

*Land Your Dream Design Job* » Part IV: Acing Design Exercises »

# Whiteboard Challenge

22 minutes, 2 links

From Edition e1.0.3 • Updated October 11, 2023

## Land Your Dream Design Job

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You're reading an excerpt of *Land Your Dream Design Job*, a book by Dan Shilov. Filled with hard-won, personal insights, it is a comprehensive guide to landing a product design role in a startup, agency, or tech company, and covers the entire design interview process from beginning to end, for experienced and aspiring designers. **Purchase the book** to support the author and the ad-free Holloway reading experience. You get instant digital access, commentary and future updates, and a high-quality PDF download.



conditioning or do they blast heat on purpose? Anyway, I draw a persona and start making flows. Whoops, 40 minutes later I find out it's the wrong persona, wrong flow, and I'm a hot mess.

Since that one awkward time, I've done many whiteboard interviews and had the opportunity to interview new and seasoned designers using the whiteboard challenge. I've seen some common mistakes but also best practices emerge from those interviews. While this interview is different from your everyday whiteboard sketch, it doesn't have to be an enigma. Here's a systematic approach to take on the challenge, avoid common mistakes, and prepare effectively.

## *Whiteboard Challenge Format and Criteria*

Whiteboard interviews typically range from 30 minutes to one hour. Usually you'll be interviewed by one or two designers. Similar to the take-home exercise<sup>§</sup>, the whiteboard design challenge is meant to evaluate your skills in a short amount of time with a focus on interaction design and collaboration.

Your interviewers will assess you on:

- **Problem definition.** How well can you explore the problem space and identify big problems to go after?
- **Solution finding and idea generation.** How quickly can you explore multiple creative options without being married to any one idea and identify the best one to develop further?
- **Interaction design knowledge.** How well can you make trade-offs between platforms, or global and local interaction patterns? Is your story and interaction flow coherent?
- **Collaboration.** How well do you work with your interviewers by responding to their prompts and getting them interested in the approach that you're taking?



snow strong reasoning and meaningful concepts.

Just as with the app critique, how you come across, your level of self-awareness, matters. Usually you'll complete one whiteboard interview per company however at some places designers may have to complete two different whiteboard challenges. Typically the first challenge will assess your generative skills while the second interview will focus more on MVP scoping and/or getting the feature to the finish line with engineering.

## *Going on the Journey Together*

Since whiteboards are an artificial challenge, it will be up to the interviewer to properly set you up. As the candidate, you'll be driving the interview. However, since prompts vary and companies have different expectations, clarify expectations with interviewers up-front:

- What outcomes do they expect to see?
- How do they want to be engaged?
- What role will they play in the process: are they designers, product managers, engineering peers, users of the product, stakeholders, researchers, or someone else?

§ Write down their response and what you won't cover so that objectives are visible and clear from the start. At its core, the whiteboard is a highly visible space to build shared understanding quickly. Use this to your advantage.



## *Approaching the Challenge*

Once you have an understanding of the interaction model, the process itself can unfold as predictably as the traditional double diamond design model that's so often taught in school. Since you'll be pressed for time, you'll need to

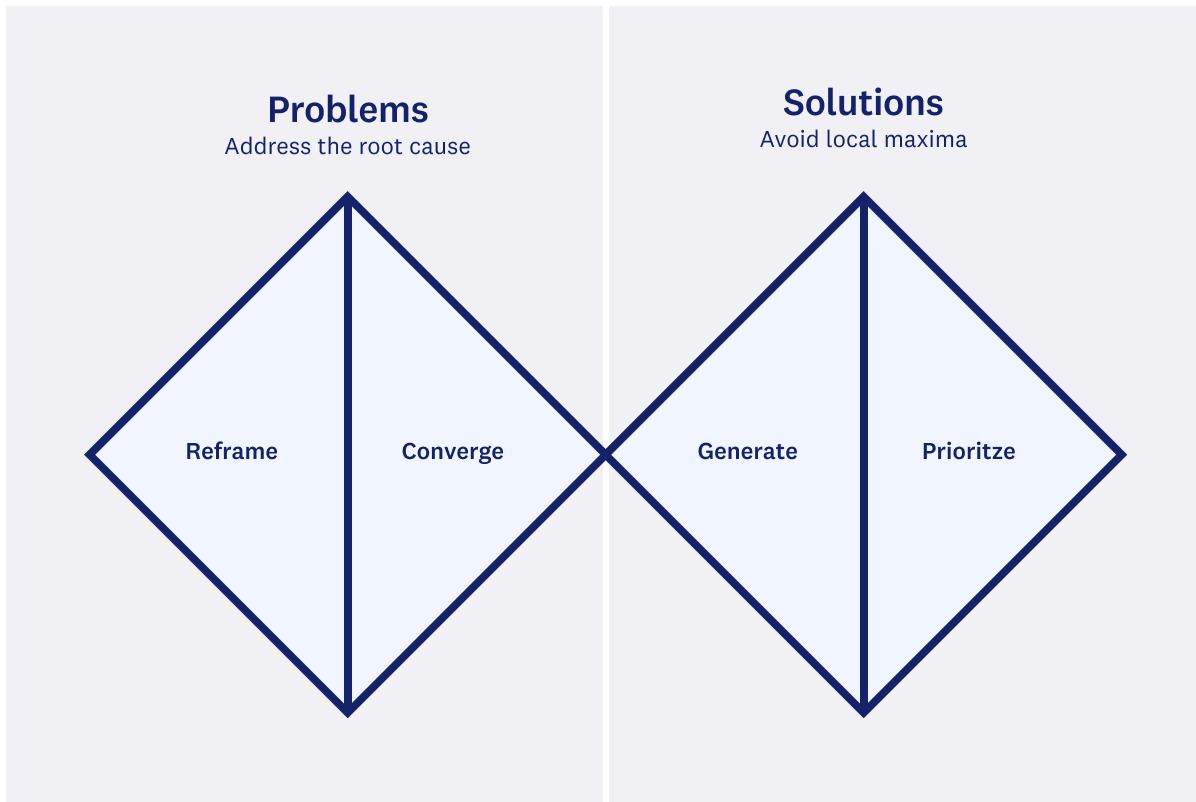


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**FIGURE: THE DOUBLE DIAMOND DESIGN MODEL**





1. **Understanding the problem.** Challenging existing assumptions, asking questions, clarifying.
2. **Defining the problem.** Reframing the existing brief based on answers from the previous steps.
3. **Exploring solutions.** Brainstorming multiple divergent solutions to avoid local maximum, not judging ideas, and keeping things as open as possible.
4. **Converging on a solution.** Picking a particular solution to go after and spending time fleshing it out.

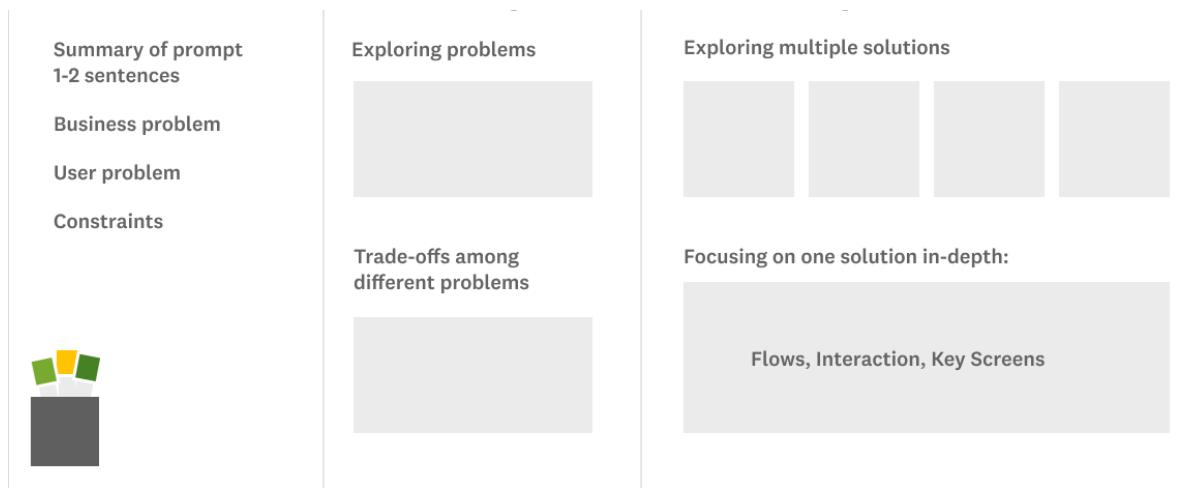
Like all models, it's not perfect. It doesn't account for all the nuances of the design process, but that's OK because the whiteboard interview isn't about going through nuanced details like visual design and such. Instead, this exercise is more about getting a glimpse into your design approach, specifically how you think through complex interaction design<sup>§</sup> challenges.

 **STORY** During one of my interviews, the candidate kept drawing and redrawing a border of a window, emphasizing that they're particular about how things look, thinking about 1px borders and shadows. While detail is important to design, the reality is that there's no way to adequately convey this detail, nor is it required for a whiteboard challenge. Show your visual skills in your portfolio or in the design exercise.

## *Managing the Whiteboard Space*

Just like when you're presenting your portfolio, you also want to position yourself in a good spot for a whiteboard. This means having enough space for you to write while having your interviewers clearly see what you're doing. You should also keep track of time, ideally with a timer on your watch.

The surface area of your whiteboard should be proportional to the amount of time you'll spend on it.



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## SETTING THE CONTEXT

The first step to any design solution is to understand the problem. Just like in your portfolio project summary slide, you want to summarize the context:

- What is the prompt? What are you trying to solve for?
- What are the business objectives?
- What are the user objectives?
- What are the constraints?
- How do we measure success?

At this stage, you may treat your interviews as stakeholders. They can be your business or research counterparts. Ask questions to understand the problem fully from multiple perspectives and document this on the whiteboard.

When you wrap up: summarize key context points, tell your interviewers what you're going to do next, and ask if there's anything unaddressed that they'd like to see. This ensures everyone is in sync and no lingering questions (which can derail you later) remain.



opportunities to go after.

This step is an opportunity (no pun intended) to demonstrate your **product thinking** by narrowing options to the critical few leading to outsize impact. Show how you think about impact and the criteria you use to evaluate a problem space.

Here are some basic frameworks:

- **Impact versus cost.** The impact to the business and the user will be high, while the time spent developing this feature will be low.
- **Forward momentum.** Building this feature will pay down tech debt and position the team to learn and iterate faster.
- **Ideal experience.** If there are no explicit constraints, what would the ideal solution look like?

Alternatively, you might also be asked to not think about constraints at all (for example, unlimited engineering resources) and to create the best solution. In that case your constraints are driven by user needs, which you want to note down.

 **IMPORTANT** Finally, beware of the **curse of knowledge**. Take the time to remind yourself of the main goal and pick one big problem that you can solve well in the allotted time. It's tempting to fight on multiple fronts, but you won't have the time for that here. Choose meaningful focus over diffused diligence.

## GENERATING IDEAS

Now for the fun part—exploring many varying solutions by lifting constraints. Suspend disbelief and generate lots of solutions. The beauty of whiteboards is that you can draw lots of ideas and then either erase or narrow down the list to a promising few. If you get stumped, don't be afraid to start sketching. The



## CONVERGING ON A SOLUTION

Once you've considered the world of possible solutions, you can start narrowing your scope down to a few promising options. Now's the time to go deep. Again, it's important to refer back to your original objectives. Did you miss anything? Look back to ensure the solution you're about to expand on hits on the key pain points you've learned during the problem phase.

As you're sketching out your solution, think in journeys and flows. How would someone interact with the service or the product? How would the interaction flow from one screen to the next? At this point you're usually not expected to think through the edge cases as you're sketching out a happy path.

### *Finishing on a High Note*

Even with great time management, there are usually more problems and more solutions to explore, so it's very likely that you'll run out of time. If you've been tracking time yourself, pause ten minutes before the end of the interview to take a pulse check—what do the interviewers want to see next? Do they want you to proceed further, or is this a good place to stop?

If you are at a stopping point or if you've actually “completed” the whiteboard challenge with time to spare (congrats, a rare feat!) take a moment to summarize and mention how you might have approached the process differently. Balance this self-reflection with time for additional questions that you might want to ask your interviewers.

As an interviewer, I'm also reflecting on our time. Could we work well together? How well did you respond to my feedback? Was your approach different from mine? Can you help me overcome my gaps? Have I learned something new here?

### *Common Whiteboard Mistakes to Avoid*



## OVERKILLING IT WITH CONTEXT

As part of the product design interview, it is important that you establish a strong foundation that's predicated on context and the problem. But you can also go overboard with this and run out of time, so you don't get to any solutions or you take a very superficial pass at the solution phase.

This is a problem of time management. Context setting and problem definition should take less than half of the interview time. For example, in a one-hour session with 15 minutes for questions, roughly 10 minutes should be used for understanding context, about 10 minutes for problem exploration and definition, and most of your time (about 25+ minutes) on sketching and iterating through solutions.

## JUMPING INTO SOLUTIONS TOO SOON

The flip side of too much context is doing too little. Jumping into solutions without considering the broader context leads you to dance between possible solutions and possible problems. It leads to a dangerous path where you spend a lot of time on a solution and invent the problem for it. Make sure your foundation (context, problem) is solid first.

## OVERFITTING AN EXISTING PATTERN

Some designers have tried to use patterns from one app (for example, Facebook) as an answer to the whiteboard prompt. While this approach is generally sound and you will use analogous apps for inspiration, beware of trying to fit a pattern that doesn't make sense in the context you're solving for. Think through the problem from first principles—what must hold true for this pattern to work? If the context isn't right, consider a different pattern.

## THINKING COMPONENTS, NOT JOURNEYS



right, it doesn't matter if your UI can be componentized, as you'll still be solving the wrong problem. Get the journey right first.

## NOT VOCALIZING YOUR THOUGHTS

The more clearly you can verbally communicate what you're doing, the easier it is for the interviewer to understand your process and provide feedback.

◇ **IMPORTANT** Strike the optimal balance of talking, sketching, and facilitation. This can be hard to do at first, which is why I recommend practicing (more on that follows).

## NOT TAKING ADVANTAGE OF INTERVIEWER FEEDBACK

On the flip side, you don't want to speak so much that it leaves little breathing room for your interviewers, with no opportunity for them to interject. Interviewers are your best source for answers, and they're right there! Don't miss out. Lead them through your process, but also be sure to pause, clarify, and engage them with questions. Your job is to strike the optimal balance of talking, sketching, and facilitation.

## NOT ADDRESSING INTERVIEWER FEEDBACK

Generally, whiteboard prompts start open-ended with a wide field of opportunities. As you work through the prompt, I'd like to see how you react to my feedback. Are you receptive? Do you "yes, and" or do you try to brush it off or, worse, skip it? Responding to feedback effectively is just as crucial as having a solid process with good solutions.

## BLAMING THE WHITEBOARD INTERVIEW

No interview is a perfect assessment of your skills. As interviewers, we know this and take it into account by assessing candidates holistically across multiple interview types. However, getting defensive and blaming the



 **SOLID** After a decent whiteboard interview, I left ten minutes at the end for the candidate to ask me questions. Instead of asking questions or talking about how he might have done it differently, he proceeded to bad-mouth the interview and blame the whiteboard for his poor performance.

## *Solid versus Amazing Whiteboard Execution*

Once you've mastered the basics, it's time to think about what can take your whiteboard execution from good to great.

### **SOLID EXECUTION**

A good whiteboard execution hits on many of the things we have already talked about—proper framing, generating solutions, and collaboration.

You've taken the time to understand the problem by looking at it through multiple lenses from the business, user, and engineering side. You've defined a specific audience or persona to design this solution for. You've pushed back on the initial statement by reframing it, perhaps making it broader or more specific or by discovering a new problem altogether. The interviewers agreed this was the way to go.

Based on your problem you've generated many different high-quality ideas quickly. You didn't dodge any questions—you answered all of them and clarified with the interviewers to make sure their questions were addressed. In the end you made good on time, enough to give you a moment to step back and reflect on what you could have done better.

### **AMAZING EXECUTION**

Amazing execution builds on top of solid execution. Usually, I've seen this come from design leads who have a rich interaction design vocabulary developed over years of solving complex design problems in different industries.



with unconventional solutions that not only solved the problem but also anticipated other issues that you've mitigated for.

Although you stated the approach that you would follow to your interviewers up-front, you weren't rigid. You struck the right balance of moving faster through certain sections, skipping some, but also deliberately taking longer in other parts to make sure no one got lost. In the end, you finished the whiteboard exercise with plenty of time to spare for questions, leaving your interviewers impressed by your execution.

## *Practicing Better with Whiteboard Prompts*

The best way to get better at whiteboards is through practice. Baseline yourself initially to gauge your progress. If you haven't done any whiteboarding, grab a marker and start sketching. Don't worry about perfection, just get familiar initially.

The prompts vary depending on the company and the space they're in. Some exercises range from pragmatic to design fiction. Interviewer guides usually include the prompt, variations, and questions interviewers might ask, plus grading criteria. As an interviewee, you'll be presented with the prompt up-front and then be asked to walk the interviewer through the process. Here are a couple of starter prompts to experiment with:

### **GROWING GARDENS, GROWING BUSINESS**

- **Prompt.** Growing Gardens targets suburban families who are interested in gardening but have little to no formal knowledge. The business primarily sells plants but is also extending into additional products (pots, fertilizer) and services (landscaping). Create an application to help people learn more about gardening and getting them to begin to garden.
- **Assessment.** As an interviewer I'd like to see how you think about the opportunity space, which platform you decide to use for this prompt, and how you balance user and business needs.



doesn't require any human interaction. As a designer, you've been asked to reimagine the car interior. What should the interior look like?

- **Assessment.** I'd like to see how you think about blue-sky projects, and how you define a problem space and generate novel ideas accordingly.

## TIME-TRAVELING TOURISM

- **Prompt.** Scientists recently discovered a way to time travel. People can now go back and forward in time without any consequence to the timelines —no need to worry about the butterfly effect. As one of the first designers of the time machine, you've been tasked with creating an experience for time-traveling tourists. What experience would you create?
- **Assessment.** The open nature of this prompt gives you many possibilities to go after. You'll need to think through constraints, analogous experiences, and how to scope the problem meaningfully.

## *Baselining Your Whiteboarding Skills*

Now that you have some prompts and core criteria, you can start practicing by yourself. Imagine you're running a think-aloud usability study, but instead of moderating, the participant is you. Record your first-time through and be sure to time yourself. Play back the recording and look for patterns where you pause, don't speak, or speak too much.

Take a photo of the whiteboard and do a self-evaluation based on the criteria we mentioned in the beginning:

- What did you wish you could spend more time on?
- What did you miss?
- What's not clear?
- Did you go over or under your time limit?



those gaps. That said, don't forget to highlight your strengths during the actual whiteboard interview.

After your baseline, and a few more practice runs (which you can easily do in a week), it's time to practice with a fellow design friend (or two). Take turns, let them be your interviewer and have them probe you on the design details. Then evaluate them. The nature of switching roles will help you see the problem from a different perspective.

## Whiteboarding Remotely

5 minutes

If you've been asked to do a whiteboard challenge in 2020 or 2021—and perhaps even beyond—chances are it's taking place remotely. Like the on-site version of this challenge, typically you'll have about 30 minutes to an hour to complete this interview. Instead of a traditional whiteboard in a conference room you'll be given a few options as to which tool you want to use.

In general, these options fall into two categories—analog or digital. Analog

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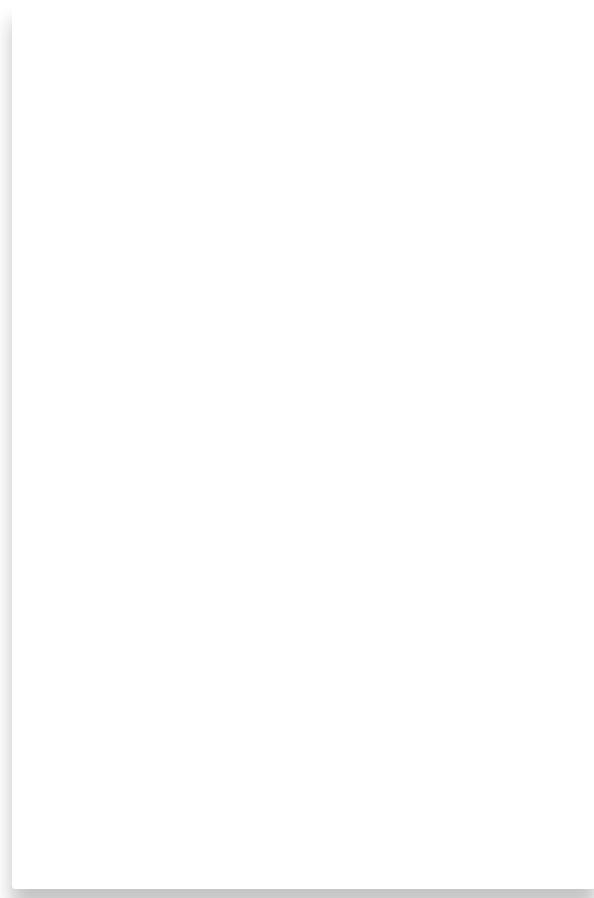
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**ISBN****(Holloway.com):**

978-1-952120-29-9

**ISBN (print):**

978-1-952120-30-5

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# Land Your Dream Design Job

A guide for product designers, from portfolio to interview to job offer

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by DAN SHILOV

Design is hard. As designers, we spend considerable effort in honing our craft and staying up to date on the latest design trends. Shouldn't we apply the same rigor when we're looking for that dream design job? *Land Your Dream Design Job* is a comprehensive book about landing a product design role in a startup, agency, or tech company. Learn what skills are expected of designers and how to demonstrate them throughout the job search process. You'll identify your next opportunity and target your job search process to stand out as a candidate when submitting your portfolio. You'll find a detailed breakdown of interviews and how to prepare for them: phone screens, portfolio presentations, behavioral, cross-functional, app critiques, whiteboard challenges, and take-home exercises. Lastly, you'll learn how to do your due diligence, negotiate compensation, and accelerate onboarding to your new role.

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