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UX Design

The Definitive Beginner's Guide





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GENERAL ASSEMBLY

UX Design

The Definitive Beginner's Guide

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How to Think Like a UX Designer

Great UX designers are great analysts.

They question everything. They're aware of biases, and they validate assumptions by triangulating quantitative and qualitative data. They think in terms of screens and systems.

As a UX designer, the first skill you must refine is your own thought processes. Otherwise, you might design the most elegant solution to the wrong problem. You can learn the right thought processes in a few weeks – mastering them takes a lifetime.

In this first chapter, we'll give a brief overview of UX design, then dive straight into the thought processes you must apply to every design project you touch.

Designer Pro Tip



“Think about how you solve problems in the rest of your life: you assess the situation, making sure you understand the needed outcome. You look at the materials at hand, the constraints, the time limits, and the people you’re working with. You think out loud. You ask questions. You say “what if...?”. You toss out crazy ideas. You ask for advice. You say, “how will we know if that option works?” You THINK. Remember that design principles and pixels are your tools, not your solution.”

Cindy Alvarez, Director of UX at [Yammer](#)

UX is a Process and a Product

UX doesn’t mean one thing. One of the greatest pitfalls for newcomers is trying to understand UX as a field separate from other related fields (like web development, technical communication, etc.).

UX is an interdisciplinary field. UX is a way of looking at the world that involves making decisions beyond data with humans firmly in mind.

In fact, my favorite infographic for introducing UX is [one by Erik Flowers](#).

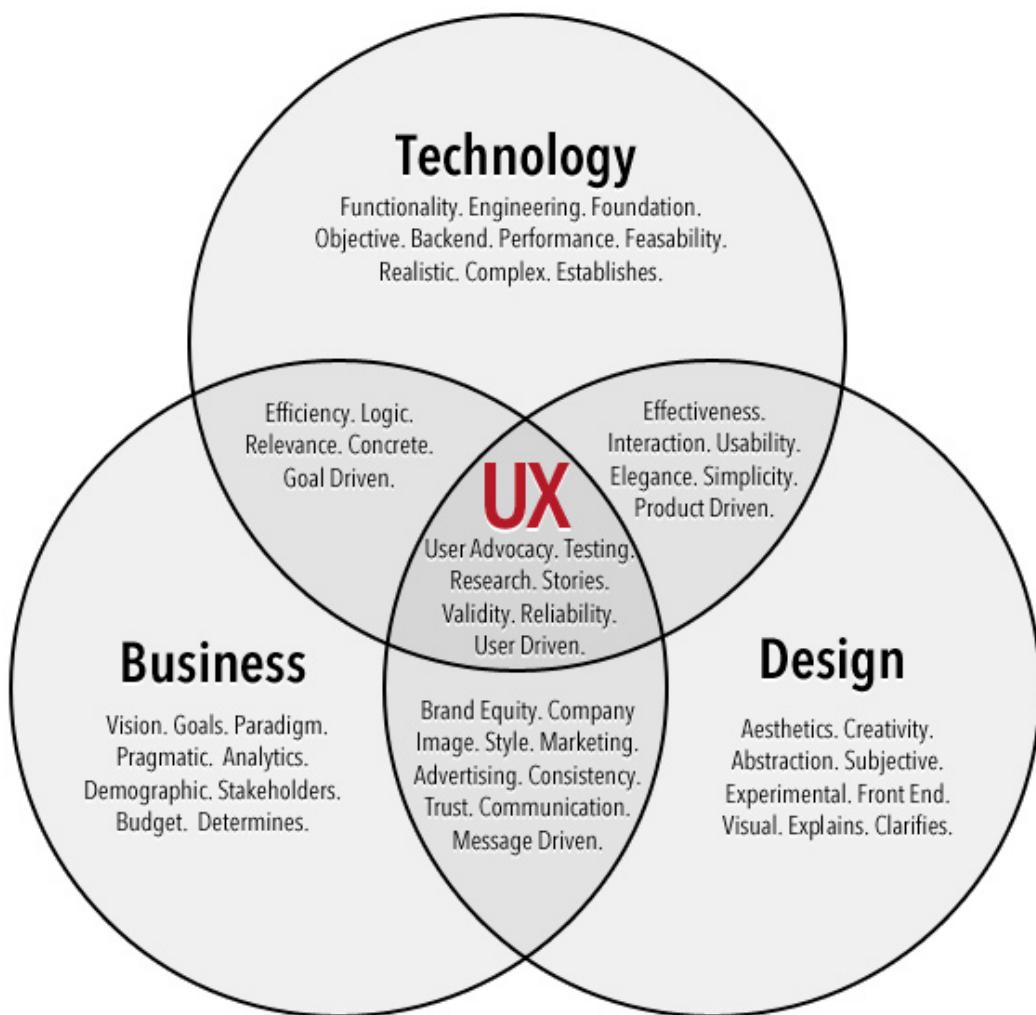


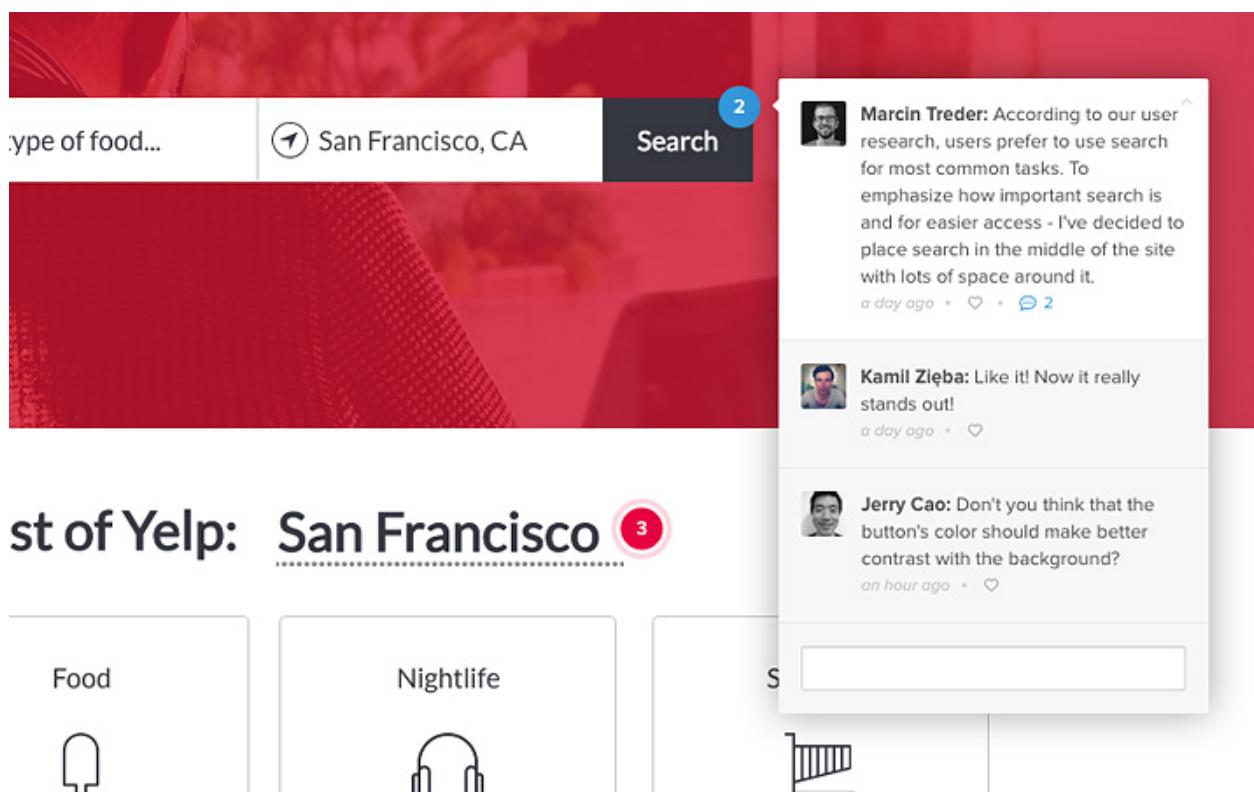
Photo credit: Erik Flowers. Used with permission.

I love this infographic because it hones in on a series of attributes for UX, but clearly relates these attributes to other domains of knowledge: technology, business, and design. UX is the field that *emerges* when you balance these three domains of knowledge around solid methods that focus on user needs.

Based on conversations with [UXPin](#) (a collaborative design platform) about their customers, I can tell you that *everyone* in those domains

is usually involved in the design process at some point. Web developers might dive in and comment on a prototype alongside a marketer. In large organizations, business analysts also frequently create lo-fi prototypes to illustrate business requirements to their team.

So not only is the UX designer expected to understand the business and technical implications of their work, they also need to bring others along the way at each step.



Check Your Ego

Given the collaborative nature of product design, the first thing I always ask people interested in UX is if they work well with people.

If the answer is no, they'll never make it.

Users are troublemakers. They use digital products in unintended ways. They don't update their operating systems in a timely manner, which causes products to behave bizarrely. They ignore the best-laid, most obvious plans and instead adopt their own. Users are, in other words, human beings.

Likewise, your coworkers and clients will frustrate you. They won't always allow the time you need to research before you design. They will question the execution while missing sight of the strategy. They may force your hand towards compromise so they can wash their hands of the problem.

Be patient. Accept that your work isn't always interpreted or used as intended.

Checking your ego is the only way you'll thrive in today's fast-paced Agile processes. Great UX designers aren't just good practitioners – they're fantastic facilitators as well. They can guide users to reveal problems everyone else missed. They can also guide other designers and non-designers to approach business problems from new perspectives.

In order to facilitate good design and think with a clear head, remember a few ground rules:

- **Design is a business function** – Yes, artistic principles apply to design. But there's more at play here. Your personal preference matters only in relation to user and business needs.
- **Empathize internally** – You'll find plenty written about empathy for users. But don't forget your clients and coworkers also have families, mortgages, and dreams of promotion. Present your thinking in terms and concepts they appreciate.

Designer Pro Tip



"The biggest mistake I see all the time from new or aspiring designers is that they assume a design career is all about doing design. The education they get (College, University, other courses) teaches the techniques and the practical implementation of design. But they quickly find out that design is about understanding and working with people."

Designers must find ways to collaborate and communicate with non-designers, or stand up in front of a large group of people and present design confidently. You simply can't avoid this. Some

people are much better at these soft people skills than others. But actively developing your people skills will always boost your early career.”

Chris Thelwell, Head of UX at Envato

Question the Problem Tirelessly

As a designer, you'll oftentimes face situations in which a coworker (or even fellow designer) enthusiastically explains a business problem that needs solving.

Your first responsibility is to question the problem. Failure to do so results in astronomical costs for something that customers don't need.

Any time someone explains a problem that needs a design solution, consider these 5 questions that Chris Thelwell (Head of UX at Envato) [asks his team before every project](#).

1. What do we know we know?

You want to discuss anything that will influence your decisions in the project. For example, lessons learned from previous projects, existing user research insights, even opinions held by certain stakeholders.

The first question also helps you reveal assumptions disguised as facts. When someone says something they believe to be true, ask them to cite supporting evidence.



Photo credit: Chris Thelwell

Let's say you've been tasked with redesigning an analytics platform as trial-to-signup conversions have plummeted.

A product manager might say "Customers with the highest lifetime value buy our analytics platform because we offer the most customizability for reporting". That statement is a fact only if you can verify against prior user research and feedback. Otherwise, you must consider it an assumption.

Keep a running tally of assumptions vs. facts. If you've revealed an assumption, you need to move it now to the second question.

2. What do we know we don't know?

Now you add to the assumptions identified in the first question.

At this point, a marketer might say "I'm not sure if our competitor's aggressive ad retargeting of our trial users is stealing away our

on-the-fence users”. You would list the response as an assumption in the format of “Competitive ad retargeting might be stealing market share”.

It’s also worth discussing the consequences if your assumptions are proven wrong. For instance, if you later discover that your most valuable customers aren’t buying your platform for its customizable reporting, how will that impact the project?



Photo credit: Chris Thelwell

The goal here is to identify the risk behind your assumptions.

As you can tell, our above assumption carries a high degree of risk. If you dive into redesign and learn after the first round of usability testing that a reworked reporting feature makes no difference, your team just wasted untold hours and dollars.

As you start seeing the different risks behind assumptions, you start to naturally prioritize the questions that initial user research will seek to answer.

Research should reveal most answers, but some might be unanswerable (e.g. determining the effectiveness of a competitor's retargeting ad). In those cases, at least you've pushed that risk to the surface where stakeholders can evaluate early in the process (e.g. proceed with the project, or push to backlog).

3. What do we actually know, but think we don't?

The answers to this question might naturally arise as other people chime in to the previous questions.

For example, a marketer might answer question #2 with "I'm not sure if people churn due to cost or frustration", and your user researcher might explain a series of usability reports that points to frustration.



Photo credit: Chris Thelwell

Nonetheless, it's worth revisiting all the answers you've categorized as assumptions. Ask the team if they worked on similar projects in the past, and if they revealed any insights regarding the assumptions. You don't want any facts miscategorized as assumptions since you'll later waste time researching previously validated information.

4. What are the unknown unknowns?

This question sounds strange, but pay close attention.

Have we failed to discover anything so far that could completely ruin the project? What haven't we thought about yet? When you ask this question, you're helping to turn the grey zone of "unknown unknowns" into illuminated "known unknowns" that your team can prioritize based on risk.



Photo credit: Chris Thelwell

For example, the question might prompt a developer to say "Well, now that you bring it up, we actually found out three weeks ago during load testing that our reporting feature can lag by up to 4.5s for data sets exceeding 100 rows".

That information might be an "unknown unknown" for everyone outside of the development team, but you've now added it to everyone's list of assumptions to test.

You've now revealed that the team needs to also test the assumption that "We might be losing customers due to slight performance

issues with our current reporting feature”. In this case, the solution might not even require any front-end design work.

5. What does success look like?

“A smooth product experience” doesn’t cut it. You need to write down [S.M.A.R.T goals](#).

- Specific
- Measurable
- Actionable
- Relevant
- Trackable

Here’s an excellent example of a S.M.A.R.T. goal in our hypothetical UX project:

“Success is achieved when our trial-to-signup conversion rate increases from 2% to 2.50% without affecting churn”.

As you start validating assumptions through user research, you might make the goals increasingly specific as you start to hone in on a solution. If you discover, for instance, that a buggy checkout process is mostly affecting sales completion, you might add a secondary goal that “Success is achieved when our checkout completion rate increases from 45 to 75%”.

Designer Pro Tip



“Design consists of two phases; “divergent thinking”, where designers explore the problem space and come up with lots of potential solutions; and “convergent thinking”, where designers start to sift through the ideas to hone in on the best solution. In the desire to produce, junior designers often rush the divergent stage. As a result, they often ignore more interesting or novel approaches in favor of more obvious solutions. Spend more time exploring the problem, as it’ll pay dividends in the end.”

Andy Budd, Co-founder and CEO at [Clearleft](#)

Identify the Constraints

Questioning the problem helps us decide *if* we should design a solution. Formalizing our constraints helps us decide *how* we should design the solution.

You’ll generally run into these types of constraints:

- **Timing** – In today's world of Lean and Agile, every company wants to ship good products quickly. Find out if you need to release your **MVP** by a non-negotiable date (e.g. a global tech conference your company spent \$58,000 sponsoring)
- **Technology** – How well can the development team write the code so your system's response time feels instant? Do your servers support enough bandwidth to feed data quickly in real-time? Does the location of your data centers affect quality of experience in certain regions?
- **Medium** – What do users already expect from your type of product? What current mental models and UI patterns does your product need to incorporate?
- **Budget** – How much money is the company setting aside for the project, and how much could they stretch in case unforeseen delays or challenges appear?

After your questioning exercise, conduct thorough **stakeholder interviews** so you can further reveal any hidden constraints as early as possible.

Designer Pro Tip



“Dealing with constraints, especially those coming from other people or departments, is not a battle. Designers are not there to fight constraints. This sometimes gets lost in the designer’s emotional connection with their work.

To get around this reaction, I encourage all my designers to respond to a new constraint by saying ‘thank you’. This changes the tone of the conversation. You are thanking the other person for making you aware of the constraint and setting up the conversation for collaborating to find a good solution.”

Chris Thelwell, Head of UX at Envato

Gather Context for the Solution

Once you’ve identified the initial constraints, you need to validate those assumptions. At this point, you’ll start conducting user research, prioritizing requirements, and prototyping concepts.

1. User Research

The most cost-effective generative research method is user interviews. You can conduct them in the office, over Skype, or even at the user's location (contextual inquiry) to better observe their natural use cases.

When interviewing users, your goal is to explore the whole scope of the experience – not just the immediate area of focus. For example, if you want to create a competitor to Netflix, don't just talk to people about how they currently use Netflix. Talk to them about other services they use – legal or illegal.

Where do they watch episodes or movies? What device they use? Do they download or stream? Why?

Ask plenty of open-ended questions about user behavior (not user opinions), then pause for the answers. Don't worry if the interview veers slightly off topic since the best insights sometimes come from tangents.

2. Prioritizing Requirements

Once you've finished the user interviews, you'll want to review the answers and start identifying patterns. Check those patterns against any existing quantitative data (e.g. in-app analytics).

When defining requirements, designers and their stakeholders generally conduct a prioritization activity with a [2x2 matrix](#) as

they evaluate the qualitative data and quantitative data against the design constraints.

Designer Pro Tip



"To make a matrix, make a "plus" sign of two axes. Label each axis with attributes that will guide your decisions. Common labels are: important/less important; easy/difficult; urgent/less urgent."

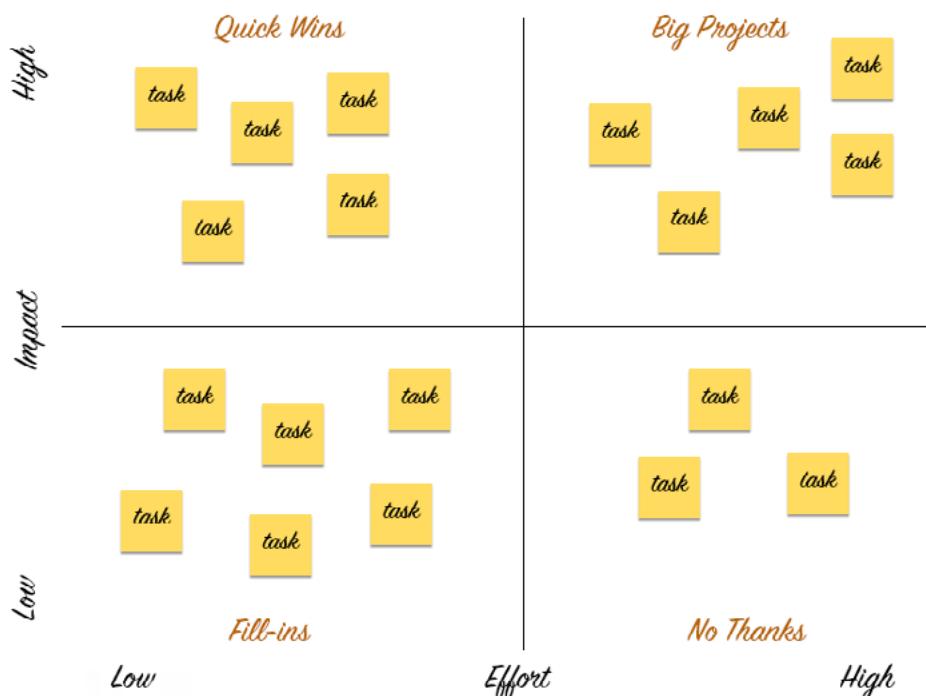


Photo credit: Sarah Harrison

Write each idea/feature on a sticky note, and as a team, plot each sticky in a quadrant, based on the attributes. Then, focus on ideas

in the optimal quadrant (usually a combination of "important" + "easy" or "urgent", but it varies based on the context.)"

Kate Rutter, Principal at Intelleto

3. Prototyping the MVP

The [minimum viable product](#) represents the least amount of effort required to validate a hypothesis. Don't confuse an MVP for an incomplete or rushed product. Your goal is to create something complete at the smallest scale possible.

When working on the first MVP, focus on incorporating the items that populated the “Quick Wins” and “Big Projects” quadrants of the 2x2 matrix. Discard any items in the lower-right quadrant, and move all the items in the lower-left quadrant to the backlog.

The screenshot shows a user interface for a healthcare product's encounter management system. The top header includes the encounter ID (Encounter_73457), subscriber name (Barbera Johnston), and status (Rejected). It also displays statistics: 14 Uneditable fields, 3 CMS Response Errors (0 errors changed, 3 remaining), and 0 unvalidated changes (1 Ignored, 1 Fix later). A 'Validate encounter' button is visible.

The main content area is divided into several sections:

- SUBSCRIBER:** Fields include Payer Subscriber Number (123456) and Receiver Subscriber Number (559893755A).
- IDENTIFICATION:** Fields include System ID (Medical Life Health Plan), Claim Type (Aetna), Patient Control Number (987966564), and Medical Record Number (Medical Life Health Plan).
- DETAILS:** Fields include Submission Type (Initial), Bill Type (13), and Frequency (1 - Admit through discharge claim).
- PARTNERS:** Fields include Trading Partner (Medical Life Health Plan) and Payer Name (Humana).
- BILLING/PHARMACY PROVIDER:** Fields include Billing Provider Name (St. Johns Hospital) and Payer ID (60920).
- RENDERING/PRESCRIBING PARTNER:** Fields include Payer Subscriber Number (123456) and Receiver Subscriber Number (559893755A).
- ERROR LOG:** A sidebar shows an error log with one entry: "1 - Ignored fields" (highlighted with a red circle).
- NAVIGATION:** Buttons for "Previous error" and "Next error" are present, along with a "View error report" link.

Lo-fi MVP prototype created in [UXPin](#) by customer [LookThink](#) for a healthcare product.

You might start sketching the MVP, then move into a digital platform to create a digital prototype. It doesn't need to be pretty, but it must function well enough to test with users.

You're on the right track if the MVP prototype faithfully executes the 20% of features that deliver 80% of the value. Only increase the fidelity as you test additional hypotheses (e.g. if your brand colors affect usability).

Conclusion

Never assume you know all the answers.

As you test the MVP prototype, you may reveal additional user needs and need to reprioritize requirements again. Don't be alarmed – design is never a linear process.

While every designer's individual process differs, they all follow the same framework of thinking: question the problem, gain context through user research, and build just enough to validate existing assumptions and uncover new needs.

In the next chapter, we'll dive into greater detail about the activities and deliverables that help drive decisions as designers progress from revealing the problem to refining the solution.

Practicing UX: Tasks and Deliverables

Because UX is an emerging field, it can be difficult to gain meaningful work experience, especially when you're first starting out.

In the first chapter, I laid out the thought processes every budding UX designer should refine. Now, I explain how those thought processes manifest themselves in the form of UX tasks and deliverables.

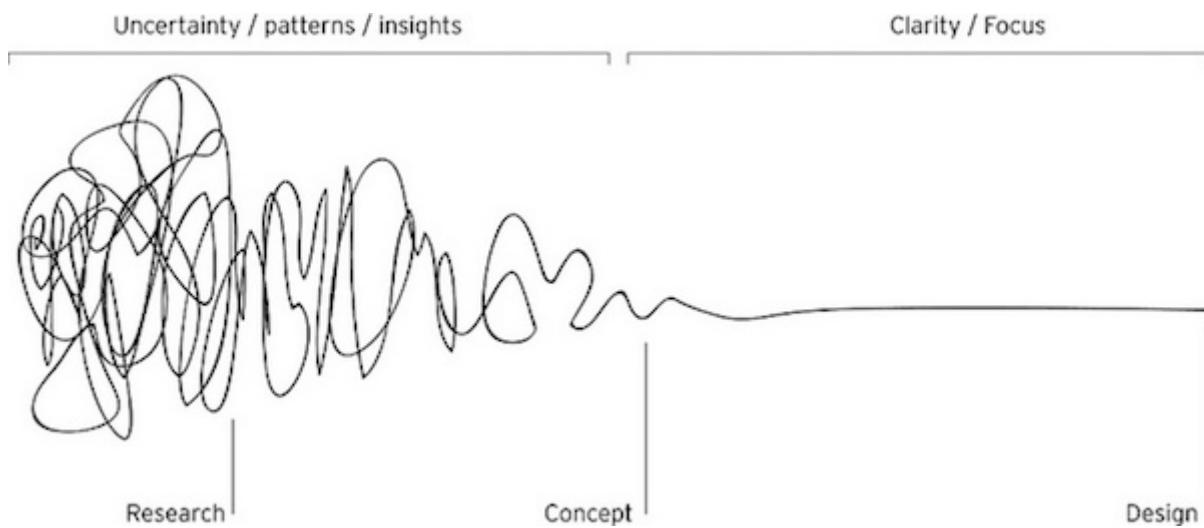


Photo credit: Rosenfeld Media. Creative Commons.

Let's get practicing.

Create Your Personalized UX Library

My [own approach](#) to UX is to separate it into stages and skill sets:

UX Design Stages

- [Preliminary Research](#)
- [Prototyping](#)
- [User Testing](#)
- [Maintenance](#)

UX Skill Sets

- [User Research](#)
- [Interaction Design](#)
- [Information Architecture](#)
- [Content Strategy](#)
- [Visual Design](#)

Essentially, the project progresses through a series of stages that are largely recursive (meaning circular and iterative), and will use a variety of distinct skill sets.

I organized this list not only to help my students, but also to help myself.

Because the UX process isn't always linear, I keep a library of resources for quick reference.

I have an [Evernote](#) list that I call “UX Stuff” which includes every article, book, blog post, and webpage related to UX that I’ve ever found useful. I’ve also tagged all these resources with more specific categories (e.g. interaction design, content strategy, rapid prototyping, etc.) to help me find specific topics.

The screenshot shows the Evernote Premium interface. On the left is a sidebar with sections for 'Work Chat', 'Shortcuts' (with a note about dragging), 'Recent Notes' (including 'Futureproof...', '10 WAYS TO...', 'Govern, Plan,...', 'Strategic prin...', and 'Raising your...'), 'Notes', 'Notebooks', 'Tags', 'Atlas', 'Market', and 'Announcem...'. The main area shows a list of notes under the 'UX Stuff' notebook. One note is selected, showing its title 'Creating Better UX Portfolios: 4 Do's and...' and a preview of the content. The preview text reads:

Creating Better UX Portfolios: 4 Do's and

Created: Jul 24, 2015 Updated: Jul 24, 2015 blog.uxpin.com

Published in Interaction Design, Tutorials, design tips, User Experience, UX Design, Web Design

The note content starts with:

Hello World, I'm still here

Relocated to San Francisco

Dynamic Bezel Lines

Transition and old browsers

A nice recursion example

Let us thi

If I’m working on a project that requires some really solid thinking about interaction design, for example, then I pull out those resources and review my approach. The list of terms is much less important than the *resources you collect that are connected to those terms*. I add to this list all the time.

That’s the reflection part: whenever I’m struggling on a project and I’m not sure where to go next, I go back to my list of resources and even search for some new ones. Even though I have a complete theory of UX in my head, I still return regularly to the drawing board to review best practices for specific situations.

Knowing isn't enough. You have to practice, and you have to make sure what you're doing matches the advice of more experienced professionals. That's how you learn and retain UX knowledge: think, practice, reflect.

Practicing Preliminary Research and User Research

I like to introduce people to the practice of UX by pairing design stages and skill sets. This works well for getting some actual design hours clocked, especially when you're not sure how to get started.

This path starts with preliminary research. Preliminary research is the the most easily neglected UX stage, even though it is one of the most important. It involves gathering all the tools you will need for the project and creating a project plan that articulates how stakeholders will work with you on the project, even if that's just you and the client.

Designer Pro Tip



“Don't be afraid of negative user feedback. It's not personal. It doesn't mean you're a bad designer. It means you need to un-

derstand users better. Embrace user feedback, even the negative stuff, and be glad you work at a place that allows you to grow as a designer by learning what you got wrong and trying again.”

Laura Klein, Principal at [Users Know](#)
and author of [Lean UX for Startups](#)

One of the best resources I’ve encountered for this stage is Leah Buley’s [The UX Team of One](#).

Buley lays out almost every UX tool you can think of. If you’re serious about learning to do UX, buy the book. There are also [a lot of other good resources out there](#), but Buley’s book is a great one-size-fits-all approach to UX that also contains a surprising amount of nuance regarding her own personal process. Because it targets the lone UXer, it’s perfect for those trying to establish themselves.

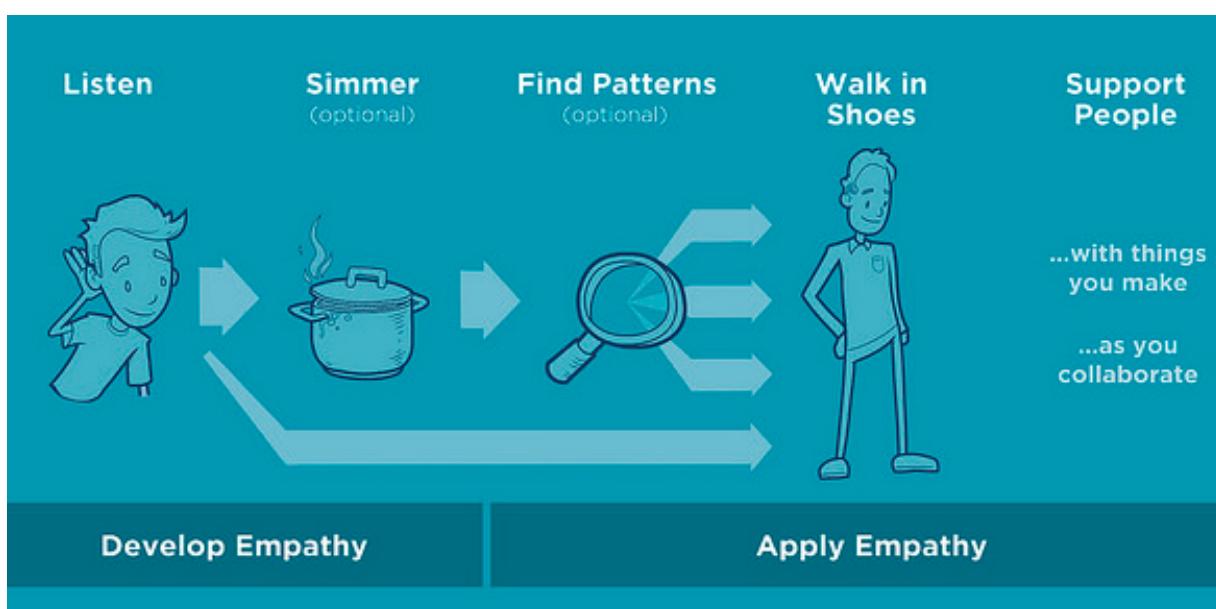


Photo credit: “PE024: Figure 3.3.” [Rosenfeld Media](#). Creative Commons.

As far as user research, this typically starts with [contextual inquiry](#). Stemming from [ethnography](#), contextual inquiry involves interviewing users about their wants and needs, typically in the setting in which they will actually use the product. A great book about contextual inquiry is Steve Portigal's [*Interviewing Users*](#). Portigal uncovers all the nuances of how to interview a user, how to figure out what's important to them, and how to help them help you make better design choices.

As far as snagging an actual design project, there are two types of projects that are pretty readily available for practicing your preliminary research / user research chops.

1. Hypothetical projects

These are projects in which you take a known product and redesign it or design a hypothetical product of your own. Or you can take two products and [pit them against each other](#). The point is to design a project around a known product to show that you have something to contribute, even to known brands.

2. Client-based projects

These are projects in which you work with an actual client, either paid or unpaid, to design a product for them (or redesign one). To snag a project of this kind, you usually need look no further than local businesses and non-profits. Reach out to your friends, relatives, and colleagues for people who need design work and negotiate a project with them.

3. Deliverables at This Stage

Something else that can be confusing for people new to UX is what deliverables fit with what stage, meaning: what should you give people at which points in a design process? For each stage, I'll present some common deliverables for that stage to help you get going with that stage. A great, comprehensive list of UX methods and deliverables can be found at UXDesign.cc.

Personas: These are profiles of archetypal users, meaning actual users that are representative of a key demographic from your user research. All user research documents grow out of the persona, so spend some time learning how to [create them correctly](#).



JONATHAN VIZZIER

"Design isn't just how it looks, it's how it works."

Demographics:

- 27 years old
- Masters in Visual Design
- Visual Designer
- Single
- Earns \$85K per year

list [text](#)

Behaviors & Beliefs:

- Obsessive over visual quality
- Hates when product managers use the word "just" before describing last-minute tasks
- Wants to be as involved in the design process as possible
- Loathes jargon, wishes people would get to the point

Characteristics & Attributes (0 to 5)

- Design experience: 3
- Education: 4
- Tech Savviness: 5
- Ambition: 5
- Workload: 5

Goals:

- To build a strong portfolio, regardless of whatever job I'm at
- To start mastering UX design by the end of this year for a career transition
- To rise up in his company and start getting assigned larger-profile projects

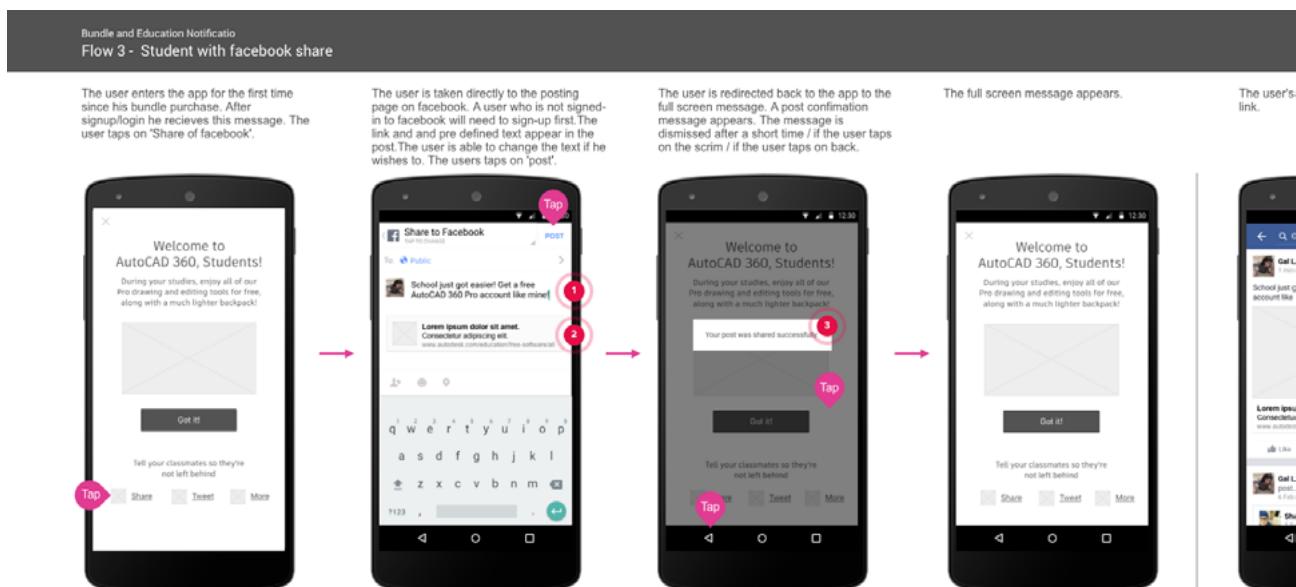
User stories: Now that you have your personas, you need to now assign them actions. Each persona usually requires at least a few user stories, since they represent the most important user actions and motivations. You can create a Google spreadsheet [like this](#). It's a fast way to get a birds-eye view while allowing for collaboration.

As a...	I want to...	So that...
Marketer	Quickly offer feedback on designs	Everyone can see the possible revisions and I can get back to my daily non-design work
UX Designer	Add interactions to wireframes in one click	I can create prototypes quickly to test my interaction design
Business Analyst	Add rough prototypes in under 5 minutes to my list of business requirements	I can illustrate business requirements to designers in a way that won't be misinterpreted

User scenarios: User scenarios fill in the situation in the user stories. User + task + environment = scenario. User scenarios help you better empathize with the user stories, because you are adding human details. It's another exercise to get you to not just understand the user, but to feel for them. For some fast user scenarios, add a few additional columns in your [user stories spreadsheet](#) where you can drop in the scenarios.

As a...	I want to...	So that...	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3
Marketer	Quickly offer feedback on designs	Everyone can see the possible revisions and I can get back to my daily non-design work	It's 7:30PM on a Friday night. John should be home already, but he's staying late wrapping up the copy for a new landing page set to go live next week. He sees an email from the designer on another project asking for some emergency copy since they just realized the header and first paragraph is still in Lorem Ipsum. He feels frustrated because he asked the designers to insert some rough copy as a starting point. John's already clocked in 50 hours for the week, so he wants a smooth way to give his feedback as easily and quickly as possible so he can head home.		

User flows: For each scenario, this is a sketch of the paths users take through a product. It can be an actual map or just a simple line drawing that depicts the ways users navigate through a product. I tend to use [UXPin](#) to make these. Combined with [task analysis](#), user flows give you a clear picture of how to create the easiest paths for users to complete goals.



AutoCAD 360 - UX/UI Specifications

User flow created in [UXPin](#) by customer Autodesk

Designer Pro Tip



"The biggest mistake I see new designers make is not fully understanding the problem to be solved or the goal of the design. This leads to jumping into producing only one solution at a high degree of precision/fidelity too soon. It's critical to make sure you really understand the problem, and identify the desired outcome. The best way to start designing is to explore multiple options at low fidelity: sketching, task flows, rough prototypes. Then you can assess which design idea will best solve the problem. Pro tip: it's often not the first, most obvious solution."

Kate Rutter, Principal at [Intelleto](#)

Practicing Maintenance and Information Architecture/ Content Strategy

One of the primary elements of maintaining any digital product is understanding how it uses information (information architecture) and how users access and use this information to achieve tasks (content strategy).

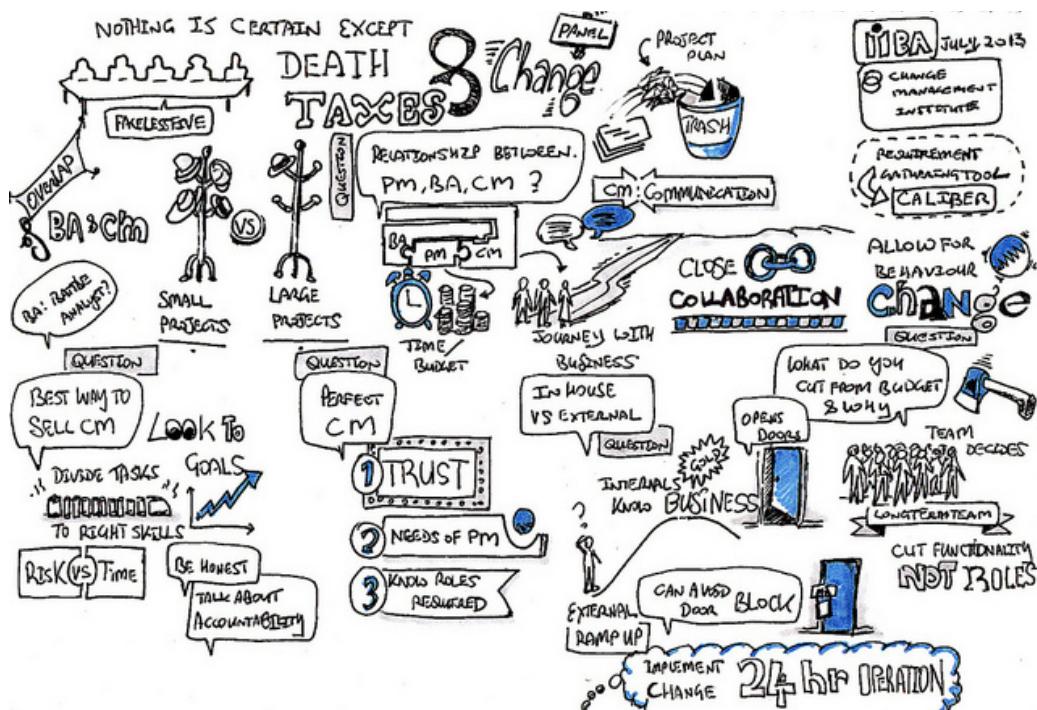


Photo credit: CannedTuna. Creative Commons.

One of the least understood stages in my opinion, I see information architecture as largely the foundation of information structures and flows upon which any product runs.

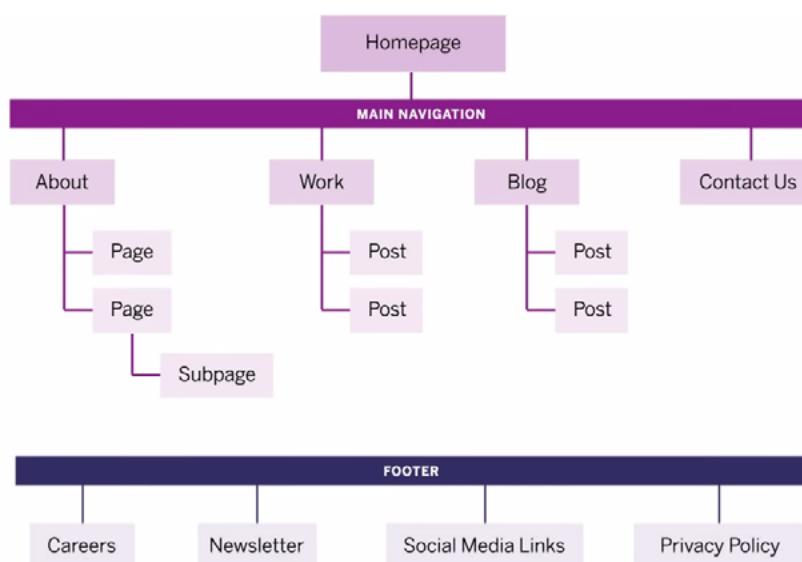
Content strategy, on the other hand, is the user-facing considerations regarding these information structures and flows. Like any complex system, no digital product will last if these important considerations aren't foregrounded. That's why I encourage UX novices to think of the maintenance stage as actually coming first: you need to plan for it from minute one. I do that by starting my deliverables for this stage before I any design work. That way, I can take notes and improve them as I go along.

At the same time, these deliverables also have a lot of longevity, which is also why this stage is ongoing. Again: UX is recursive, and not every

stage only happens once. This stage, and these skill sets, will be the most important after the launch of a final product.

1. Deliverables at This Stage

Sitemaps: Sitemaps depict all the pages (or other defined elements) of a product and how they interconnect, typically in a simple line drawing diagram. You can even connect the “forest” view of sitemaps with the “tree” view of wireframes and prototypes by creating an [interactive site map](#) (like the examples below created in [UXPin](#) by customer Barrel).



Taxonomies: [Taxonomies](#) are lists of vocabularies for all information contained within a product. They are not content repositories (see below), but help ensure that the information contained within a product is usable, valid, and controlled. One of the best taxonomy resources I've found is [TaxoTips](#).

Content Governance Plans: A [content governance plan](#) is a complete strategy for updating, revising, and maintaining all content within a product. It often includes several sub-elements that will help your client maintain their product. These can include:

- A list of clear goals for content development and governance.
- A content calendar or long-term plan for developing new content for the product.
- A list of content repositories or places within organization or online where readymade content exists that can be used for the product.
- A schedule for conducting content audits, or complete inventories of the status and effectiveness of all content contained within the product.

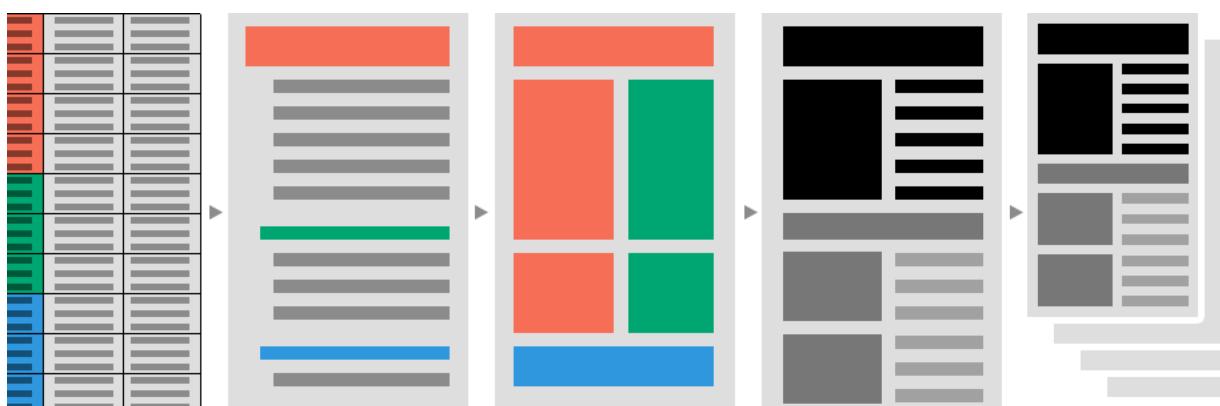
Practicing Prototyping, Interaction Design, and Visual Design

After you get a sense of your users, their needs, and your content structure, it's time to make something for them.

The process is a lot more complicated than it sounds, and is usually where a lot of folks new to UX get stuck. Given their short learning curve (and employer's demand for expertise), I highly recommend investing in the new generation of prototyping apps.

The main trick at this stage, of course, is *what* to make, and *when* to make it. To figure this out, you need to think about the relationship between a prototype, user interactions, and UI elements (the visual components users will eventually see).

Essentially, to quote a recent article by Arijit Banerjee, “The main purpose of building prototypes is to test whether or not the flow of the product is smooth and consistent.”

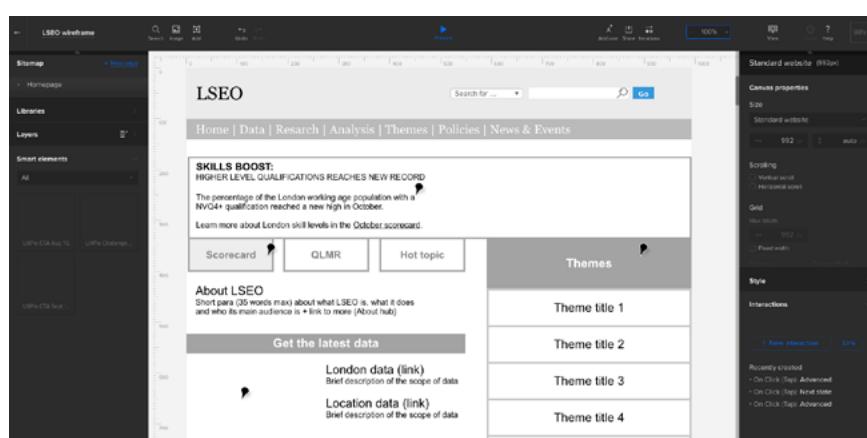


A prototype is *not* the final product. This is important, because you don't want to constrain developers into particular technological choices. Sometimes you'll also be working with a content management system (CMS) that will constrain choices.

This is why I encourage new UXers to think of prototypes as a kind of **minimum viable product** you can use for user testing. Prototypes must give both stakeholders (meaning clients and decision makers involved with the product) and users a clear sense of how they can interact with the final product. You should avoid cluttering your design with a lot of UI elements that will probably be added later based on different considerations (which I cover below).

1. Deliverables at This Stage

Wireframes: Every prototype starts as a static wireframe, which depicts a single screen of an application, including some UI elements. A wireframe is most useful as a tool for developing a unified vision of a product, focusing on content structure rather than visual finesse. If the wireframe is clickable, we consider it a **low-fidelity interactive wireframe**.



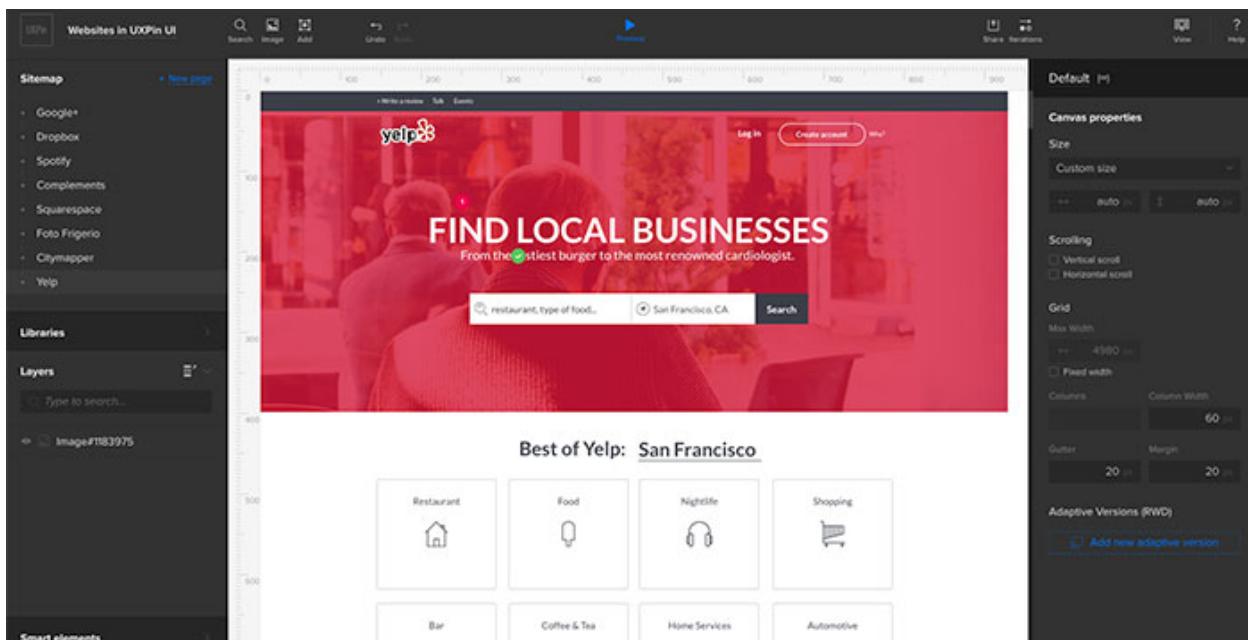
Annotated Wireframe created in [UXPin](#)

UI elements: UI elements are the atomic components of the product users will actually see. You must include some UI elements in your prototype, such as buttons, links, and spaces that are demarcated from other spaces (e.g. headers, footers, scrollbars, images, pages, etc.), as users need them to interact with your prototype. As your fidelity increases, so too does the number of UI elements.

Added iPhone 6 Plus		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Added iPhone 6 Plus Lo-fi				
Added Android Lollipop				
Added Yosemite UI				
Added Windows Phone 8 UI				
Added Android Wear				
Added Google Glass				
Added Social Buttons				
Added UXPin Icon Set				
Added Retina Icons				
Added Android Icons				
Added Font Awesome Icons				

Mockups: Mockups are more complete depictions of a product. They are usually medium to high-fidelity (like what you might create in Photoshop or Sketch). They can also be static or clickable, depending on what kinds of tools you use to develop them. If they're clickable, we can consider them a medium to high fidelity prototype.

In the traditional design process, you'll usually start wireframing, then prototyping, and finally polishing up the visual design with a mockup. However, you can just as easily start with a prototype and move to a mockup. Experiment with each deliverable and use whatever process you're most comfortable with.



Mockup created in UXPin

Practicing User Testing and User Research

At this point, it's important to remember that the UX design process is recursive, meaning that it almost never proceeds in a linear fashion.

The reason I bring this up is because user testing is the point at which a lot of well-laid plans oft go awry. Sometimes you have to combine stages, too, due to time constraints or other considerations.

Because I work as a UX consultant on fast-paced projects I often don't have time to interview as many users as I'd like, so I tend to combine my **user research** with preliminary **usability testing** and then do another round of quick testing with a higher fidelity prototype later on.

	User 1	User 2	User 3	User 4	User 5
User feels interface is overwhelming					
Prefers "search" over browsing the categories					
Requested that "Accepts Credit Cards" be a top-level filter					
Wants photo gallery accessible on results page to assess restaurant ambience					
Bookmark feature was frustrating					
Needs clearer indication of price ranges					
Felt it was easy to sort restaurants by "Open Now"					
Could not find the Events tab					

Photo credit: UXPin based on exercise suggested by Tomer Sharon

Keep in mind that user testing is very different than contextual inquiry. While the latter is designed to get a broad sense of user needs, with the former you need at least a low-fidelity prototype to test with. User testing also is designed to test the usability of an application, meaning how effective it is at helping users reach their goals. You must know what users' goals are at this point, however, or it's hard to design a usability testing script, which is a key preliminary deliverable for this stage.

1. Deliverables at This Stage

(Before testing)

Usability test plan: Summarize the background, goals, objectives, and methodology for the testing. Are you running a on-site usability test, or a [remote usability test](#)? Is it [moderated or unmoderated](#)? How many people are you testing? I recommend following Tomer Sharon's [1-page format](#) for a concise, scannable plan or Userfocus' [1-page dashboard plan](#).

User testing script: In order to perform an effective user test, you need to create a script for the entire experience, including who you will recruit for the test. Your test users should be versions of

your personas. That's easy if you've done your homework up to this point: you simply need to find people who match your personas. Your task analysis should also tell you what steps you will lead users through. If you're moderating the test, encourage users to think out loud and reassure them you are testing the product – not them.

Use this [free usability test kit](#) to get started (includes test script).

Usability Test Script

<!-- This is a sample Usability Test Script. Feel free to fill it in with your own data and use it during your own research. I recommend learning the text by heart (it's important that you want to keep your own style), rather than reading it. -->

Welcome participant warmly and show her a place in which you're going to conduct the test. For the introduction part, seat her in a way that will let you see her face (helps with natural conversation). The Computer screen should show a neutral website (Google, Yahoo etc.). Don't show the research software yet.

Hello {Name of the participant}, thank you for coming. My name is {your name} and I'm a researcher for {name of the product} – I'm going to walk you through the session today.

Before we'll start I have some information for you.

We're currently testing {name of the product} to learn as much as we can about the way people use it. Every product is intended to work in a certain way by its creators, but as you know – the reality might be quite different. The goal of this research is to get us as close to the reality as possible.

The session will take about an hour.

(After testing)

Usability reports: I tend to combine my reports with other deliverables, such as wireframes and refined prototypes, but regardless: you'll need to communicate findings from your user testing to your client. The most important part of generating a good usability report is a thorough introduction to what was effective about your prototype and what wasn't. I like the “crap sandwich” approach: I start with what was effective, then I talk about what wasn't, then I end with what next steps are required to make the product more effective. The free kit mentioned above also includes a report template.

Usability Test Report

Summary

<!--A word of explanation: Blue color and "html comment tags" are used throughout this template to indicate comments that you should delete after completing the report with your own content. Our comments are meant only to provide guidance. -->

<!-- When you've finished the report, summarize your work and key findings here. Be brief and to the point. -->

“Might be good a idea to include the most interesting customer quote here. It helps with emphasizing your points”

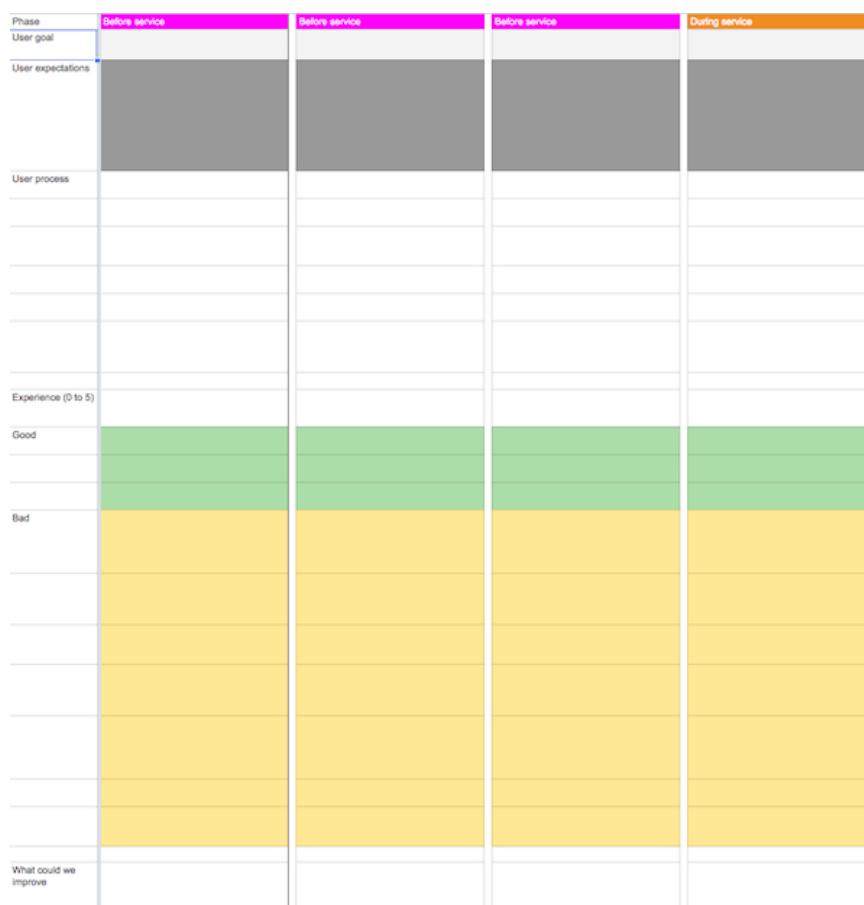
<!-- By reading this section, stakeholders should immediately understand:

- the reason for conducting the test,
- when it was conducted,
- how it was conducted,
- key takeaways from the test.-->

After analyzing basic use cases of the {name of the product} it came to our attention that further analysis and a test with real users is crucial for improving the overall usability.

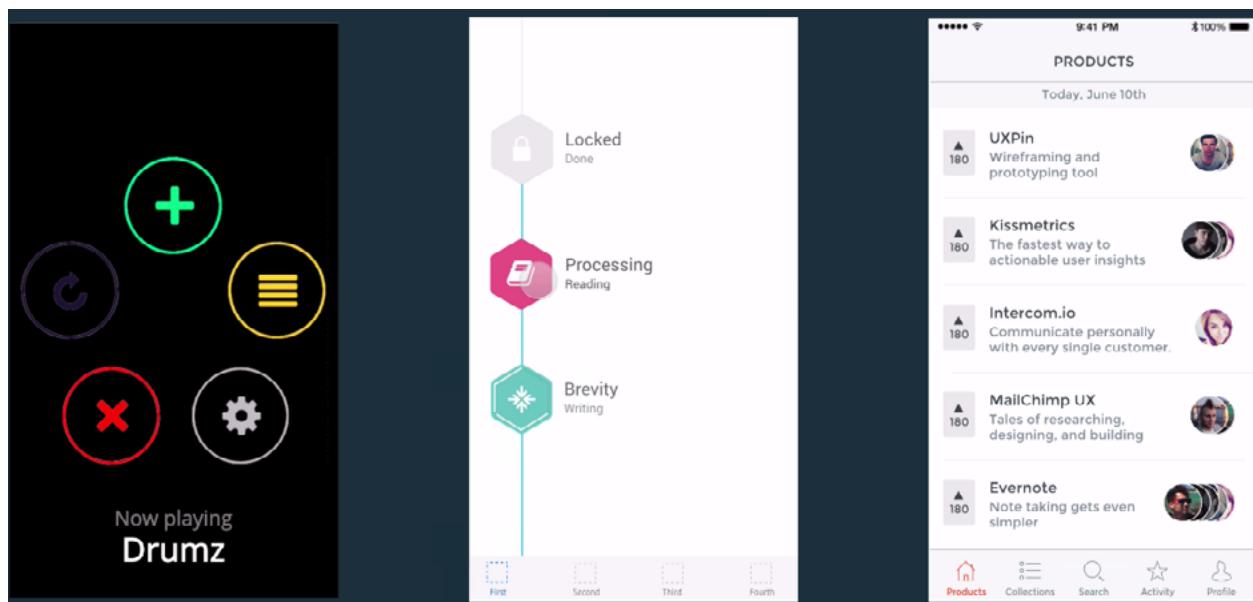
After thorough preparation of test scripts (described in the section “Scenarios & Tasks”, we've gathered a group of {number of participants}, who use a current version of the service

Journey map: A journey map is similar to a user flow, but it's more detailed. With user testing data, you can say more certainly how users will navigate a final product. If you've done your contextual inquiry effectively, you can even say where they start at in the daily lives before encountering your product. The end of the journey of a journey map is always accomplishing key tasks. Finally, it's important to clearly describe "pain points" or areas of the product that users are likely to struggle with and what can be done to minimize this struggle. Adaptive Path offers an excellent [free e-book](#) on the topic.



Refined prototype: The main goal of user testing is to improve your prototype. If you don't find anything wrong from your prototype, you probably need to dig deeper. It is almost impossible to guess

how real, live users will interact with your prototype, meaning that there will probably be some usability problems (and that's okay). You should always test each iteration of your prototype with users.



Get out there and master your UX tools!

If there is one thought to leave you with, it is that you *must* gain more than a theoretical understanding of UX to be any good at it. Whether you're practicing on your own while searching for internships or launching a second career in a new position within your current organization, you need to go out there and try these out all of these tools and processes. And just like in any trade, you will *not* be equally good at all of them, and that's okay.

Specialists exist in the UX world just like every other field. You'll find information architects, content strategists, user researchers, and prototyping specialists. In fact, there are even people who do nothing

else than create taxonomies for organizations to use in their product lines. If you want to appeal to employers, follow the [T-shaped skills model](#): be a generalist in all of the above fields, but specialize in what interests you most.

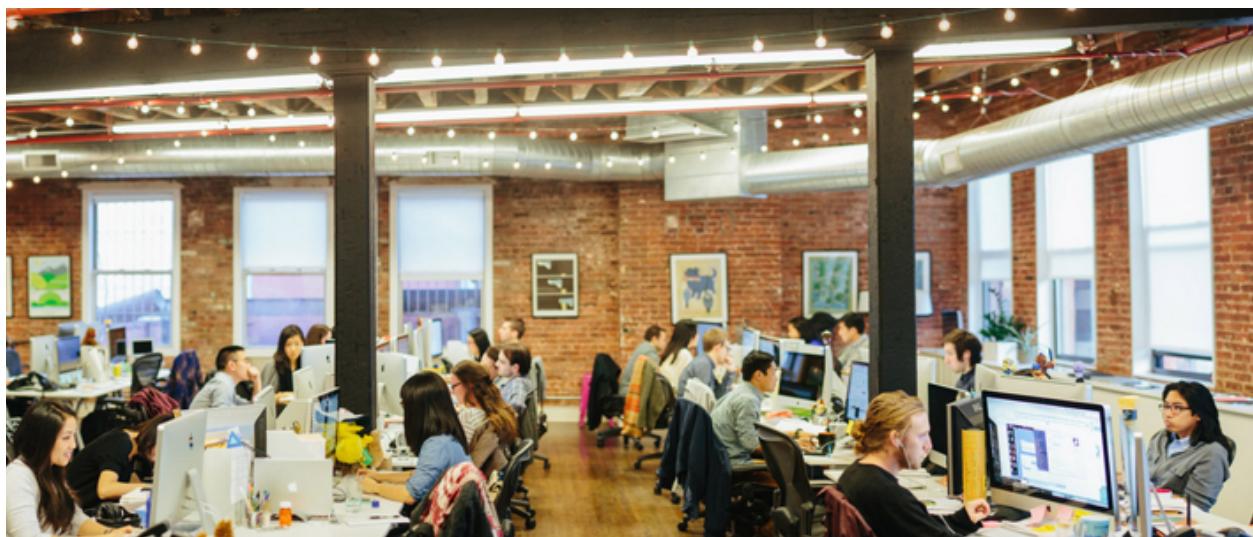


Photo credit: [Barrel](#).

It all comes down to mindset. Think of yourself as a learner, not a knower.

Learners are allowed to make mistakes. They're allowed to not know something. They're allowed to figure something out through tinkering rather than proceeding from accepted knowledge.

That's the spirit of every good designer I've ever worked with: they're humble, they're always willing to try new things, and they're always willing to admit when they don't know something, (or at least when they're uncertain).

Improving As a Designer Through Others

To succeed as a UX designer, you again need to swallow your pride and lean on others.

Not only will you further practice and improve your skills, but you're also building your network. As UX Director Patrick Neeman [mentions in his blog](#), the best UX jobs are found through word of mouth.

In this third chapter, I explain three tactics that can help anyone refine their skillsets (even if you have no formal UX training). I'll describe:

- How to build a meaningful relationship with a UX mentor
- How to become a UX apprentice
- How to initiate your own UX projects to get noticed by employers

Let's get started.

Tactic 1: Building a relationship with a UX mentor

Like becoming a Jedi, one of the best ways to learn UX is to find a master. Whenever I was doubtful as a beginner, I'd ask my mentors for advice.



Photo credit: Angelo Yap. Creative Commons.

Don't be afraid to rely on mentors to fill in any knowledge gaps. The first time someone asked me for help prototyping a mobile app, I felt no shame in telling them I didn't know how to do it. I did, however, mention I was familiar with responsive prototyping and that I was confident I could help them.

Then I emailed one of my mentors, and we figured out the rest.

Finding a UX mentor can be a difficult process, however. Most national organizations (e.g. the [UXPA](#), the [IA Institute](#), the [IXDA](#)) have mentoring networks they've tried to cultivate, but I've always preferred to find my mentors indirectly. I've attended conferences, local

meetups, and talked to complete strangers. When I seem to get along with someone, and if they seem to know their stuff, I'll ask if I can bug them about future UX projects.

And, *most importantly*: if they say yes, always take them up on the offer.

I can't believe how many mentees over the years have asked me if they can get advice in the future, and then never followed up with me. Advice from an experienced UX practitioner is the most valuable commodity on the planet for beginners. You should always learn from someone with knowledge and mileage.

Designer Pro Tip



"I see a lot of new designers going to startups or contracting, which can put them into environments where they're supposed to be the experts immediately. It's hard enough designing for a startup when you've already been around the block a few times. When I was learning to be a designer, I was lucky enough to work for the team of amazing, brilliant women at [Sliced Bread Design](#). They'd been doing research and interaction design for years, and

were fantastic teachers who helped me learn quickly. You'll learn much faster when you're surrounded by people who can help you do your best work."

Laura Klein, Principal at [Users Know](#)
and author of [Lean UX for Startups](#)

1. Potential pitfall for Tactic 1: Unresponsive or ineffective mentors

At the same time, not everyone is cut out to be a mentor, which is really just another word for *teacher*.

There's a reason that some UX professionals host workshops, classes, and even retreats and others don't. As with most professional relationships, it's up to you to figure out if your needs are being met by a specific mentor.



Photo credit: [Matthew G. Creative Commons](#).

If you try taking the advice of one mentor and it doesn't work out, try getting some different advice. As a teacher myself, I can tell you that no teacher is a perfect fit for every type of student, just as every student has specific needs that not every teacher can meet.

Follow up with your mentors (and always try to meet in person if possible), but don't be afraid to move on if it's not working out.

If you'd like to shorten the path to mentorship, you can also consider enrolling in an [online mentored course](#). The classes generally allocate at least 1 hour a week to meet with a mentor over Skype (or in-person, if they're local) to answer questions and discuss your project.

Tactic 2: Becoming a UX apprentice

Tactic 2 may sound identical to Tactic 1, but by "UX apprenticeship," I mean [what Fred Beecher means](#): a learning experience that takes you from UX zero to UX grasshopper. These are often programs sponsored by UX organizations (e.g. [The Nerdery](#), [Fresh Tilled Soil](#), etc).

When evaluating programs, make sure you seek out the opportunity to work on *real projects*.



Photo credit: Jean Baptiste Paris. Creative Commons.

Apprenticeships are like internships, but people like me (and Fred) don't like to use the former, because an internship can mean a lot of things. An internship just means you're working in an organizational context, but an apprenticeship means *you're actually being trained to be a certain type of professional.*

So: not all internships are apprenticeships, but some are.

Formal programs with plenty of hands-on UX training also fall into this category (e.g. [Kent State](#), [General Assembly](#), [Bentley](#), [UW](#), [SVA](#)), though some people would probably argue that they are very different. As an academic, I don't really see a difference between the two, however, *as long as academic programs have good relationships with industry partners.* (Hint: this is true of all those I just linked to).

2. Potential pitfall for Tactic 2: Ineffective learning experiences

As a beginner, it's not always easy to assess which programs are worth your time. Beggars can't be choosers, so sometimes you

just have to apply to all the programs that seem to offer what you want to learn.

Here are some questions to ask before you sign on the dotted line, though:

- What kinds of portfolio deliverables will you produce through the program? Will you actually produce things you can showcase as evidence of your problem-solving skills?
- Does the program have a trusted network of potential employers that you can be connected with?
- How practical are the experiences that the program promises? How conceptual? How product-based? How process-based?

When it comes to the last set of questions, you must find programs that fulfill all 4 criteria (since UX requires mastery of all of them). Even if a program only promises to fulfill 1-3 criteria, or only offers training in specific, limited elements of UX (e.g. prototyping), consider looking elsewhere for comprehensive beginner training.

Tactic 3: Engaging in individual UX projects

Whether as part of a formal industry-based or academic program, or on your own, it never hurts to practice UX principles whenever and wherever you can.



Photo credit: Baldiri. Creative Commons.

This is what I tell most beginners struggling to build their portfolio:

- Find an organization in your local community with a website or mobile app that needs help. Not everyone *realizes* their website or app needs help. This is why networking is so important. Pretty much 100% of the clients I've worked with over the years were people I encountered through my professional network who happened to be looking for design help.
- Let decision makers within the organization know you're learning UX and have some feedback on their website or app that they might find valuable. Tell them you'd like to practice by providing them with advice that can improve conversion rates. If you want to matter, always frame design issues as business issues.
- If they agree, treat the project as a full-blown UX project and produce some deliverables that will *actually be useful to them*, like a [content audit](#), a [prototype](#) for a new homepage, or a new

[taxonomy](#) for their entire website. This works even better if you can collaborate with the designer who worked on the website. At the end of the project, present your findings. If you do a good job, you might even get a reference and some portfolio entries out of the experience.

3. Potential Pitfall for Tactic 3: Projects that don't count as legitimate UX experience

I've seen a lot of beginners take on the wrong projects.



Photo credit: jnyemb. Creative Commons.

That's why this tactic is the riskiest of them all: *you really need the help of experienced people to break into UX.*

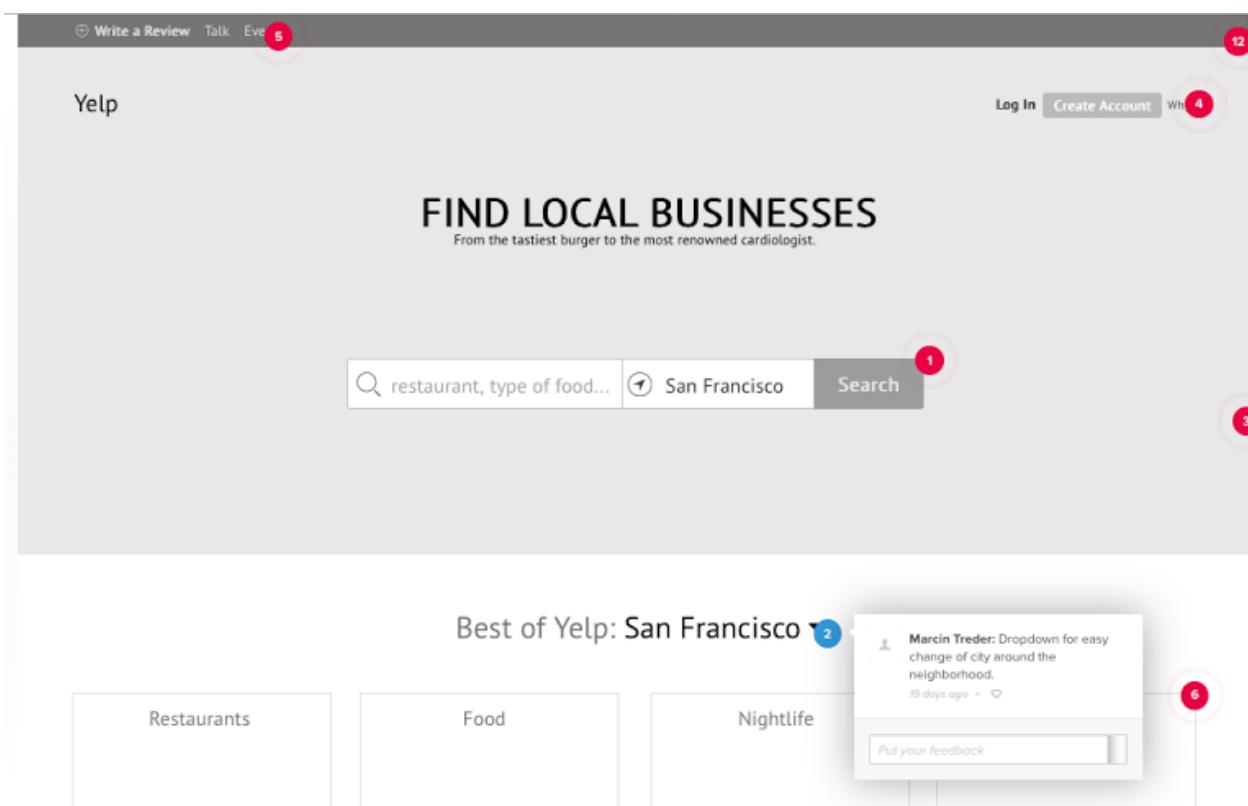
Here are a few things I just don't think transfer, no matter how great they appear:

Deliverables produced for non-digital contexts.

You may have created the most outstanding brochure in the world for a local non-profit or small business, but you'd be much better off designing a wireframe or a sitemap of a well-known website.

Deliverables that don't demonstrate current design aesthetics.

Like it or not, many (I'd hazard to say *most*) UX professionals work in visual media: [prototypes](#), [wireframes](#), [sitemaps](#), process diagrams, etc. You don't need to master hi-fidelity design to become a UXer, but you must understand how to communicate visually.



Low fidelity prototype created during a Yelp redesign exercise.

Deliverables that don't demonstrate your [design thinking](#).

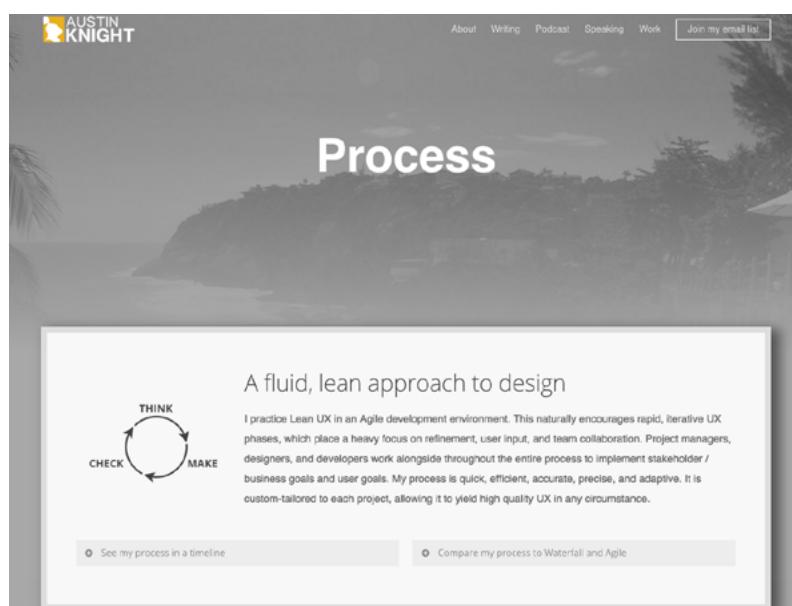
In today's world of [Agile UX processes](#), every project in your portfolio should communicate the following points:

- How you helped the team balance user goals and business goals
- How you analyzed the business and technology constraints
- How you collaborated with non-designers
- How you transformed user research and quantitative data into actionable insights for the team
- How you worked with the team to resolve unexpected challenges

If you present wireframes, taxonomies, and prototypes without tying them back to the above narrative, you haven't sold the true value of your work as a designer.

Since it's best to learn by example, take a look at these excellent UX portfolios below. Notice how the deliverables are only a means for communicating the thinking.

Austin Knight – UX Designer at Hubspot



Ivana McConnell – Interaction Designer at MyPlanet

 [Ivana McConnell](#) // [Blog](#)

[Design](#) [Code](#) [Writing](#) [Speaking & Teaching](#) [Side Projects](#)

Design & Code // Design Salaries Survey 2014

When I first came across [the results page](#) of this survey, done by Cameron Moll, my first instinct was to try and visualise it somehow, to get some idea of how design salaries varied across continents, cities, and countries. Cameron hadn't had a chance to visualise it himself, and I had wanted to have a go with the [HighCharts](#) library for ages, so this seemed like an excellent opportunity. There were some interesting insights to be found in the data, and definitely encourage more surveys like this in the future.

Initial thoughts

The first choice I made when doing this was to visualise only the 'design' occupations. There were freelancers, developers, as well as engineers, but I have only visualised those with 'designer' explicitly stated in the job title, just to ensure focus. Hopefully I'll have time to do other visualisations later, and compare across occupations.

My first instinct upon seeing the data was what the average 'designer' occupation salary was. This would encompass everything from 'Art Director' through to Junior and UX Designer, as well as various countries so it wasn't expected to be hugely accurate, but interesting nonetheless. Again, it did not include 'developer' job titles. In total, the average international 'designer' salary was:

80,422 USD

All in, this included the job titles of Art Director, Chief Design Officer, Creative/Design Director, Design Manager, Designer (Junior, Mid-level, and Senior respectively), Head of UX, UX Designer, Mobile UI Designer, and Motion Graphics Designer/Animator. There were some points removed, where it was obvious an extra zero had been added, or there was a currency error. I have made note of which points were removed later on.

The highest salary included here was 350,000USD, for a Senior/Lead Designer in the US (Los Angeles to be specific), while the lowest was 4,500 USD, for a Junior Designer in India.

Now, on to the charts!

Specific Occupations (on average)

In general, an overarching 'average' salary on its own isn't especially useful, especially when the levels of occupations are so broad, as is the geographical reach of this survey. There were 800 design responses from 48 countries, so we would need to delve a little deeper to actually take some meaning from the data.

I thought a good place to start would be the specific occupations, as well as their averages, to see which ones might be skewing the mean one way or the other. 'Art Director,' for example, is a prestigious position to hold, and one would assume that it pays well (or at least, better than certain other design occupations. So let's find out:

Edmund Yu – Head of Product Design at Bloomz

[edmundyu](#) [Welcome](#) [UX Portfolio](#) [Process](#) [Mentions](#) [Resume](#) [Contact](#)

Competitive Analysis

Assess the strengths and weaknesses of competitors against your user's needs.

Comparison by Products

Product	SYNC		MANAGE		CREATE		VIEW		SHARE		
	Sync	Sync Photos	Folders	Sync Directories	Upload	Create Directories	Sync & Upload	Preview Directories	Photo Gallery	Multi-Viewer	Multi-Viewer Preview
OneDrive	Y	N/A	Y	N/A	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N
Android Phone	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
iPad	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mac	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
iPhone	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Android Phone	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
PC	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
MacBook	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
iPad Pro	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Android Phone	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
PC	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Desktop Browsers

Browser	MANAGE		CREATE		VIEW		SHARE	
	Folders	Sync Directories	Upload	Create Directories	Sync & Upload	Preview Directories	Photo Gallery	Multi-Viewer
Google Chrome	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Microsoft Edge	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Safari	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Firefox	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y

Get out there and stick to it

Though it may sound like a cliche, one of the top traits a UX beginner needs is *tenacity*.

Unfortunately, we don't start people out in kindergarten drawing mobile prototypes (yet). If you're new to UX, chances are you're going to have to learn a lot on your own. And as you do: consider it your mission in life to add some innovation to your own neck of the woods.



Photo credit: Duncan Hull. Creative Commons.

To learn more about UX best practices, check out some of my favorite free e-books from UXPin's [design library](#):

- *Web UI Best Practices* – 7 chapters exploring techniques spanning visual design, interface design, and UX design.
- *UX Design Process Best Practices* – 100+ pages of advice spanning the whole product design process.
- *Interaction Design Best Practices: Words, Visuals, Space* – 7 chapters explaining the practical use of affordances, white space, size/distance, visual consistency, cognitive load, and more.
- *Interaction Design Best Practices: Time & Behavior* – 6 chapters explaining how to reduce friction, design for time, create delight through animations, affect user decisions & behavior, and more.
- *Guide to Prototyping* – 100+ pages explaining how and when to use prototyping tools, paper prototypes, and other popular methods.
- *Guide to Mockups* – 80+ pages discussing how to create mockups of all types and fidelities, along with best practices for Photoshop & Sketch.
- *Guide to Wireframing* – 100+ pages explaining the context, tools, techniques, and best practices for analog and digital wireframing.

Launching Your UX Career



Photo credit: [Barrel](#)

So, you've learned some core UX methods and now you want to launch a UX career. Maybe you've even done an internship or two and joined some professional UX organizations. *Maybe* you've even had a nibble or two from some hiring organizations about full-time work.

Below are three tactics I recommend for taking that next leap into full-time UX work.

Tactic 1: Do UX in Your Current Organization

Pretty much every organization that has a public-facing website needs UX. They may not know they need it, but they do.

And if you've learned something about UX, your first stop on your journey into full-fledged "UXhood" might be your current manager. You've been doing something for a living thus far, right? Why not ask if there's some way you can transition into UX within your own organization?



This is especially possible if the following things are true:

- You work in a large organization with lots of different departments that don't communicate with each other much.
- You work in an organization that depends heavily on a public-facing website, mobile application, or even enterprise software that every employee has to navigate on a daily basis.
- Your organization has at least heard of UX and generally thinks it's a good idea.

As with any approach to launching a new career, there are risks involved with this approach. Some of these risks are substantial, and should be avoided at all costs. Here are some I've personally experienced:

Risk:

Your employer says, “Great, why don’t you just start doing that as extra work on top of your current full-time job with no resources and report back to me about it. Thanks!”

Response:

Your answer to this should be a polite, but firm, “no.”

Risk:

Your employer doesn’t really have any idea what UX is, but thinks it’s the solution to all their problems: “Great, why don’t you just redesign our website/mobile app for us from the ground up and let us know when that gets done. Thanks!”

Response:

Your answer to this should be a polite, but firm: “I am not a web developer, but I can work with a developer on this” (unless, of course, you are a developer; then it’s up to you if you want to take this risk).

Risk:

Your employer says, “Great, you’ll be working under so-and-so who has convinced me they know everything about UX even though they clearly have no experience in it whatsoever. Thanks!”

Response:

Your answer to this should be a polite, but firm, “I’d definitely be open to collaborating with so-and-so, but I really need some creative control over this project.”

Tactic 2: Seek a UX Role in a New Organization

Sometimes, for various reasons, it’s best for you to cut those apron strings and apply to jobs in new organizations. In order to do so, you need two things:

1. A portfolio of your work, even if it’s based on largely hypothetical design situations.
2. The time and energy to perform “design tests,” which are the main screening mechanism for companies hiring in UX.

Essentially, your [portfolio must be an easily portable, but private, collection of projects](#) that demonstrate your problem-solving. Review the below resources when building your portfolio, since outside employers will evaluate your work more than your formal education:

- [Creating UX Portfolios: 4 Do’s and Dont’s](#)
- [10 Steps to a Perfect UX Portfolio](#)
- [What Makes a Great UX Portfolio?](#)

Designer Pro Tip



“It’s better to show your complete process for 2-3 projects than to show beautiful visual designs for 20 projects. Can you filter feature ideas based on feasibility and viability? Can you translate raw user research into bulleted actions for designers and non-designers? We hire based upon a designer’s analytical and communication skills, not just their visual abilities.”

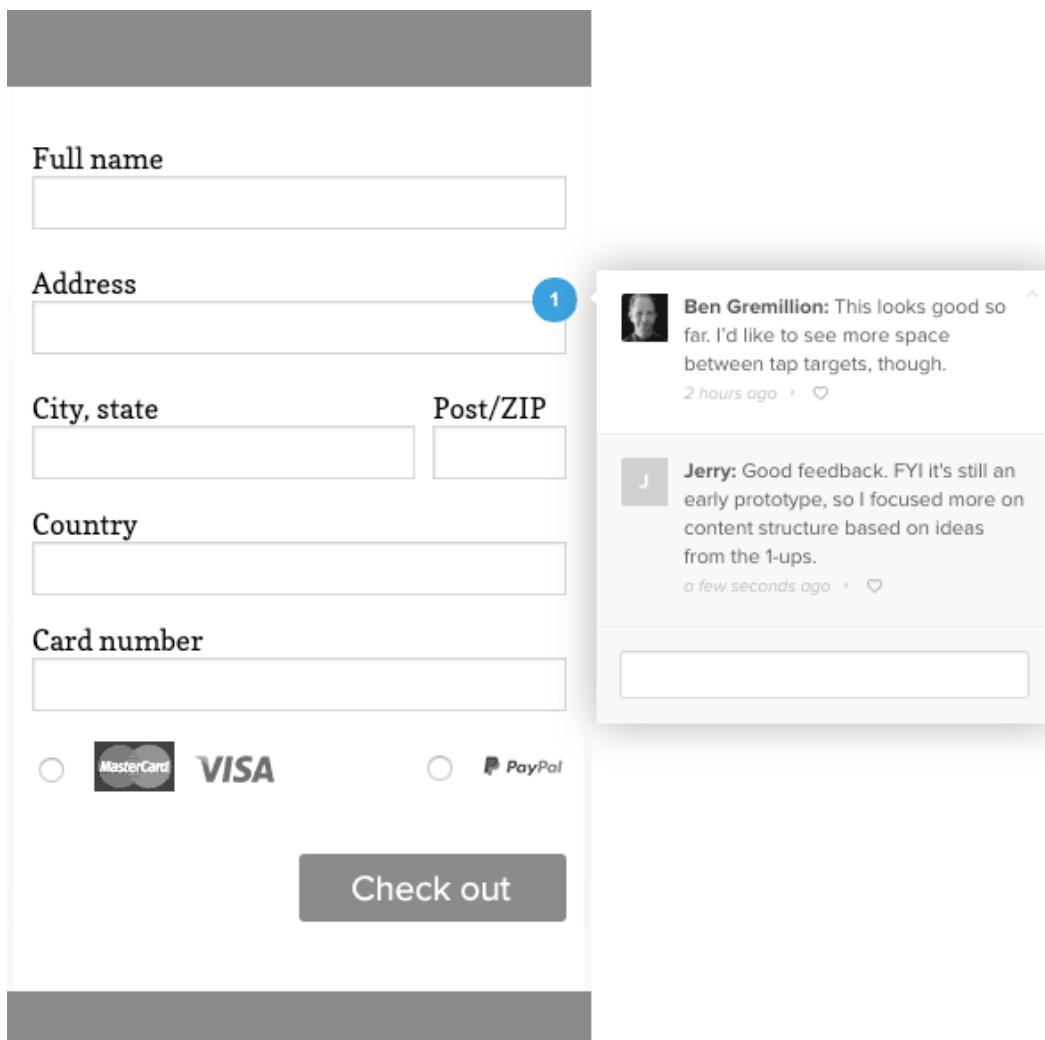
Kamil Zieba, Head of Design at [UXPin](#)

You’ll also need to prepare for timed tests in which you are given a problem and must solve it to the hiring manager’s satisfaction.

To train myself, I would seek out a design problem (such as reworking the checkout process for a high-profile site like [Overstock](#) or [Ebay](#) to improve conversion), then dive into a collaborative design platform like [UXPin](#) to create some low-fidelity prototypes of the new flow.

I’d timebox myself to 20 minutes, then explain out loud the thinking behind the prototype. If you have any friends who work in UX, try having them play the role of hiring manager and ask for feedback afterwards.

If you can't meet with your friend in person, you can add a comment on your prototype to ask for their feedback.



UX jobs typically come in a combination of the following varieties:

- **Contract jobs:** Typically short-term jobs (e.g. six months). Don't take them lightly because they may be a great way to gain UX work experience, even if they're only part-time.
- **Permanent jobs:** Typically long-term jobs. They typically come with added benefits not available in contract jobs like good quality health insurance, job security, and even some possible management work (e.g. leading teams, managing projects, managing

entire products, etc). These are also much harder to land than contract jobs.

- **Agency jobs:** These are jobs with smaller organizations that are typically devoted explicitly to design, such as web design firms, digital marketing agencies, and startups built around applications. These jobs tend to be lower paid than their corporate counterparts, but are a great way to build your reputation quickly, because your job is almost exclusively hands-on design.
- **Corporate jobs:** These jobs are with large-scale organizations typically devoted to a product or service that doesn't explicitly have to do with design. These jobs typically pay well, but can also be incredibly stressful and often involve working with an organization with a lot of moving parts. It might be intimidating to many people first starting out.

You should definitely consider looking for work in a new organization if:

- No UX roles are available in your current company.
- You can relocate to a technology hub with lots of UX-related jobs (if you are not currently in one).
- You feel trained up enough in UX that you're ready for the challenge of full-time work.

Some of the risks with launching a UX career in a new organization include:

- **The uncertainty of a new organizational culture.** With UX positions (which range from working with tech-facing information to working in the field with users) you need to ask questions about specific job duties to make sure you're well suited.
- **The unicorn effect.** An oft-debated piece of UX culture, “[design unicorns](#)” are folks that have incredibly rare combinations of skill sets, like someone who is equally good at visual design, code, and user research. The problem with this mentality, however, is that these jobs might demand one major skill set completely unrelated to UX.

Beware jobs that look like developer jobs, but contain just a few UX skill sets. And again, ask plenty of questions. Most importantly, be honest with your skillset.

Designer Pro Tip



“Employers seek designers with a really strong portfolio of industry-relevant projects. If you want to work for a commercial design agency, you need to choose commercial projects over more esoteric ones. If you’ve skipped university to go straight into industry, you need to build your portfolio through other methods:

working on your own projects, designing sites for friends and family, or offering your services to local charities and open source projects. The best portfolios don't just show the final result, but explain all the steps in your process.”

Andy Budd, Co-founder and CEO at [Clearleft](#)

Designer Pro Tip



“You will be working with far more non-designers than designers. When you interview, ask questions and talk about your decisions and why they matter. Admit mistakes. Talk about what you wished you'd done in past projects and explain the impact in terms of customers or the business. And yes, you do need to understand business goals – at least the basics. In the beginning you won't, and that's okay. Ask questions and be curious and that will send the signal that you'll be part of the team, not just a headphones-on-and-heads-down pixel pusher.”

Cindy Alvarez, Director of UX at [Yammer](#)

Tactic 3: Launch Your Own Design Firm or Consultancy

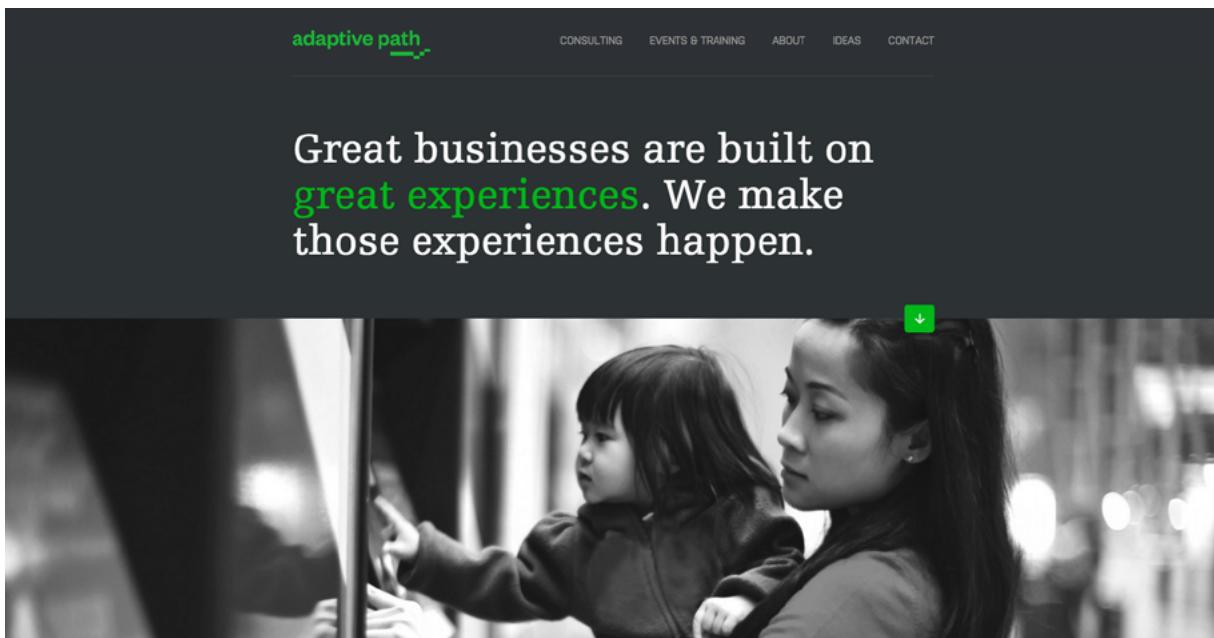


Photo credit: Adaptive Path

Even though this might be the Holy Grail of many young entrepreneurs, going solo is probably the least viable option for beginners.

First of all, you need clients. And clients are hard to find. You're competing against more established businesses for a finite client base. Clients also need to trust you and your expertise enough to significantly invest in you.

Second of all, you need a reputation. In the design world, reputations are built from working with organizations, so you see the Catch-22 here. If you're just starting out, and don't have a lot of formal work experience in UX, it's incredibly difficult to establish the kind of reputation you need to attract clients. The only real way to do so is through freelance work.

Starting your own agency or consultancy might be viable if you meet any of the following criteria:

- You find yourself in a network of fellow professionals looking to do work sharing, (e.g. you do work for them and they do work for you – sharing clients who need UX and another skill set, etc.).
- You find yourself working within your current organization with highly motivated and skilled individuals trying to create separate opportunities on the side (this was the case with myself).
- You find yourself in a network of people who have needs for UX-related services but don't want to hire for a full-time UX position.
- Someone offers to hire you as a consultant. It can be very beneficial for you, and for them, if you create a [sole proprietorship](#), [LLC](#), or [S-Corps](#) so that you are not simply functioning as an at-will employee. Many of these business structures can also limit your tax liability, and your personal liability, should something go awry.

Some of the risks of launching your own UX organization include:

- **Lack of guaranteed income.** Even contract jobs come with a set wage, some benefits, and some certainty of a paycheck from week to week. Starting your own organization comes with no guarantees.
- **Lack of guaranteed growth.** Local markets are also often notoriously unpredictable, meaning that you might land several big clients and then have them leave for another, more established firm.

- **Lack of access to benefits, including health insurance.** Many entrepreneurs find themselves sacrificing a lot of their personal needs to feed their startup, which can include important things like good health benefits. It pays to work for organizations, especially if they are willing to provide benefits to you at little or no cost.

Get out there and reinvent yourself (into a UX person)

Whether you decide to work part-time, full-time, or by launching your own firm, UX is an exciting field with a lot of possibility, and it is only going to expand.

People from all kinds of industries are suddenly realizing they need someone in their organization who can craft experiences for different users, create inexpensive prototypes, and solve messy human problems.



Photo credit: "UX for Good Breakout. WIAD DC. Creative Commons."

As with most careers that are currently in-demand, the only thing stopping you from becoming a UX professional is your own ingenuity. If you have the fire for helping to build the next generation of digital products, then go out there and land yourself a position you can be excited to go to every day.

[Level up your UX skills with UXPin \(free trial\)](#)

10 Expert Designers Offer Realistic Career Advice

By collaborating with [Springboard](#), the team at [UXPin](#) interviewed 11 kickass UX designers to ask them what inspires them—and also what UX advice they'd give to other practitioners.

See their insights below!

Paul Boag



Having worked with the web for over two decades, Paul is a co-founder of web design agency [Headscape](#) (which counts Nestle, Macmillan, and several UK universities as clients). He is also a prolific writer and speaker.

1. Design Inspiration:

My favorite piece of design is the original London Underground Map.

What made this so groundbreaking was that it broke conventions. It rejected the convention of realistically showing distance and location. By letting go of those constraints they were able to create a simple representation of a complex network. For me this is what good design is all about – taking the complex and looking at it from a different angle to simplify it.



2. Career Advice:

Honestly, I would avoid giving any advice to my younger self because I know I wouldn't listen to it!

Even if I did, I wouldn't gain as much value as I did discovering these things myself. The best way to learn anything is through

making mistakes and so I would not want to deny my younger self that opportunity. As Winston Churchill once said “success is going from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm”.

Make your own mistakes and then when you fail, get up and try again.

Eva Kaniasty

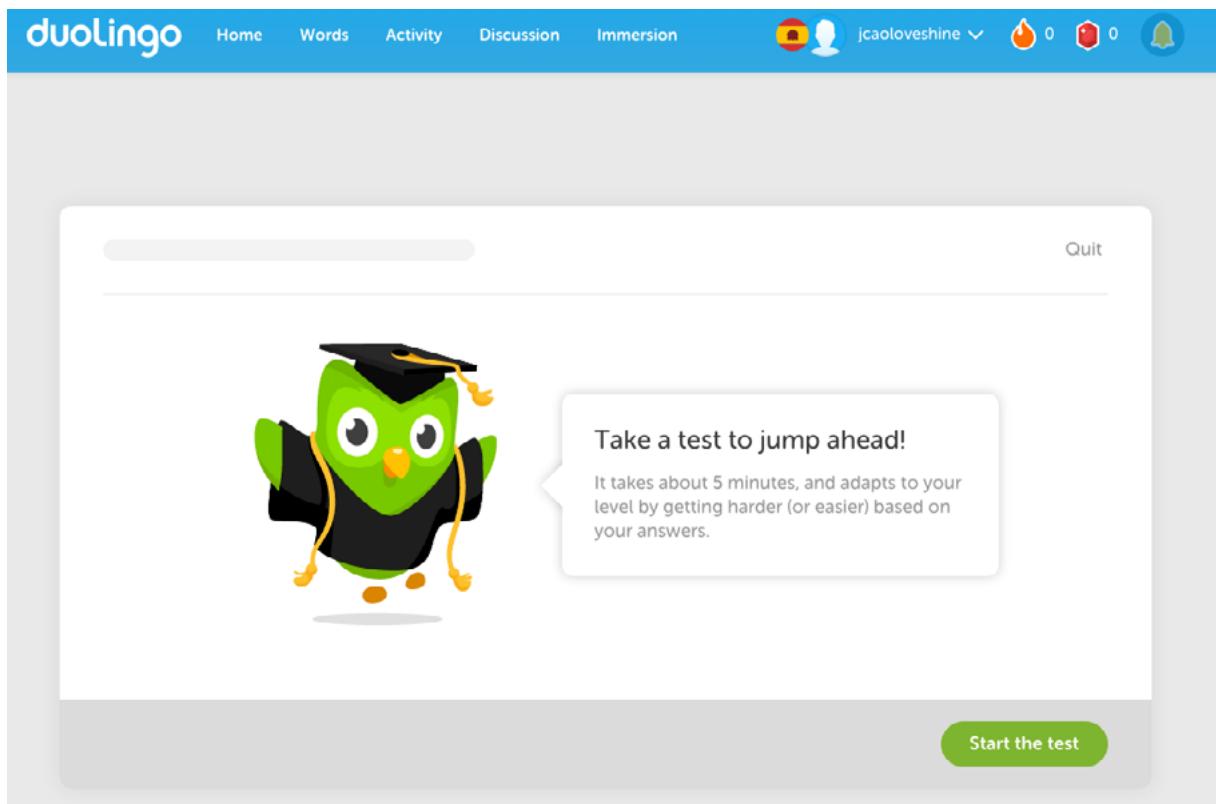


Eva runs her own company ([Red Pill UX](#)) based in Boston, is a regular at events of the [UXPA](#), of which she is the President.

1. Design Inspiration:

I recently discovered [Duolingo](#), an online language learning platform.

I love the UX for so many reasons...it's a very uncomplicated interface that's fun and motivating. A lot of apps try to incorporate gamification or community just because it's the cool thing to do, and it ends up feeling like an afterthought. Duolingo does a great job of using the gaming elements and variation in lessons to keep users engaged.



I also love the language immersion part, where users collaborate on translations. Memorization and repetition are innate parts of beginning language learning that can be quite boring, and it's clear the folks at Duolingo have been very thoughtful in trying to alleviate this challenge.

I often get the feeling that we've reached a bit of a plateau as far as consumer app innovation is concerned, so it's great to see something that's fresh and spot on.

2. Career Advice:

Understand that in a collaborative profession like UX, people are more important than skills. If you have an aptitude for research or design, you'll master those skills in time, but having the right relationships can make or break your career.

When I made my initial career change into high tech, I knew very few people who did the same thing I did. When I went back to school for Human Factors at Bentley University, it was like a whole new world opened up for me. Of course, a big part of it was the learning, but the network of people I ended up meeting was just as valuable.

Today I stay engaged in that community through my local chapter of UX Professionals Association, and that community is even more important now that I'm doing independent consulting. So meet as many people as you can who are as excited about UX as you are, and ask them for advice.

Mike Kus



Having started out with graphic design and then making the move to web-design, Mike has worked with the likes of Twitter, Microsoft, and Mailchimp to create User Experiences that marry form and function.

1. Design Inspiration:

[Hipopotam Studio](#). I love this site and UI for it's pure creativity & fun.



Photo credit: Hipopotam Studio

2. Career Advice:

Learn to separate UI trends from practical/useful UI design conventions. Just because a current trend is widely used, doesn't necessarily mean it's the best way.

Jack Zerby



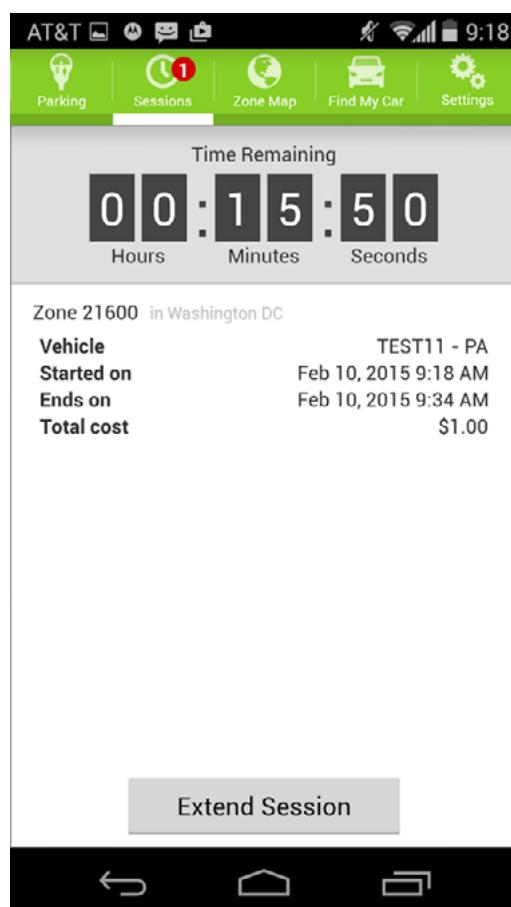
Co-founder of [Flavors.me](#) and [Goodsie](#), and previously Design Director at [Vimeo](#), Jack says he was hooked onto design the very first time he started up Photoshop while he was in high school and counts his father as one of his primary influences. Nowadays, you can find him

at [Workshop](#) – a no nonsense entrepreneurship training program for young adults.

1. Design Inspiration:

My favorite product experience lately has been using the [Park-Mobile app](#) around town.

Instead of searching around for quarters, getting change from delis, all just to pay a parking meter, I can now just enter in a number [found on the meter](#), set the desired duration and pay the fee. It texts me when my time is almost up, and I can add more money if needed.



Smooth and painless.

2. Career Advice:

Always consider the final outcome and context for the user/customer. What do they need to accomplish and in which context?

For example, I am trying to install a bike rack on my car and I visit the manufacturer's website. The goal is to successfully install my bike rack and get on the road as quickly as possible. The context is, I'm standing outside my car in the hot sun with my kids crying because they want to go to the park now.

Design with those parameters in mind. Know thy user. Just like with successful marketing, understand their pains, problems, frustrations, and use their language to communicate.

Don't guess and fall prey to designer arrogance (which we all do from time to time).

Laura Klein



Laura has spent more than 15 years as an engineer and designer in Silicon Valley. Her goal is to help startups learn about their customers so that they can build better products faster. Her [book](#), and her popular design blog, [Users Know](#), teach product owners what they need to know to do research and design.

1. Design Inspiration:

I think it is the curse of the UX designer that we only ever notice design that annoys us. Or maybe that's just me. Whichever it is, I'm always in love with any design that is so simple and integrated into my life that I don't notice it.

2. Career Advice:

Get two mentors.

The first one should be somebody older and influential in the field you care about. They will help by giving you perspective and teaching you the sorts of skills you need to get hired by somebody like them.

The second mentor should be somebody a couple years older than you. They will tell you what you really need to know to do the job you're likely to get. I don't know what life is like for somebody who is just starting out in tech these days, but somebody who's only been doing it for a couple of years will have really good insight.

So, find two people: someone to help you get your next job and somebody to help you do your next job.

Joshua Garity



Described as a design psychologist and brand strategist, Joshua has worked with companies like Wendy's and the New York Times to help connect with their customers and increase their revenues. You listen to what he has to say on [his blog](#), [Twitter](#) and [Candorem](#), the company he runs.

1. Design Inspiration:

User Experience surrounds us and extends far beyond the grasp of the digital web. User Experience as a label has to be seen through the perspective of context in designed interaction versus the actual medium or platform.

As an example, let's take a look at automobiles in general.

It's assumed that most of the time we spend in our vehicles we would be driving them. When we're driving the priority, I hope, would be entirely based on the road in front of us. Stay in our lane. Stay under the speed limit. Watch out for other vehicles, pedestrians, or animals. But then we introduced a radio and thermostat. Looking away from the road for even a fraction of a second can lead to a lot of trouble for everyone on the road. So, why don't the car manufacturers keep that in mind when designing the center

consoles? Most have overly robust options, buttons, dials, and even touch screens to change the temperature or radio station.

If User Experience is about the context of interaction, then we need to look at how we can simplify the experience so the user's primary focus isn't negatively affected.

Great design guides a user without requiring much thought. Confusion kills.

2. Career Advice:

Be insatiable. Always be present. Don't let a label define you or what you look to accomplish in life. Look to everyone and everything for answers even when they don't seem to relate to the question at hand. You can be anything and everything you want to be.

Lis Hubert



Lis has worked with a number of companies, large and small, to create technology products – like espnw.com and nba.com, that change people's lives in a meaningful way. She also serves as an Advisory Board Member for [Future Insights](#) events.

1. Design Inspiration:

One of my biggest inspirations lately has been public space design in large cities, like New York City, where I live.

I can't help but notice not just how well designed the larger spaces like Central Park are, but also how convenient smaller spaces are available to the public wherever I look. I also find myself obsessed with watching people use parks, and the fields and courts within them. The reason I look to this ecosystem for inspiration is because in order to make these spaces successful one has to design for the experience of such a large, varied group of people to enjoy, what can be, such an overwhelming and crowded space.



This, to me, is the aim of architecting for a User's Experience, allowing them to flow, how they decide, through a space, to get an intended result that is pleasing both to the user, as well as to the product owner or designer.

2. Career Advice:

Chill out, for starters.

One thing about being in our field is that we know the importance of our work, and we want everyone else to know that importance and “get it”. So, many times we find ourselves fighting tooth and nail to get the message out there.

This, of course, leads to exhaustion and deflation. What I’ve realized is that fighting so very hard to imbue my knowledge on those outside of our field is not the point. I’ve also learned that it really doesn’t matter if the business, or the technology team, or whomever “get” what I do at the deepest level.

All that matters is that you are passionate about what you can control, do what you are responsible for (and more if necessary) to see that passion come to life, and that you enjoy the ride as you go!

Matt Hamm



Matt is the co-founder of [Supereight Studio](#) in the UK and has been designing on the Web since 1998. You can check out his work [here](#) or hear what he has to say on [Twitter](#).

1. Design Inspiration:

Dropbox continues to rule in UX – the app is very seamless.

Good UX design should appear to be invisible. Dropbox impresses me with the onboarding experience, attention to detail, and thinking differently rather than copying patterns to make it completely intuitive.

2. Career Advice:

Document everything!

Having an extensive reference of well ordered UX design to browse through helps you learn and also find solutions to problems as your reference builds. Remember to document real-world experiences too, these patterns can be referenced too.

Pavel Macek



Currently Lead Designer for [Screenhero](#), Pavel says that he cares about people, and this translates into his work – designing and building delightful things enjoyed by many. Follow him [here](#).

1. Design Inspiration:

For me, one great example of UX design is the [Technics turntable SL-1200](#), which has been sold for 35 years without major modifications. It's still the most popular turntable for DJs, producers and musicians.



It demonstrates functional design at its best and the importance of coupling thoughtful design with precise execution. I think that the ensuring the best possible execution is very often forgotten part of a UX designer's responsibility, but it ultimately defines the success of the product.

2. Career Advice:

Don't get lost in all the design methodologies and design patterns. It's important to learn about design frameworks and have rigid design process, but the start is always very simple: Who am I designing this for? What does he need to achieve? How can I help him to achieve that?

Then it's just a matter of iteration and learning what works and what doesn't.

Robert Fabricant



Robert specializes in design for health-care and social innovation. He recently led [Project Masiluleke](#), an initiative that harnesses the power of mobile technology to combat HIV/AIDS in South Africa. He has previously held the position of Fellow at the prestigious global agency [frog design](#). He also [teaches](#), gives talks, and [writes](#).

1. Inspiration:

I am continually inspired, provoked and challenged by the [NYC subway system](#) as an amazing, multi-faceted user experience.

I have been a subway rider for (at least) 45 years. You can't truly know or appreciate the value of an experience unless you have lived with it, and lived with it over an extensive period of time.

Too many of the user experiences we celebrate are transient – apps that will likely not be in our phone in another month much less year. The subways are here to stay, and improvements are measured in pixels, people and steel. This sort of design is slow hard work.



Yet change is constant. As a resident of NYC there are few systems that are more important to “learn” than the subway. But where does the experience begin and end? It is not simply contained in the stations, trains and turnstiles.

In recent years the subway system has become a platform for experimentation, both authorized and improvised. Recently, large touch-screen information displays have started popping up on the Union Square platform. It is fascinating to watch people interact with them for the first time, peeling back one more layer on an experience that connects so many of us together in this great city (yes it is my home town).

As UX designers we should be thinking – and crafting – experiences on a big scale. What better than a city, where data and mobility are beautifully intertwined, and where we can constantly explore (and enjoy) the seams between our own experiences and those around us?

2. Career Advice:

I love to talk to designers about the first moment that you put your design in front of a person to explore, experience and (hopefully) enjoy.

In that one moment, even before the person actually engages with the artifact, you always see it differently. It is like the old expression about the ‘scales falling from your eyes’. You suddenly see (and know) so many things that were just outside your understanding, planning and intuition.

Those moments are precious – very, very precious – as well as humbling for every designer, no matter how accomplished.

Design is not precious in comparison, so try to make as many of these moments as possible happen on your projects. You don’t need to ask for permission!

Working at [frog](#) for 13 years, I had the pleasure of being in those situations over and over again with many different teams – Close Encounters of the Design Kind.

Quality is always, and only, measured in the response the artifact elicits – in how it engages, delights and supports the user.

[Behavior is our medium](#). Never forget it.

Additional Resources

To enrich your learner mindset, I leave you with some of my favorite resources:

- [UX Apprentice](#) – Free courses and learning materials for those looking to learn the basics.
- [UI Patterns](#) – One of the most insightful pattern libraries on the web. The categories, examples, and descriptions of use cases are unrivaled.
- [UX Mastery](#) – Managed by practicing UX designer Matthew Magain, the blog includes plenty of in-depth guides and resources.
- [General Assembly](#) – Their [workshops](#) and [immersive programs](#) offer useful shortcuts into the world of UX.
- [The Hipper Element](#) – A library with 31 daily lessons on the fundamentals of UX design that has a good reputation.
- [LukeW](#) – Product Director at Google, Luke Wroblewski is one of the top UX experts in the world. His site summarizes takeaways

from conferences, includes plenty of “how-to” pieces, and features plenty of solid advice for UX design.

- [UXMyths](#) – Regularly updated list of dozens of common myths with thorough research disproving each misconception.
- [A List Apart](#) – Meticulously written and edited, A List Apart features some of the most thought-provoking pieces on designing experiences for the web. Always worth reading.
- [Smashing Magazine](#) – The online magazine includes plenty of opinion pieces, how-to-articles, and thought pieces on the state (and future) of UX design.
- [UXPin's free eBook Library](#) – A collection of e-books (growing at one a week) teaches practical UX design principles by analyzing existing live examples. The longer books range from 50 to 180 pages, while shorter pocket guides span 20-30 pages.
- [UXPin Blog](#) – The blog features tutorials (like prototyping [with Photoshop](#) and [with Sketch](#)) along with straightforward articles to get you started.
- [ZURB Blog](#) – The reputable design agency’s blog is full of thought-provoking and practical advice on product design from its staff of designers and the CEO himself.
- [Boxes and Arrows](#) – One of the longstanding and respected UX-related publications, B&A is particularly strong in the areas of content strategy and information architecture, providing practical, hands-on advice in these skill sets.

And make sure to follow these people on Twitter (and check out their personal blogs):

- [Jared Spool](#)
- [Dan Willis](#)
- [Laura Klein](#)
- [Steve Portigal](#)
- [Karen McGrane](#)
- [Lou Rosenfeld](#)
- [Dana Chisnell](#)
- [Irene Au](#)
- [Dan Brown](#)
- [Christina Wodtke](#)
- [Jeff Sauro](#)
- [Paul Boag](#)
- [Jeff Gothelf](#)

- ✓ Create and collaborate with your entire team in one place
- ✓ Get real time project updates with our Slack integration
- ✓ Go from lo-fi to hi-fi in a single tool
- ✓ Import files from Photoshop and Sketch

[Start using it now!](#)