Design thinking & ethics

Before You Start Designing

It's tempting to create a new file and get started making something immediately, but there are some considerations to make before pixels hit the canvas.

The reality as a designer is that moving pixels around on your screen is only a small part of your job. Building buttons, type systems, interfaces, and much more will come soon, but that work is not inclusive of all the work a designer does. Being a designer is, in part, identifying problems, asking the right questions, and making the best solution or choice for your clients—or even yourself.

Let's say I'm creating an application for mobile phones. To get started I ask myself or my team, "Who is the audience?" Is my audience the entire globe? Then I will need to think about my app in different languages, and how that affects the space I leave for text in my buttons and other interface elements. Some words in English are very short but when directly translated to a language like German can end up very long, breaking a beautifully crafted button.

Since design is problem-solving, you'll need to tailor your solution to your audience and their specific problems. Your ability to communicate with your audience comes from listening to them and understanding their situation; if we don't understand their needs, it is not likely that our design solutions will be effective. Teams need to reflect on the diverse needs of their audiences and society to represent that audience and help identify their problems and the correct solutions.

I don't know for sure, but I can presume that there are a lot of ways for individuals to find out the weather already, with built-in applications existing on all the mobile platforms. Along with the ability to step outside the home in most circumstances, I think that building a weather app might be a solved problem (unless you've figured out a way to summon rain on demand!).

How about an application to let trans-identified individuals find a safe place to use the restroom? That is a real problem: Trans individuals can be bullied, harassed, and even killed for where they choose to use the restroom. Apps like Refuge Restroom and Gender Neutral Toilet Finder are trying to solve these real-world problems by addressing something new, rather than reinventing tools we already have.

This is why ethics are so important for designers.

Creating products and services that solve real problems and help people live better lives is a superpower that is accessible with design, and should not be taken lightly. Considering how you are able to help or hurt people when designing is crucial, and worth investigating before you get into a creative application. You can do good in the world with design, with a greater understanding of the impact your work has on others.

A code of ethics

As Mike Monteiro explains in A Designer's Code of Ethics, we must judge the value of our design work by the impact it has on the world, good or bad — and it's up to you to be aware of that impact.

If you were to design a voice-activated product, like a personal assistant, you'd want to make sure customers can control their data and understand how it is being used. If they are coming to your product to create shopping lists, then their shopping list data shouldn't be sold to other companies to advertise to them unless they explicitly agree. In a situation like this, you have a voice and can use it to do good. You could help them understand where their data goes and who can see it before they start to create their first shopping list, as well as offer them controls to delete their data.

There is not yet a Hippocratic Oath for designers, requiring us to uphold ethical standards to do no harm like there is for medical doctors. It is worth your time — as

well as the time of your customers — to review and reflect on the impact your designs have on the world, and decide where your own boundaries lie.

Design is a people-focused job. You'll hear a lot about empathy, and for a good reason. Empathy, put simply, is an ability to understand the world through other people's eyes—and put aside our own biases as we do so.

Empathy is an important part in inclusivity as well. Design has the power to inform, and the messages we communicate about our products often imply much more than you might have expected. Alice Lee, a freelance designer in San Francisco, illustrated WordPress.com's brand and wrote about how important it is to bake this consideration into your process from the very beginning. She states,

> *So, how can inclusion and representation be expressed through character design and illustration voice? When you begin with these principles as cornerstones of your brand, rather than tacking them on at the end, they manifest in the design process in straightforward and thoughtful ways.*

Unconscious Bias

Bias is the preference or prejudice for or against someone or something.

Our brains look for patterns and past events to inform decisions without involving the conscious part of the mind. This is helpful to reduce the cognitive load of our everyday experiences. But the previous experiences that our perception is being filtered through can include cultural stereotypes.

Unconscious Bias is having these stereotypes influence how our minds are processing new information—if we believe in these stereotypes or not. Being exposed to cultural stereotypes can lead to our brains using them to understand new experiences. Rapheal Smith talked about designing for unconcious bias at Venctors Conference. He shares,

> *When we're working with such little information about people, we rely on the social group that person belongs to or other characteristics they embody as the basis for our judgments.*

It is nearly impossible to get rid of your unconscious biases entirely (and there can be a lot of them), but you can work to reduce them. Unconscious bias is molded by what we observe around us, proactively working to transform those concepts and images we're exposed to can begin to change how biases inform how we process what we perceive.

It's crucial for designers to understand bias both to combat their own biases as they create and to tap into the biases of their customers, to provide better experiences.

Further reading

To learn more about unconsious bias check out the Unconscious Bias FAQs by Joelle Emerson.

You can also explore Managing Unconscious Bias by Facebook.

Go to next section

Figma

Use Cases	Explore
UI design	Design features
UX design	Prototyping features
Graphic design	Design systems features
Wireframing	Collaboration features
Diagramming	FigJam
Brainstorming	Pricing
Templates	Figma Organization

Remote design

Students and educators

Customers

Security

Integrations

Contact

Resources

Blog

Best practices

Support

Developers

Learn design

Downloads

What's new

Releases

Careers

About us

Agency partners

Privacy

Status

Compare

Sketch

Adobe XD

Invision Studio

Framer

Design on Windows

Manage Cookies