.

If we had the perfect answers every user experience ever made would be flawless.

The reality is:
It's YOUR design.
It's YOUR portfolio.

You get to choose what to implement.

Consider the feedback:

- **Is it Constructive?** Use it. Grow.
- **Is it Irrelevant?** Ignore. Move on.
- **Is it Conflicting?** Pause. Reflect. Choose your path.

Your portfolio is a reflection of you.

Yours is the voice that matters.

Trust your instincts.

Use us as a guide.

But be you.

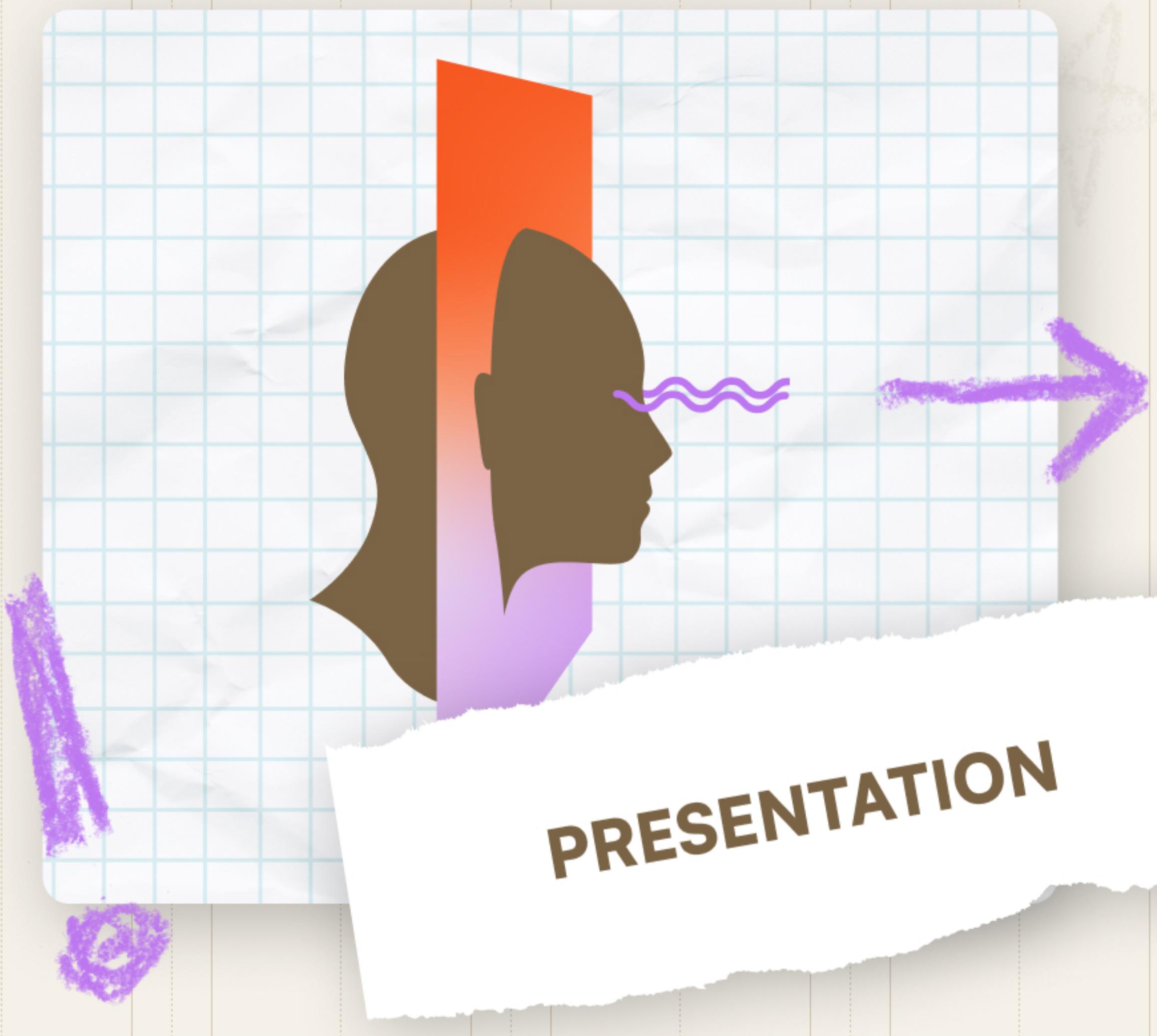
THE INTERVIEW



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Don't just show, tell.



Not getting another interview after your portfolio presentation?

The biggest mistake I always see is not showcasing the why behind your work.

Context.

So many presentations go like this:

- Hi, it me 
- Here's my first case
- Here is a persona I made
- Here is another persona I made
- Here is an arbitrary user flow
- Here is a sketch I made
- Here is a wireframe I made
- Here is the final solution
- I learned a couple of things

Your presentation should be a story, not a simple show and tell.

Don't just tell your audience **WHAT** you did.
Tell them **WHY** you did it.

The why connects your thought process to your design.

We want to hear what drove your decisions.



Paint a vivid picture of the challenges you faced, the insights you stumbled upon, and the brainstorms that led to breakthroughs.

What separates you from other designers is how you think and your design decisions.

- ✓ **Frame your failures**
- ✓ **Dissect your decisions**
- ✓ **Incorporate your successes**
- ✓ **Create a beginning, middle, and end**
- ✓ **Show the path from initial idea to final**

Each slide and each statement should reveal a bit more about your thinking process.

Details matter.
Subtleties matter.

They all add up to a powerful narrative.

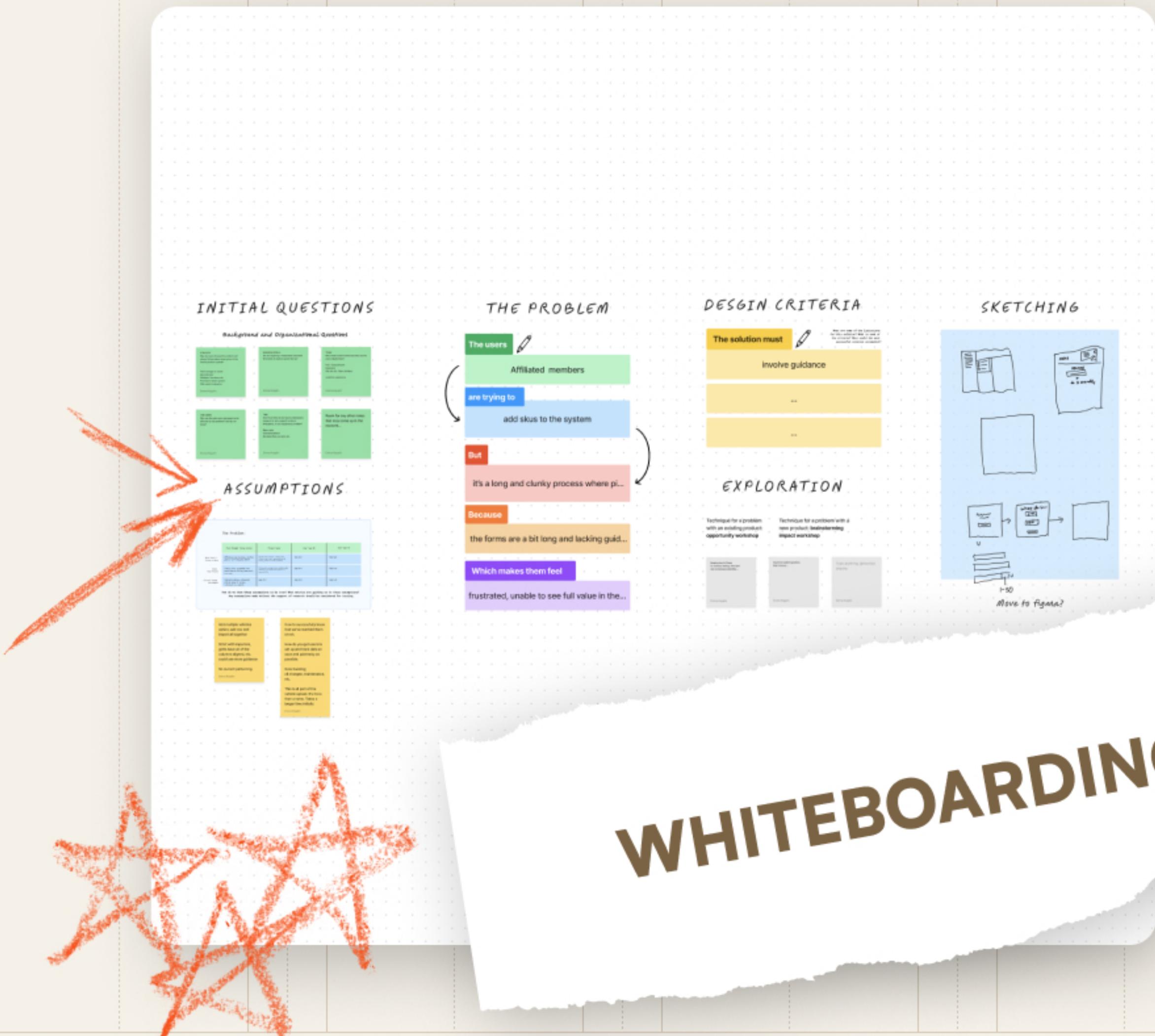
When your presentation is infused with purpose and passion, your work shines. It demonstrates your technical skills and your capacity for critical thinking, problem-solving, and empathetic understanding.

And that's what sets you apart. Not just the sheer quality of your work but also the depth of thought put into it.

Make them remember what you did and why you did it. Because, in the end, it's the why that truly matters.



Master the Whiteboard.



INITIAL QUESTIONS

Background and Organizational Questions

- What are the main goals of the organization?
- Who are the key stakeholders?
- What are the current challenges?
- What are the opportunities?
- What are the resources available?
- What are the constraints?

ASSUMPTIONS

The problem

Assumption	Supporting Evidence
Assumption 1	Evidence 1, Evidence 2, Evidence 3
Assumption 2	Evidence 4, Evidence 5, Evidence 6
Assumption 3	Evidence 7, Evidence 8, Evidence 9
Assumption 4	Evidence 10, Evidence 11, Evidence 12

Red handwritten notes:

- Assumptions are often wrong and lead to poor decisions.
- Assumptions are often based on incomplete or biased information.
- Assumptions can lead to complacency and lack of innovation.
- Assumptions can limit the scope of the problem.

THE PROBLEM

The users   Affiliated members are trying to add skus to the system.

But  it's a long and clunky process where pi...

Because  the forms are a bit long and lacking guid...

Which makes them feel  frustrated, unable to see full value in the...

DESIGN CRITERIA

The solution must   involve guidance   

EXPLORATION

Technique for a problem with an existing product or opportunity workshop

Technique for a problem with a new product, leadership impact workshop

- Information gathering
- Problem definition
- Opportunity analysis
- Competitor research

SKETCHING

Move to                   <img alt="lightbulb icon" data-bbox="73

Does the whiteboard challenge get you panicked?

My 5 Steps to succeed in the session:

1/Trial the Product

Many companies have a trial basis for their product. Jump on their website, check it out, and sign up if possible. Familiarize yourself with its core features, strengths, and gaps. This sets the stage for asking the right questions to find the root of the problem.

We want to see how you prepare.

2/Bring in a Framework

The best whiteboard sessions I've been in? The designer brings their own framework. Great designers don't wing it. They have questions lined up, a path to follow, and a goal they're working towards. Remember, it's not just about solutions.

We want to see how you unearth problems.

3/Drive the Session

With a framework in hand, you're the leader. Guide the discussion and make sure everyone stays focused on the goal. Take us through the next steps - don't wait for us to tell you what to do.

We want to see how you lead.

4/Think Outloud

Whiteboard sessions are all about brainstorming and sharing ideas. Don't leave any thought unexpressed. Even if it seems messy, your thought process can result in a breakthrough.

We want to see how you think.

5/Collaborate

We are looking to see how you build ideas in the moment. You have skilled designers in the room; draw from their expertise and integrate their ideas. Teamwork isn't just a skill; it's a strategy.

We want to see your dynamics.

Your aim should be to split the time for questions and ideating.

Use the timer!

What's critical is to show up as a curious and collaborative team player.

The whiteboard session isn't always about solutions. It's about how you think, collaborate, and ideate.



Prove you're a fit.



PHONE SCREEN

So you have a killer portfolio. Now what?

3 quick ways to stand out in the screening interview:

Trial their Software

Many companies offer a trial experience for their software. Sign up. Gain first-hand experience and familiarize yourself with their tools.

Map their values to yours

Align your values to their company values. Highlight examples from your past that exhibit these values in your answers.

Show them why you'd be a cultural fit.

Create thoughtful questions

Take what you've learned from trialing the software, mapping their values, and ask insightful questions about both of these. This is your chance to be curious.



Mollie Cox

Slide for more →

Question examples:

 What is the culture like at _____?

 I admire _____'s dedication to smart decision-making and innovation. How do these values manifest in the design team's work, particularly when facing challenging decisions?

 What do you like about working here?

 I'm drawn to _____'s emphasis on kindness in the core values. How do you see this reflected on a daily basis, and how is it meaningful to you in work?

 What does the future of _____ look like?

 [Specific feature] stuck out to me when using _____. How do you see this scaling and/or evolving in the future?

You're not just proving competence at this stage. You're proving fit.

You're showcasing:

- Initiative
- Alignment
- Curiosity

Make these short interview minutes count. Stand out.

Be unforgettable.

Prove you're the investment they've been searching for.



It's more than just ability.



OVERALL INTERVIEW



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Your portfolio doesn't get you hired.

Technical skills get your foot in the door.
Soft skills push it wide open.

Imagine two designers:
Both have impeccable portfolios.
They have pretty even experience.
Their work looks great and is impactful.
But, one keeps getting further in interviews.

Why?

- **Empathy**
- **Communication**
- **Collaboration**
- **Adaptability**

These aren't just buzzwords.
They're the difference between a good designer and a great designer.



Great designers talk about:

- How they navigate collaborating with others.
- How they listen, absorb, and process feedback.
- How they adapt to changes quickly and efficiently.
- How they empathize with users and teams.

They also **ASK** great questions.

A designer who listens more than they speak, adapts swiftly to feedback, and empathizes with the user and team brings more than wicked good Figma skills.

They bring value, versatility, and vision.

Companies want technical design wizardry, no doubt.

But they really crave team players who will contribute to their success.

Yes, your portfolio matters.
But it's your soft skills that leave an impression.

Don't just show your ability.
Prove your adaptability.



Mollie Cox

Slide for more 



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Drop me a line; let's talk.

product design

design leadership

ux strategy

ux research

storytelling

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