

# Make Your Portfolio Count

*A Portfolio Checklist for Designers*



JESSE SHOWALTER

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## A Portfolio Checklist for Designers

Back in the day before the “interwebs” dominated the way we consumed media, designers had to have a physical portfolio. One that they printed up and luggered around with them to meet clients and interview for jobs. **My first portfolio was absolute garbage. Some college projects and band flyers I had made and shoved into a cheap black binder... but it worked.**

Nowadays everyone and there mother is connected to a device, so showing off your work is not only recommended but it's kind of a mandatory. If someone tells me they are a designer and they don't have an online portfolio of some kind, I think one of two things.

1. They are lying

2. Maybe they are actually a super hero and this is their cover to fight crime

**100% of the time it's number 1 just on case you are wondering.**

Now since everyone has access to viewing your work, and your not a super hero fighting crime at nights, you need your work online, but is snapping a shot and throwing it on Twitter or Instagram enough?

How do you set yourself apart from the rest? How do you establish yourself as a knowledgeable, capable, and talented designer that is sought after? **How do you Make Your Portfolio Count?**

“A portfolio is the backbone of a creative as it shows what you're capable of,” says graphic and interactive designer Jacob Cass of Just Creative. It's a showcase of your blood, sweat, talents and triumphs. It's your brand, be proud of it. Now go show it off!

I truly believe that being a designer is less about some pumped up CV or Resume and all about what you can do. To put it simply

**You have to be able to Walk the Walk... not just Talk the Talk**

There are a lot of way different ways that you can go about building your online portfolio. Themes, Site builders, Portfolio Platforms, etc... The important part is **Not the How** of building your portfolio, it's the content itself that makes or breaks your portfolio. So before I get to my 10 keys to building your portfolio here is my quick advice on the actual **How** and process.

# 5 QUICK TIPS

*before you get to the meat*

1

Get something up this week. Don't wait for perfection, just aim for progression. Something is better than nothing.

2

If you're just starting out don't worry about spending the time or money on a solution, create a free Behance account and get to work on the content.

3

Copy presentational styles of other designers until you form your own way that tells your story and helps craft your own narrative.

4

Join a designers slack group, reddit, spectrum community or other online space that has designers, and ask them to critique your portfolio ASAP.

5

Decide where you want to work in 5 years and build your portfolio to get that job or those types of clients.

*With all that being said here are my 10 keys too having a successful design portfolio*

# ALL KILLER NO FILLER

*Display nothing but your best work*

A portfolio is not a repository for every piece of work you have ever done. External hard drives are for archiving, portfolios are for shining.

Go through your work and choose the 5 to 7 best projects and work your tail end off creating presentational materials to show them off.

For those of you that don't feel like you don't have 5 to 7 amazing projects that you can deck out to put your best foot forward, then it's time to dig deep and make some concept projects. **Built them out of thin air, late nights and lots of coffee.** Think of things you like and create the logo, iOS app or website that you wish they had. Don't let lack of experience be your excuse.

## SUGGESTIONS —

1. Show only the projects that will wow people
2. If you have no projects that will wow people, wow yourself with a concept
3. Don't use projects that you did quickly or without care
4. Anything you put in your portfolio should be worthy of submitting for an award.

# FOCUS ON YOUR FUTURE

*Include only the work that you want to be doing*

Maybe your just starting out and you don't know what you want. Then my advice is to skip tip 2 and move on to 3.

For everyone else reading that has been designing just long enough to know what excites you... Stop being a generalist and start being a specialist. Stop posting anything on your portfolio that distracts from your very narrow focus in the design world, and start saturating your online presence with a singular(or as close to singular as you can get) thing.

**Perfection does not equate to victory, consistency does.**

So start including work in your portfolio that highlighted the work you love and therefore the work or job you hope to land in the future.

If you love designing mobile apps then you should have 5 to 7 amazing examples of iOS and Android app designs chalk with samples, process, presentation materials and tutorials on how you made it. Now I understand a little variety but the narrower the spectrum the better. So yes... design apps for iOS and Android, and sure include a responsive website you did for a client, but don't put some graphic tee's in there too. Those things go together like peanut butter and pickles.

## SUGGESTIONS

1. Only include projects that you would want to start with a new client tomorrow
2. When posting case studies about these projects, speak a lot about topics that are contextually relevant to that field... AKA use buzz words.
3. Don't post duplicate content. You can do UI work without posting 7 identical dashboards with identical dashboard widgets.
4. Have at least one dream project in your portfolio. (A dream project is a client/project that would be your dream to work on. It's very rare that you will ave accomplished this so more than likely it's concept time )

# BE CONSISTENT

*Include work that helps mold a consistent style or brand*

This sound similar to the above point but it's worthing stating that as you start your career in design you are inevitably and maybe even unbeknownst to you are creating a personal brand. That personal brand needs to be consistent if you hope to progress at all in this industry.

Your personal brand starts with consistent work.

- *UI designers design UI's*
- *Brand designers design Brands*
- *UX designers design Experiences*

On top of the obvious mentions above you also have to be consistent within your area of focus. So when creating anything that shows off your work/personal brand let it all be synced.

Whether you are posting to your Instagram account, tweeting out a link, making a YouTube video or posting a project to your portfolio make it look, feel and resemble the rest of your work to give people a good feeling of who you are what you do.

## SUGGESTIONS —

1. If you have a distinct style, try to highlight it
2. If you focus on a specific field make it obvious (education, tech, etc...)
3. If your style is still varied because you are still finding your style, just cheat it and present everything similarly

# STAY CURRENT

*Only Include work from the last 3 years*

It's important to keep your portfolio updated with recent work. The reasons why you would want to be so selective might be:

- *Design trends change and old projects make you look dated*
- *Client or recruiters want to see that you are currently capable and worth contacting*
- *Old projects makes you look like you haven't been able to find work and people start asking questions when that happens.*
- *Brands and Companies come and go, people want to see work that still exists in the wild today*
- *Old projects make you look desperate*

## PRO TIP

The amount of projects you should have displayed in your portfolio directly correlates to the frequency of new projects that you take on.

So if you only do 1 project a year right now you should only have 3 projects in your portfolio so you stay relevant. (unless you do concept projects that you can fill in the gaps with)

For a list of concept projects you could do, message me on Twitter for recommendations @iamjesseshow

## SUGGESTIONS

**1.** Try to keep your work classic so you don't have to worry about staying fresh

**2.** Make the hard decisions and cut things even if you love them

**3.** Supplement your portfolio with awesome concept work that you believe in

**4.** Always have one thing in your portfolio that is cutting edge

# PRESENT IT 5

*Design the way your designs are presented*

**The more time you spend on presenting your work the more future clients you will get.**

So many designers including myself, spend a ton of time doing amazing work, they crush there design or development projects but wonder why they are sitting around waiting for recognition or for new clients to hire them... Maybe it's because the didn't spend the time creating a reason for people to love your work or want to work with you.

The reasons as to why someone would work so hard just to turn around and not show the work off to the world properly could be one of the following:

**1. Laziness** - You did so much work not he project you're too tired to work on it more. You just wanna slap what you got up quick and move on.

**2. Pridefulness** - You think the work should speak for itself or that people should just want work with you because you know how hard you worked on your last project.

**3. Ignorance** - You have never thought about taking the time to present your work. You just figured it would all be all right.

**4. Misguided Humbleness** - You don't like presenting your work because you don't like talking about yourself, pumping yourself up, marketing yourself, or even stalling about yourself at parties.

## SUGGESTIONS

1. If you don't know how to present your work go look at Behance portfolios and copy that style of presentation.
2. Muster up a little energy and spend a night taking your project files and turn them into presentational materials for yourself.

credit: Tiago Almeida



# SHOW YOUR PROCESS

*Describe your process, role, and struggles*

I'm going to start this section off with a tightly held secret.

**The "Process" is the portfolio piece. So either show the process or don't show the project.**

I'm serious here, show people all of it. The more of your process you can show in a kind of case study, the better off you will be. Why you may be asking?

Because people are looking for value. Value is an incredibly personal thing for someone to assign to you, but it's more likely for someone to assign value to you if you give them a story to latch onto.

People love a good story, this is why when Super Bowl comes around each year the NFL makes sure to highlight a few key players from each team. They focus on the players story, their challenges, hardships, victories, and values... why do they do this? Because some people are watching the Super Bowl that don't love football, but they do love a good story, therefore they will become invested in what the NFL is selling... their brand.

What's the difference between a designer handbag and a knock-off? Answer... usually nothing except the perceived value of the bag.

So to sum up, show people more than just flat examples of your work. Give them sketches, challenges, milestones and so much more.

## SUGGESTIONS

1. Show people your process, if you don't have a process get one and showcase it
2. Don't be afraid to be vulnerable in your portfolio pieces, show the human side of your work. There is a lot of good design out there, there are fewer good stories.
3. Show your work in a chronological format. Ideation, conception, production, delivery (or whatever you do)
4. Use real pictures of the work to bring a real world element to it.

# SHOW RESTRAINT

*Don't let your portfolio take away from your actual work.*

Want to hear crazy truth? **Designer love to design. I know it's insane right!** Yes you're a designer, yes you have skills, yes you want to wow potential clients and companies, but no you should not let that zeal distract you from your purpose when presenting your work. What do I mean?

Designers are notorious (me included) for designing their portfolios in a way that distracts from the work itself. We frame our work in tacky iPhones and iMacs. We learned a little CSS and go nuts with transforms and animations.

All of that is a distraction. Here's a little rule of mine.

## When in doubt, throw it out

So when you are building a site, or choosing a theme, or selecting a SquareSpace template, **Keep It Simple Stupid.** You'll thank me for it later. No one is going to judge you for your portfolio being too simple, but people might judge you if you have no self control or common sense.

## SUGGESTIONS

1. Frame your projects in simple shapes instead of devices
2. Establish a personal color palette and stick with it.
2. Be careful with background images and textures
3. Use lots of white space to highlight portfolio pieces or key content

# SEO

*Be discoverable so you are hirable*

I'm about to drop some internet knowledge on you so put on your thinking caps. I am by no means an SEO expert but I know enough to help an newbie so here it is.

1. Make sure that if you use an image you apply an **alt** tag and a **title** tag. These are the tags that will show up if people are searching google images, if there mouse rolls over the image, or for screen readers and visually impaired. Just name them what the image is and use some keywords in those descriptions.

2. We just spoke about **Keywords** those are little words that help search engines know what your page is all about. Use them in the pages **title** and **description** and repeat some of those words in your written content on the page.

3. Use **Open Graph Protocol** so your stuff looks nice on social media. If you don't know what **OGP** is [read up on it](<https://www.optimizesmart.com/how-to-use-open-graph-protocol/>), in a nutshell they are tags that explain to the internet how to display your stuff when posted all over the web.

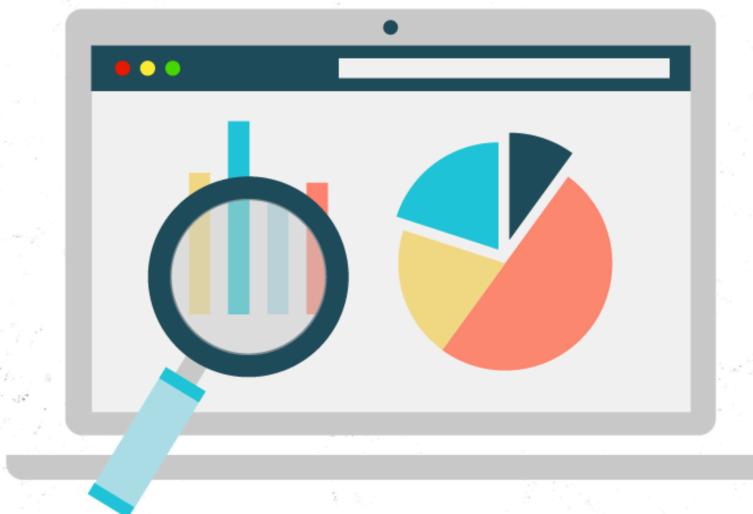
4. When you revise your portfolio and update work or post new blog posts etc... do a quick double check for the above SEO basics so you stay consistent in leading people back to your work.

## PRO TIP

In whatever platform you are building your online portfolio there should be a way to apply these SEO techniques... Wordpress, Squarespace, Wix, Good Ol' HTML, They should all have SEO.

**If there is no basic SEO abandon ship!!!**

illustration credit: <https://lpcreativeco.com/>



# CONSIDER YOUR JOY

*Include only the work you enjoy the most*

Now you might be thinking that this one sounds really similar to tip number 2, and you're right... it does. But it doesn't mean we shouldn't stop really quick and state the obvious.

Being a designer is an awesome job. You get to make cool things using your creative skills... Awesome! You get to work with pretty cool people (usually)... Awesome!

You get to feel accomplished because you had a say in creating something that other people use... Really Awesome!

There is nothing worse than having all of that Awesomeness stripped away because you love typography and hand lettering but have been forced to do front end development on the daily. That's like the Star Wars nerd that wanted to do animation all his life, so he went to school for computer animation and got the chance to work on star wars movie only to find himself doing the rendering of the hairs of Yoda's toes in the Phantom Menace for 60 hours a week... Joy Killer!

To avoid such a monstrous disappointment make sure to put only things in your portfolio that you enjoy the most.

## SUGGESTIONS

**1.** Ask yourself what you love. What could you do for 5 hours a week and be excited about each week? That's what you include in your portfolio.

**2.** There is no such thing as a passive person, just people who actively choose to pursue joy, so actively pursue your passions.

**3.** Understand that you may have to eat some crap for while. It's OK to do things you hate to pay the bills but don't lose sight of the goal.

# KEEP IT UP

*Review, Add, Delete Complete*

**So now you have built a portfolio that is:**

1. Nothing but your best
2. Only the things that you want to be doing
3. Consistent to your personal brand or style
4. Fresh and Current
5. Thoughtful and Painstakingly crafted to impress
6. Shows your process and proves your value
7. Demonstrates restraint and maturity
8. Uses the internet to your advantage
9. & ensures your future joy with forward thinking

## WHAT'S LEFT TO DO?

1

Review it **QUARTERLY**

2

Add to it **BI-ANNUALLY**

3

Delete from it **YEARLY**

4

Repeat **CONTINUALLY**



# JESSE SHOWALTER

*Designer / Developer*

Thanks for taking the time to read "Make your Portfolio Count"  
I hope that you got something out of it and that it will help you  
craft the portfolio that you have always wanted.

If you enjoyed it, I would really appreciate it if you would help  
spread the word and share it with someone by sending them  
the download link or mentioning me on social media.

[Twitter](#)

[Instagram](#)

[YouTube](#)

I hope that you are designing amazing things, making  
amazing things and that you are making your portfolio count.

-Jesse