



Figma

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What is graphic design?

A common misconception is that design is merely making things pretty. It's true, there is an element of design that is purely [aesthetics](#), but it's not inclusive of everything that design is. Here is a non-exhaustive list of some of the things that design is:

Design is all around us

It impacts the way objects and environments function. It is something that is executed by everyone, including you, even if you've never considered yourself a designer. You make design decisions all the time, at school or work and in your personal life.

Every choice you make to solve problems is a design decision. The way you get ready, by brushing your hair, then having a coffee, and finally brushing your teeth, is a design decision—an intentional choice to design your morning in a particular way.

This might have developed out of the way toothpaste was making your coffee taste and the coffee staining your teeth. You solved these problems at some point by ordering your routine so that coffee came before teeth brushing.

Problem solving

Signage added to a door to indicate if it's opened via push or pull is fundamentally helpful, right? A better design would be to make the door's direction intuitive;

having a handle on the pull side and a flat area to push against on the other, with or without labels. But design isn't just the visual indication of which way the door swings.

Deciding that the door opens when pushed from the inside, in case of an emergency, is a design decision and is probably the most critical consideration. It's not just the obviousness of which way the door swings, but the consideration as to the best direction for the door to open.

If you're a door designer, for example, the problem you are solving for would be: we need to make doors safer. The solution of allowing a door to be pushed open from the inside, especially during an emergency, does solve that problem; and doing it with an intuitive, beautiful push plate on the inside of the door makes it an elegant solution to the problem.

Listening, empathizing, and acting on information

Hearing our customers and their needs is a way that we can best ensure that our designs are solving the right problems. The solutions we're creating are addressing the needs of real people—solving problems that they might otherwise be frustrated by.

The best way for anyone in the design discipline to create a product or service that actually addresses a person's needs is by listening and understanding their problems in the first place.

Many products are built without listening to or consulting consumers, which usually ends badly. Des Traynor, co-founder and Chief Strategy Officer of Intercom [wrote on the Inside Intercom blog](#), "If you were a chef wondering if customers are enjoying your new soup recipe, how would you find out? It's not rocket science."

Asking questions

As a designer, you must ask "Why?" Maybe not as much as an inquisitive four-year-old, but close.

Who are we designing for? What are the problems that they face? How can we go about solving those problems? Why might our solution not work? What can we do

about that? Why was a decision made by our team or company?

There are lots of questions to be asked before, during, and after a product is created or redesigned. [Question your coworkers and your customers.](#)

Stay curious.

Storytelling

A good story has a distinct beginning, middle, and end; a mapped out journey. When reading a book or watching a movie you progress through the story in a specific order and experience it as it unfolds.

As your customer progresses through your app, website, infographic, three-dimensional world, etc. they are experiencing your story. This is what User Experience, or UX, design is; and is a part of the tools you have available to help people understand how to interact with your creation.

How someone moves through a physical space is similar to this: they are presented with visual information, and from that, they are choosing how to proceed next. You could encourage someone to move through a building with navigational signs, or more subtle elements, like architecture that draws them in on their own.

Your customer may have an adverse experience and leave if they get confused (closing your app) or a negative experience that has them running out the door if something scares them (deleting your app from their device).

People use digital products in unexpected ways, so it's important to best guide them in the ways that we've built them to be used. By actively guiding our customers, you're able to help them have a great experience and ultimately get the most out of your products.

Writing is a core part of the design process that should be taken into consideration. Spelling mistakes are as much an error of the designer as they are for the copywriter or other content creator. Since design is not just how your creation looks, but how accessible it is to your audience, the clearness of the words on the page matter as much as your font choices. More on creating access and being inclusive in the [Inclusion](#) lesson.

Another consideration to keep in mind is that new design technologies and trends are always appearing. Understanding and leveraging a fundamental like storytelling will better prepare you for new types of designing, such as the latest trends in chatbots and augmented reality.

Function

It's not just making stuff pretty—that is often a consequence of functioning well and offering a great experience for your customers/audience.

[Steve Jobs said](#), "Most people make the mistake of thinking design is what it looks like, people think it's this veneer—that the designers are handed this box and told, 'Make it look good!' That's not what we think design is. It's not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works."

To go back to our push/pull door example, a clear indicator of how to use a door can be beautiful while being functional, be it an ornate handle or art deco [typography](#).

The use of well-crafted beauty can help accomplish your goals of indicating the direction a door opens, and also becomes aesthetically pleasing, adding to the overall interior design or architectural narrative of a space.

Creating the best solution for your customers' problems often results in a product that is pleasant and enjoyable to use.

Form

There are many positive consequences of solving a problem, telling a story, and making something that functions well: it often turns out being simple and easy to use. There is always still an opportunity here to visually polish it further. These are the extra steps it takes to win over your competition and to grow your product in the long run. If all bank accounts theoretically hold your money, then how are they different? Some banking apps are simply easier to use and, dare I say, fun.

There is a phenomenon known as the Aesthetic-Usability Effect, which is a perception that people believe a more aesthetically pleasing product is easier to use than a less-aesthetic product—even if it's not easier to use. This is similar to

attractiveness bias, which is often referenced when discussing the United States presidential election of [John F. Kennedy v. Richard Nixon](#).

Every design begins with the same essential elements—points, lines, and shapes. Similarly, even the most complex designs can be reduced to these vital pieces. We believe that great design is one where these pieces are used efficiently together.

For instance, in the early days of designing Figma, we often talked about what tools you need to create modern designs for screens. We realized that the toolset does not have to be large if the tools are carefully selected and work together well. With a small set of functions (like the [Vector Network tool](#) or a [Frame](#)), designers can create a lot of different things to form sophisticated means of expression.

The same is true for communications design. You can create much of our designed world by using a small set of elemental shapes to build things of high complexity. Although the use of primary shapes and colors was famously promoted at the [Bauhaus school](#) as fundamental to design, these forms have been part of the language of design for hundreds of years.

The famous New York Subway Map and signage is an excellent example of this in action. Before its total design overhaul in the 1960s, the New York Subway system was an exercise in confusion with hundreds of signs inconsistently designed even within a single station.

It wasn't until 1965 when graphic designers Massimo Vignelli and Bob Noorda took on the job of building the subway a visual identity with usability at its core, that it became much easier to navigate the system—thanks to well-considered signage and iconography. The pair focused on building a system that solved a problem and was aesthetically pleasing at the same time.

The result is the same design system you may know [today](#). The designers created a 182-page manual for the New York City Transit Authority that outlines all the ways the design should and should not be used—and it remains one of the most iconic bodies of work in the world.

Designs often have a visual element or existence, and the visual embodiment of a design is, ideally, pleasant to look at and experience. Often, if you set out to design

your product in a way that is holistically focused on ease of use, aesthetics will follow.

Practice

Being a designer entails spending time building your experience level. You are not going to be great on day one. That's okay! It's important to keep doing it, you will get better. Ira Glass, talks about the creative gap between knowing something looks good, but not being able to create it. This is a valuable step in your journey to become a great designer. Understanding what works, what looks good to you, and building toward it. [Ira Glass's advice for beginner creatives](#):

...we get into it because we have good taste. But it's like there is a gap. That for the first couple years that you're making stuff, what you're making isn't so good. Okay? It's not that great. It's trying to be good, it has potential, but it's not quite that good. But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, your taste is still killer. And your taste is good enough that you can tell that what you're making is kind of a disappoint to you. You know what I mean?

A lot of people never get past that phase, a lot of people at that point, they quit. And the thing I would just like say to you with all my heart is that most everybody I know who does interesting creative work, they went through a phase of years where they had really good taste, they could tell what they were making wasn't as good as they wanted it to be. They knew it fell short. It didn't have this special thing that we wanted it to have.

And the thing I would say to you is, everybody goes through that. If you go through it, if you're going through it right now, if you're just getting out of that phase; You gotta know it's totally normal and the most important possible thing you could do is do a lot of work.

That means you have many years and hours of designing to get through before you become a great designer. Give yourself small design challenges on a daily basis, and try to create something new, no matter how small. You will become more proficient quicker if you keep trying.

Perseverance and discipline will make you an expert. Keep building your skills — and your portfolio — by solving problems for people through design.

Summary

As you might have realized by now, design is not easy to define. It is the culmination of a number of disciplines that come together to create something for people to use, and often overlaps into other areas like writing, or even development, along the way.

Much like art, many things could be considered design to the point where it is somewhat subjective. While something could be considered art when it is challenging for a viewer to comprehend, a design would be regarded as unsuccessful.

Everyone is a designer, and you can make high-impact design decisions without realizing you're a designer. When you understand the impact of decisions not traditionally considered to be 'design' it's easy to see why. As Daniel Burka [wrote](#), "When an engineer takes a shortcut and scrimps on performance, they need to understand how that damages the user experience. Likewise, when a designer pushes an engineer to make a change that affects performance, that engineer should help the designer make the best overall design decision — not just roll over and do what the designer asked. It's this type of respectful collaboration that makes great design happen."

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