

# How To Become A Designer In 2020

15 Things To Consider Before  
Choosing A Design Course

DESIGN**LAB**

# Hey there, future designer!

Thanks for downloading this Designlab ebook! Our aim with this resource is to share helpful information about some of the biggest factors involved in choosing how to learn design—whether it’s just for fun, to add a new skill, or to change careers.

Our mission at Designlab is to enable creators to do the work they love, by offering rigorous, affordable, and mentor-led design education. If you’d like to learn more about design, or even build a new career in the design industry, [check out our courses!](#)

You can find more free resources linked at the end of this document.



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## Things About You

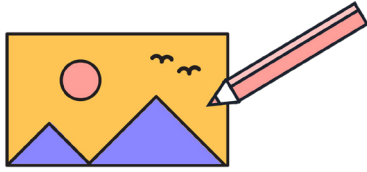
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# 1 **Design isn't art**

*“Am I really creative enough for a career in design?  
I can't even draw!”*

If that's a thought you've had, you're not alone. In fact, it's probably the most common concern amongst people who are just starting to consider changing careers to design.

Before we go any further in the book, let's clear one thing up: design is not art. Art is an aesthetic discipline concerned with personal expression and social commentary. Design is in essence a problem-solving discipline about meeting practical needs.

Although many design disciplines have aesthetic elements, aesthetic decisions in design are shaped by understanding a problem, and developing a functional solution.

For example, user interface (UI) design is about creating screen designs for apps on smartphones, tablets, and computers. There are aesthetic considerations around colors and fonts, but a lot of

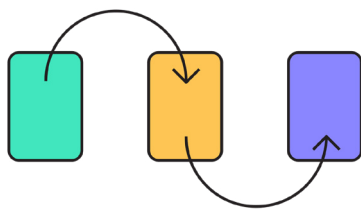
the time how screens are laid out and sequenced is based on something called a “design pattern”.

Design patterns are established ways of solving a given problem. For example, think of all the different checkout processes you go through on sites like Amazon, eBay, and Etsy. Although each one looks slightly different in terms of visuals and branding, the basic “pattern” of how the checkouts look and function is similar. This applies to a lot of digital design, and learning design is partly about learning existing patterns, and how to create new ones.

So even if you can’t draw, no worries. You don’t really need to!

## Further reading

- [The sketchbooks of 16 famous designers](#)



## 2 UX & UI Design

*UX and UI design skills are not the same thing—but UX and product designers need to have good UI skills.*

The difference between UX and UI design can bamboozle beginners for a number of good reasons. For starters, the design industry uses different terms to refer to similar work. If you see a job listing for a “product designer,” or a “UX/UI designer,” or a “UX designer,” chances are they’re all looking for the same kind of applicant. Namely, someone who has a baseline of skills in both UX and UI design.

But what are UX and UI design? And what’s the difference between them?

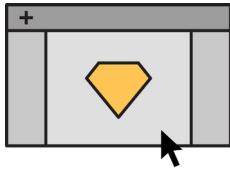
UX stands for user experience. User experience design is about researching a design problem from a user-centered perspective, and then planning and prototyping potential solutions to that problem. When it comes to digital design, that might mean identifying the user’s goals within an app or website, and then figuring out what steps and screens will be required to allow the user to reach their goals.

UI stands for user interface. User interface design is about figuring out exactly how the front-end of an app or website should look and function. It's about getting into the details of how screens should be laid out, how forms should be arranged, and how the overall design should look and feel.

It used to be more common for these to be separate roles, but increasingly, companies like to hire designers with a combination of UX and UI design skills. This is particularly true in startups and smaller companies, where design teams are small.

## Further reading

- [What's in a UX designer's job description?](#)



### 3 It's not all about the software

*Modern design tools like Sketch and Figma are now the industry standard, and they're quite easy to use.*

It's common to imagine that it's important to be able to use lots of software even before beginning to learn design. We'll let you into a secret: it's not.

You've probably heard of the Adobe Creative Suite before: Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign, and so on. These are indeed powerful, fully-featured packages for executing digital and print design solutions. However, there are two important things to consider.

First, even professional designers who use those tools every day don't have an encyclopedic knowledge of them. Software is just that—a tool—and like any tool, we learn how to use it effectively to accomplish the tasks that we have to complete.

Second, complex software like the Adobe Creative Suite has definitely become less important in the past 10 years. UX and UI designers now tend to use much more lightweight packages like Sketch, Figma, and



InVision. They're simpler to use, and they allow you to create and prototype screen designs quickly.

Having said that, if you're considering a design course, it will always help you to get the basics covered. We offer free courses in Figma, Photoshop, and Sketch, which will get you up to speed with a basic set of skills in just a few hours. You can find links below.

Finally, remember that it's never going to be your knowledge of software tools that gets you hired. What gets you hired into design roles is the quality of your portfolio, and your knowledge of the design process.

## Further reading

- [Collaboration: a new revolution in design software](#)
- [Figma 101 tutorial](#)
- [Sketch 101 tutorial](#)
- [Photoshop 101 tutorial](#)



## 4 The portfolio is (nearly) everything

*Hiring managers look at your portfolio above all else.*

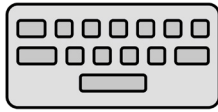
When it comes to applying for your first design job, employers are judging you first and foremost on the quality of work displayed in your portfolio. If it isn't strong, then having a design degree won't save you.

For this reason, the majority of career-track courses focus on your portfolio as the key course deliverable (see #14 below). Keeping your final portfolio in mind during your coursework can also help create focus on your overall goal, and prevent you from getting bogged down in small problems or technical details.

Think of your portfolio as the big picture to remember during your learning journey. Identify the skills you need to demonstrate in your portfolio, and prioritize taking steps forward in those areas.

### Further reading

- [12 tips to avoid an identikit UX Design portfolio](#)



## 5 You don't need to code

*Coding is not an essential skill for junior designers, but some understanding can help you work with developers.*

To be a UX/UI designer, you don't need to have any coding skills. A conventional UX/UI design workflow is for designers to research user needs, create flow charts for how users will complete tasks within an app or website, and hand off screen designs to a development team, who do the coding.

However, having a basic understanding of coding can definitely help make your designs stronger. It can also enable you to code your portfolio site and use advanced prototyping tools like Framer. Although you won't need coding skills for most entry-level design positions, learning about HTML & CSS—and asking developers to explain their work to you—can make you a stronger candidate for any position you apply to.

### Further reading

- [What are the skills needed for UX design?](#)



## 6 What are your goals?

*There are lots of reasons for learning design, ranging from a bit of fun to a full-on career change.*

### Learning for fun

Looking to expand your knowledge of design for personal enjoyment or as a hobby? There are lots of options for how to learn, and you can start right now. Chances are if you're designing for enjoyment alone, you'll be more interested in the graphic side of design—things like creating beautiful posters, cards, lettering, or even your own zine. Pick a fun project to work on (maybe for a friend's band). Find some inspiration, start sketching, and enjoy yourself!

### Adding a skill

Already in a role that you're happy with, but keen to add something extra to your resume? In that case you're likely to want something slightly more targeted and formal. For example, if you want to learn

specifically how to design an effective landing page for your business website, you might want to find a course that gives you specific, detailed guidance on that topic.

### **To see what work as a designer is like**

If you're unfamiliar with design and the design profession, introductory design courses can offer quick and inexpensive insights. There are two sides to this. First, there's gaining knowledge, understanding, and practice in hard visual design skills like layout, typography, color theory, and usability principles. And second, there's learning about what day-to-day life is like for professional designers. You might like to look for courses that offer 1-on-1 mentoring, which will allow you to put your questions to a design professional and get direct insights into their work.

### **To prepare for a career change**

This is an important consideration, because some courses are designed to prepare you for a career change into design, and others aren't. See #13-15 at the end of this guide for more on the difference between these course types.

## **To elevate existing professional design skills**

If you're already working as a generalist designer, further design courses can offer you the chance to specialize. For example, if you're currently working as a graphic designer, one option is to focus more on digital design. For a complete transition to UX/UI design, a bootcamp could be a good option. Alternatively, shorter courses will help you to add a more specific, focused skill to your repertoire.



## 7 Your existing design knowledge

*Your baseline of knowledge about design is a key factor in deciding where and how to start your learning.*

### **No design knowledge**

You might think you have no design experience, but we all have some—simply from our daily lives. We encounter design every day, whether it's in the graphics of a magazine, in using our phone, or even just crossing the street. Everyday objects like crosswalks are designed every bit as much as digital products. Try to actively notice the everyday, and you might find you know more than you thought.

### **Some design knowledge**

If you can name your favorite and least favorite fonts, and if you can name one or two designers whose work you appreciate, or apps whose design you admire, then you're already off to a great start. Your next step could be to expand your knowledge of design fundamentals.

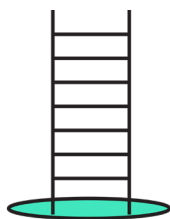
## Already a designer

If you're already working as a designer, your focus is likely to be on gaining new knowledge in a specific area of specialization, or switching from one kind of design to another. You'll likely want to look at intermediate or advanced short courses that focus on the specific skill you're looking to learn. Alternatively, if you want to make a switch from, say, graphic design to product design, a bootcamp or career accelerator could be a good option.

## Further reading

- [\*The Design of Everyday Things\* by Don Norman](#)





## 8 Your previous education and work

*You almost certainly have a number of transferable skills from the studying and jobs you've done in the past.*

If you're currently working in a job that's completely different from design, it can be tough to believe that you could ever be a designer. The destination seems so far off, and even what a designer does all day can feel mysterious and out of reach.

In reality, career change isn't as far off as you might think—and a good way to make the switch feel closer and more realistic is to recognize how many of the necessary skills you already have from your previous work and education.

Almost every line of work gives you skills that are important to becoming a designer. For example, if you work in architecture, you're already familiar with the idea generation and the importance of process. If you work in project management, you're already skilled in time management and collaboration. If you work in sales and marketing, you know how to present your work and tell good stories. If you

work as a pharmacist, you know the importance of empathizing with people's situations to understand their needs.

These soft skills are a significant part of being a professional designer, so make a list of all the transferable skills you can think of from your current work. You'll soon realize that you're not actually starting from scratch at all.

When it comes to education, you might be concerned that what you've studied previously doesn't have anything to do with design. Whether your previous studies are at university, technical college, or elsewhere, you will also be able to identify transferable skills from these courses.

For example, having a science degree might mean you have a strong understanding of research and research methods; half of the job of a UX designer is research. Similarly, having a humanities degree could mean you have strong critical thinking or brainstorming skills.

Wherever you're starting from in your career, your previous education and work is likely to prepare you for a career in design better than you thought.



## 9 How busy is your schedule?

*People's commitments vary wildly—whether it's childcare, employment, or commuting.*

### **Don't quit your job**

First things first—unless you're very financially secure, don't quit your job to take a design course. Even career-track courses (see #13 below) almost always have a part-time option which is specifically designed for you to complete around your regular work, whether you're working part-time or full-time.

Other than the upfront financial risks of quitting your job to take a full-time design course, you'll also be putting unnecessary pressure on yourself during the course itself. Of course the aim of career-track courses is for you to land a design job once you graduate—but you don't want your learning during the course to be disrupted by feelings of anxiety around your job prospects and the imminent need to find work. During the course itself, you need to be fully focused on learning.

## Using time smartly

As Laura Vanderkam points out in her incredible TED Talk on [how to get control of your free time](#), there are 168 hours in each week. If you're working 40 hours a week and sleeping 8 hours a night, that still leaves 72 hours to spend doing other things.

Of course, people's personal commitments range dramatically. How those "free" 72 hours get used will look very different for someone who's caring for multiple children and parents by themselves, compared to someone who has fewer commitments outside work.

Nevertheless, by using time smartly and proactively, it's surprising what you can achieve. The advantage of online courses is that you can use free blocks of 1 or 2 hours to plan and accomplish substantial design learning. In a busy schedule, face-to-face courses are harder, because they usually require committing whole evenings or weekends.

If you're looking to get more control of your free time, consider using techniques like timeblocking, pomodoro timers, or a planner specifically designed for intentional time management, like the [Best Self planner](#) or Michael Hyatt's [Full Focus Planner](#).

## **Keeping things under control**

Having 72 hours a week of “free time” doesn’t, of course, mean that it’s sensible to spend it all on tasks that require lots of mental or physical energy—that’s a recipe for rapid burnout. It’s also important to be intentional about the time you’ll take to rest and recharge.

If you end up with more than 60 hours of combined work and education commitments each week, bear in mind that your personal life will almost certainly need to take a back seat. Let your friends and family know what you’re trying to achieve, and don’t be afraid to ask for their help and share how they can support you.

Learning a new skill is tough. If you’re looking to switch careers, you’ll especially need practical and moral support from those around you.



## 10

## What's your budget?

*There are design courses at every price point.*

Alongside schedule, budget is of course a hard constraint for many people. The good news is that there are design courses for every budget—and there are lots of options for switching careers that don't require you to go to design school or university.

Particularly (but not exclusively) in the U.S.A., the cost of a university education is notoriously high. It can run to many tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of dollars. To make matters worse, university courses can be slow to respond to changes within the design industry, meaning that even after all that money, you can end up graduating with a set of skills that aren't well matched to market needs.

Partly for this reason, design “bootcamps” and career accelerators have emerged as lower-cost, career-focused alternatives. However, there are a range of learning options at every price point. You could combine any of the following:

## Free resources

The internet is full of free stuff about learning design. Look out for free ebooks ([like ours about design history](#)), as well as high-quality free blog content and email courses. On top of this, check out your local library for introductory books on graphic design.

## Below \$200

With this budget, you can start building a library of design books, and take some low-cost video-based courses from providers like Udemy, Skillshare, and Creativelive. These can be a great way to get a feel for what design's about, and test whether you're interested in learning more.

## \$200-\$400

At this price, you can start taking higher-touch courses. For example, at Designlab we have [4-week courses](#) that combine a guided in-house curriculum with 4 hours of 1-on-1 mentorship.

## **\$400+**

A higher budget can allow you to combine multiple short courses, like learning design fundamentals, taking a UI design introduction, and UX design basics. There are also longer, more comprehensive design foundation courses emerging in the market around this price, so keep an eye out for them.

## **\$6000+**

Online design bootcamps begin at around \$6000. They typically last 3-6 months, and include lots of contact time through a mentor or classroom (see #15).

Most bootcamps are career-track courses, meaning that they have been designed specifically to lead to an employment outcome. Most bootcamps also have some kind of job guarantee, so that if you meet course requirements and don't land a job within a certain amount of time, you can apply for a refund. Popular online design bootcamp providers including Designlab, CareerFoundry, Springboard, and Bloc.



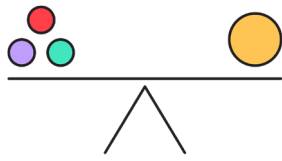
## **\$13,000+**

Offline (in-person) design bootcamps are typically more expensive because of their higher overheads. They usually lack the schedule flexibility of online courses, and in many cases don't come with a job guarantee. Providers of face-to-face bootcamps include Designation, General Assembly, Tradecraft, and Shillington College (Shillington is well established, but they offer a graphic design course only).

## **\$100,000+**

4-year undergraduate programs in design—or 2-year graduate programs—typically come in at this price point. There's no doubt that the depth and immersion of these programs can be extremely valuable. However, the cost is very high, both in monetary terms, and in terms of the amount of time you need to be out of the job market.

For more details about all these options, including exact pricing, check out course details on page 35.



## 11

# How do you prefer to learn?

*Alone with a stack of books, face-to-face, online, or a mixture? Every learning style has its place.*

An important factor in deciding how to learn is understanding what kind of role you're interested in. There are a lot of different job titles out there in the design industry, which can be pretty confusing as a beginner. ([Here's our explainer on design job titles.](#))

For example, a career in UX/UI design (also known as product design) requires a different skill-set, and a different learning path, than a career in graphic design. There is a range of exciting career paths in today's design industry. Certain roles—including those in UX/UI design—are in high demand, and can attract comparatively high salaries.

Putting together a reading list of articles, and a small stack of books on the topics you're interested in, can be a good way to get more clarity on what you might like to pursue as a career. We definitely advocate beginning to build a modest design library, as having design books on your shelves can serve as a reminder

of your goals, a dose of inspiration, and a reference point during your work.

It's theoretically possible to get a long way in your learning through books, articles, and videos. However, the difficulty with this approach is that it can be very lonely, and you're likely to get demotivated quite quickly. As well as that, it's much harder to get practice through realistic design projects, and tricky to find someone who can give you informed feedback on your work.

It's usually at this point that people begin looking into paid courses, as they can provide the structure and accountability that's lacking in completely self-taught approaches.

When considering learning style through paid courses, these are the main options:

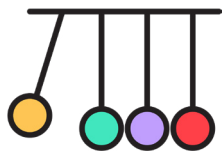
- *Video-based courses.* These are inexpensive, but it's still hard to get feedback because there is no human element.
- *Online courses with advice from instructors or mentors.* You pay more for the expert contact time and community element, but it means you have encouragement and can get constructive feedback on your work.

- *Face-to-face courses with classroom instructors.*  
These are the most structured and accountable, but they are more expensive, and tend to lack flexibility.

Take a look at page 35 for full details of your different course options!

## Further reading

- [12 books to get you started in design](#)



## 12

## When do you want to start?

*You can read a book today. For intensive mentor-led programs, you might have to wait a month or two.*

As a general rule, longer, more structured courses have a longer lead time. There are a few reasons for this.

First, these courses tend to launch in batches or “cohorts,” meaning that you have a community of peers taking the course at the same time as you. These cohort launches may be monthly, twice-monthly, or weekly.

Second, more intensive career-track courses usually have prerequisites to help ensure that you will excel in the course. This can take the form of a beginner or “foundation” course that you need to pass before enrolling in your bootcamp. Alternatively, if you have some design experience already, providers may ask that you complete a design challenge (a sample project) so that they can assess the level that you’re at before starting.

Finally, when taking a longer, more intensive course, the chances are that you yourself will need to make some preparations, even if it's just about stepping back from other commitments to make space in your schedule for the course. This can also add a month or two.

If you're taking a design bootcamp, we recommend thinking of it as a 12-month commitment, from committing to the decision, to landing your first job:

- 1-3 months for planning, decision-making, and foundation course
- 3-6 months for completing the bootcamp
- 3-6 months for job-hunting

Overall, remember that there's no rush. Even if you're unhappy in your current work, your prospects of succeeding in a new design career will be much stronger if you approach your learning in a planned and level-headed way. Doing this will allow you to focus on completing the work to a high standard, rather than rushing through because you're worried about getting a job.



## 13

### Career track vs non-career track courses

When choosing a design course, remember that there is a distinct difference between career track and non-career track courses. If you need a course which is going to support you to change careers into design, you'll probably want to look for a provider that offers:

- 3-4 substantial projects for your portfolio
- A portfolio review process prior to graduation
- Post-graduation career coaching and coursework

Note that, both online and offline, not all design bootcamps offer the same level of career support. If the level of career coaching and job guarantee is an important consideration for you, make sure to look in detail at what's offered by the different providers you're considering.

Shorter courses generally aren't intended to directly lead to career switches (although we've seen [a few success stories](#) from students who've successfully landed design jobs after taking short courses!)



## 14

# Online vs face-to-face courses

Choosing between in-person and online courses is one of the bigger decisions you'll need to make when selecting a course. There are definite pros and cons to each option:

### Face-to-face courses

*Pros:* With a face-to-face course, you'll get lots of structure and human contact. The rhythm of a regular in-person commitment can help you stay committed and on track. You will also probably have access to a classroom teacher, meaning you can get questions answered quickly.

*Cons:* They come with more overheads, like office space, heating, and full-time staff, so prices can be quite a bit higher. Also, they require you to physically live close to wherever the course is taking place, which can mean moving temporarily to take the course. Finally, the classroom model can mean having one or two instructors spread over a class of 20+ people, and full-time study is often the only option.



## Online courses

*Pros:* Online courses have lower overheads, meaning lower course pricing. You can also take them from anywhere in the world, and the schedule tends to be flexible, so you can complete the coursework around your other commitments. They tend to be quite innovative, with remote 1-on-1 mentoring being a particular advantage over more conventional classroom models. Online learning can be a practical option if you need to keep your day job and study in your spare time.

*Cons:* Although many design bootcamps have community elements like Slack workspaces and discussion boards, online courses do lack the same level of in-person interaction and the social buzz you can get from a face-to-face course. They also require more self-discipline and self-motivation, because there are fewer external barriers to you falling off track.



## 15

# Instructor-led vs mentor-led courses

An underappreciated aspect of the design course experience is the kind of expert contact time involved. There are generally two approaches: a classroom approach, where an instructor delivers lectures and holds discussions with a larger group of people at once; and a mentor-led approach, where a professional designer will be paired with you 1-on-1.

With instructor-led courses, you will typically get more contact time, but it will be shared with a class of other students. Mentor-led courses offer you a more personalized approach, where your work and questions are the sole focus of discussion. Which option is right for you depends on your personal learning preferences.

## Further reading

- [How a mentor can help you learn design faster](#)
- [11 mentors' tips for excelling as a junior designer](#)

# Your course options

We've put together a summary of your course options here, including our own, and those of our competitors!

At Designlab we believe in our unique platform and mentor-led approach. But the decision is yours, and we want you to know what's out there so you can do your own research, and decide what's right for you.

*The prices listed below are correct at time of writing (Oct. 2019). Some prices have been converted to USD from other currencies using exchange rates at time of writing.*

## Introductory options

Ideal for mastering design fundamentals.

[Our free resources](#) (\$0)

- [Figma 101 tutorial](#)
- [Sketch 101 tutorial](#)
- [Photoshop 101 tutorial](#)
- [Twentieth-Century Design History ebook](#)
- [Best of the Blog](#)

[Creativelive video courses](#) (around \$0-\$200)

[Udemy video courses](#) (around \$10-\$200)

[Skillshare video classes](#) (subscription from \$8.25 /mo)

[Designlab Design 101](#) (\$399)

[Careerfoundry UX Fundamentals](#) (\$650)

## Upskilling options

Great for adding a new design skill to your resume.

[Designlab short courses:](#)

- [UI Design](#) (\$399)
- [UX Research and Strategy](#) (\$399)
- [Interaction Design](#) (\$399)

[Careerfoundry:](#)

- [Voice UI Design](#) (from \$1780)
- [UI for UX Designers](#) (from \$1780)
- [Frontend Development for Designers](#) (from \$1780)

[General Assembly:](#)

- [User Experience Design](#) (from \$3,700)
- [Visual Design](#) (from \$2,800)

## Online bootcamps & accelerators

Intensive but flexible courses for career changers.

*Reminder: we recommend not quitting your job to take a design bootcamp full-time, unless you're very financially secure. Consider the part-time options instead.*

[Designlab UX Academy](#) (from \$6,749)

[Bloc Designer Track](#) (from \$8,500)

[Careerfoundry UX Design Course](#) (from \$6,177)

[Careerfoundry UI Design Course](#) (from \$6,177)

[Springboard UX Design Bootcamp](#) (from \$5,924)

[Thinkful Product Design Flexible](#) (from \$8,500)

## In-person bootcamps & accelerators

Perfect if you prefer a face-to-face experience.

[Designation: UX/UI Design Program](#) (from \$15,800)

[General Assembly: UX Design Immersive](#) (from \$13,950)

[Shillington: Graphic Designer](#) (from \$9,750)

## FAQs

### **I only want to do UX. So why do I have to learn UI?**

Although UX design job description used to not require much visual design, things have changed in the past 5-10 years. The reality now is that any entry-level UX design or product design position will require you to have some UI design skills, including the ability to create detailed screen designs from scratch.

Also, even in UX design roles that don't require you to design the final screens, you still need a decent understanding of UI design to create realistic prototypes when conducting user research and usability testing.

Finally, remember that your portfolio is the main way you can impress potential clients and employers. Portfolios are unavoidably visual, and you're going to stand out much more if you have excellent visual and UI design on display in your portfolio!

## **Aren't bootcamps a waste of money?**

Ultimately the value you place on a course is your choice. However, remember all the different things that bootcamps can offer. For example, our UX Academy career accelerator offers:

- Comprehensive curriculum covering all aspects of UX design
- 1-on-1 mentoring from a professional designer
- 24+ mentor sessions to discuss feedback on your work, each up to an hour long
- Written feedback within a unique learning platform
- Career Services to help you search for a job for up to 24 weeks after graduation
- Tuition reimbursement guarantee, meaning that if you meet course requirements and can't find a job within 6 months, you'll get all your money back

On top of this, remember that bootcamps emerged partly because they are a significantly less expensive option than going back to university. Combined with the tuition reimbursement guarantee, your financial risk is far lower with a course like UX Academy than with a typical university degree. It's also quick—lasting 3 or 6 months rather than 3 years.

[Read more about UX Academy here.](#)

## How do I know that the design course I choose is going to work?

That's a good question, and it breaks down to a few different things.

*Will I get a portfolio? What will the pieces be like?*

As we explained in #4 above, your portfolio is really the key deliverable from any career-track course. Before choosing a course, ensure that you're satisfied with the kind and quality of portfolio that the course helps you build. Employers will expect to see 3 or 4 substantial projects, so if you need to build a portfolio from scratch, avoid courses which only have you work on 1 or 2 projects.

For example, during our UX Academy course, you'll build 4 complete projects: 1 more guided project in Phase 1, when you're still learning key skills and tools, and 3 "capstone" projects in Phase 2, when you apply those skills and work on projects more rapidly and independently.

*Is my portfolio going to be any good? How can I tell?*

There are quite a few options out there these days for learning UX design. But given that you are new to the profession, how do you know whether the portfolios



coming out of each course are good or bad? Here are a few pointers.

- Look at how many projects people have. Portfolios with only 1 or 2 projects are unlikely to be competitive, whereas portfolios with 3 or 4 high-quality pieces demonstrating a range of UX and UI design skills will put you ahead.
- Look at the level of process documentation and storytelling. Hiring managers are interested in seeing the whole of your problem-solving and design process. Strong UX design portfolios show process rather than just final screens.
- Look at the unique touches. Our UX Academy course encourages you to work on at least one custom project that isn't selected from the course library of design briefs. By including custom projects, you can avoid the generic look that some courses can produce.

If in doubt, ask course providers to send you some typical examples of graduates' portfolios from their course. Here you can see some examples of [Designlab graduate portfolios](#).

*How will I actually learn the material? Articles, videos, classes?*

Different course providers have a range of different curriculum models. Which one is right for you is partly down to your personal preference. If you enjoy classroom learning or watching video lectures, look for courses that offer those features.

At Designlab, we find that classroom and video-style learning can be very passive, and not the best way to learn. For that reason, we have focused on creating a concise, in-house written curriculum, supplemented by graphics and occasional video clips. We then combine that with lots of hands-on projects to apply your learning, and intensive 1-on-1 mentoring to get feedback on your work so that you can iterate and improve.

*Am I going to get any career support?*

Some bootcamps offer career support after the course, while others don't. If this is important to you, make sure to check out the details of what career support is offered, and the terms on which it's provided.

Our bonus Career Services program, which is included with every UX Academy enrollment, has a 24-week curriculum all of its own. We wrote it

to support your job hunt in every way possible.  
(Don't worry, you don't have to do all 24 weeks—the purpose of the course is to help you land a job!)

## **How are online courses taught?**

They're typically a mix of:

- Online curriculum (for us, it's lessons, articles, how-to guides, and quizzes);
- 1-on-1 mentor calls, or classroom-style lectures and videos;
- Community support, through discussion boards and online collaboration tools like Slack.

If you have strong preferences about how you like to learn, make sure to take these into consideration when researching your course options.

## **Do I need to quit my job?**

No. Almost all design course providers offer part-time options so that you can study while continuing to work. We strongly discourage you from quitting your job just so that you can take a full-time design course—unless you're very financially secure.

If you're in doubt about what approach to take, it's worth delaying by a month to make sure that you've thought things through. Don't rush your decision, because it's an important one.

If you're completely new to design, it's also important to validate that you both enjoy the work, and that you have an aptitude for it that is going to allow you to learn and excel. So before committing to a career-track program, it's a very good idea to take a shorter, less expensive, more introductory course like our Design 101 primer.

### **How long is it going to take me to change career to design?**

Once you've decided to take the plunge and switch careers, it's natural to start feeling impatient. After all, your goal is to be a fully-fledged designer, and you want to get there as soon as possible.

However, it's important to pace yourself and remember that you'll put yourself in the strongest position by approaching your design course with an attitude of patience, rigor, and thoroughness. That way, you will learn more effectively, and ultimately be a stronger candidate when you do reach the point of applying for jobs.

We'd also be remiss if we didn't tell you that success isn't automatic. In a small minority of cases, people who are very enthusiastic about design turn out not to have a strong aptitude for gaining the required skills.

It's unlikely that this will happen to you, but if it does, remember that it's not a reflection on your character or overall abilities: it just means that this career turned out not to be a good fit. This is all the more reason to test the water with shorter courses and free resources before committing to a career change path.

### **Is it okay for me to copy work to learn?**

The distinction to remember here is between copywork and plagiarism. Copywork means duplicating existing designs in order to learn from how they've been designed and built. This is a completely valid—indeed an essential—learning technique. (Just remember that copywork should never appear in your final portfolio.)

Plagiarism is something different: it means using or copying someone else's work in order to pass it off as your own. This is unacceptable, and many providers (including us) have a policy of excluding anyone from the course who has committed plagiarism.

## **What if I don't like my instructor or mentor?**

First, remember that “instructor” and “mentor” typically mean different things. Instructors tend to be teachers in a classroom setting, whether the classroom is virtual (online) or in-person (offline). Depending on the provider, it can be difficult to change instructors if you feel you're not learning effectively, because it likely means changing classes. There may not even be other instructors available.

Mentors usually have 1-on-1 relationships with students, and it's more of a peer-to-peer arrangement focused on meeting your specific needs and preferences as a learner. Since we're all human, it still happens that students don't always get along with their mentor. This can be from a mismatch of learning styles, or simply a lack of natural rapport. At Designlab courses, we have hundreds of mentors—so if your mentor isn't working out, we can get you switched over to someone else.

## **Don't I need to know the software before learning UX design?**

It's a good idea to get familiar with a UI design tool like Sketch or Figma early in your learning about design. However, you don't need to be an expert, and you don't need to know about all the different

specialist tools available—most UX design courses will introduce you to those tools at the appropriate point in the curriculum.

A lot of people ask specifically about Adobe design software, like Photoshop and Illustrator. These tools—once used by pretty much every digital designers—are now much less important. Sketch and Figma offer much quicker and easier options for producing screen designs.

We offer free email courses in [Figma](#), [Sketch](#), and [Photoshop](#).

## One final tip...

### Ignore the naysayers

Every student is different and has different needs and preferences when it comes to choosing a design course. We hope that this guide has been helpful to you in understanding what your options are and how they match up with your own goals.

Before we finish, we have just one last tip. Although every student is indeed different, we find that almost all of them have one thing in common: there are naysayers in their lives.

We're not criticizing the naysayers. People most likely to discourage you from changing careers and learning something new are likely to be those close to you, including close friends and family.

They're likely to urge you to be cautious if they sense that you're very enthusiastic about the changes you're considering. It's natural, and it's usually their way of showing care towards you and ensuring that you're thinking things through.



However, if you listen too much to the naysayers, you can end up dismissing your own passions, hopes, and dreams. The reality is that a design career is within the reach of anyone who has a basic aptitude for design, and who is ready to commit to the hard work required to make that change happen.

If that description sounds like you, thank the naysayers for their advice, but ultimately make sure that the decision either way is your own. When you prove the naysayers wrong, they'll still be celebrating with you!

THANKS FOR READING!

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more Designlab resources?**

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