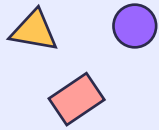# Beginner's Guide to Product Design
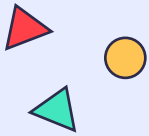
What is Product Design?

Introduction

Congratulations on taking an important first step on the exciting road to becoming a product designer! As one of the fastest growing and most in-demand careers in tech, this is the perfect time to transition into design. We've created this guide as a resource to help you learn more about product design, and to get a sense of whether or not it might be a good profession for you to jump into.
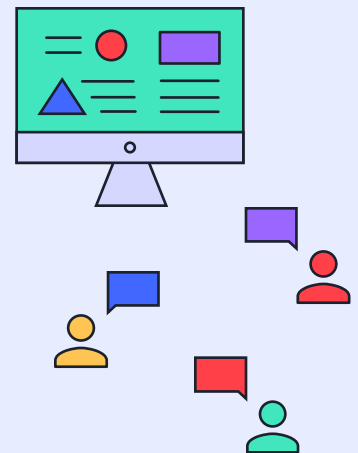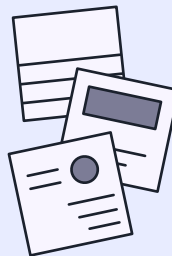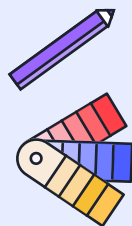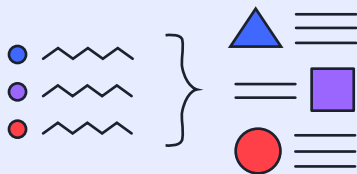
Before applying to Designlab's UX Academy, we want to give you a better idea of what a career in UX will look like, what kind of opportunities are out there, and what the future of UX might look like. We want to help you figure out whether UX design is the right career for you.
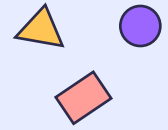
What is UX design?

While design is certainly nothing new, the term "user experience designer" is still relatively recent, having been coined by Don Norman at Apple in the 1990s.

What UX usually refers to in today's market is **digital user experience**: how people interact with and feel about digital products — everything from websites to mobile apps to electronic devices. Think about the last time you felt frustrated trying to buy something online, or the last time you got a thrill of excitement playing a mobile game. UX designers want to make products that are highly useful, easy to operate and fun to navigate. That's why UX designers are often also called **product designers**, and you'll see the term used interchangeably.
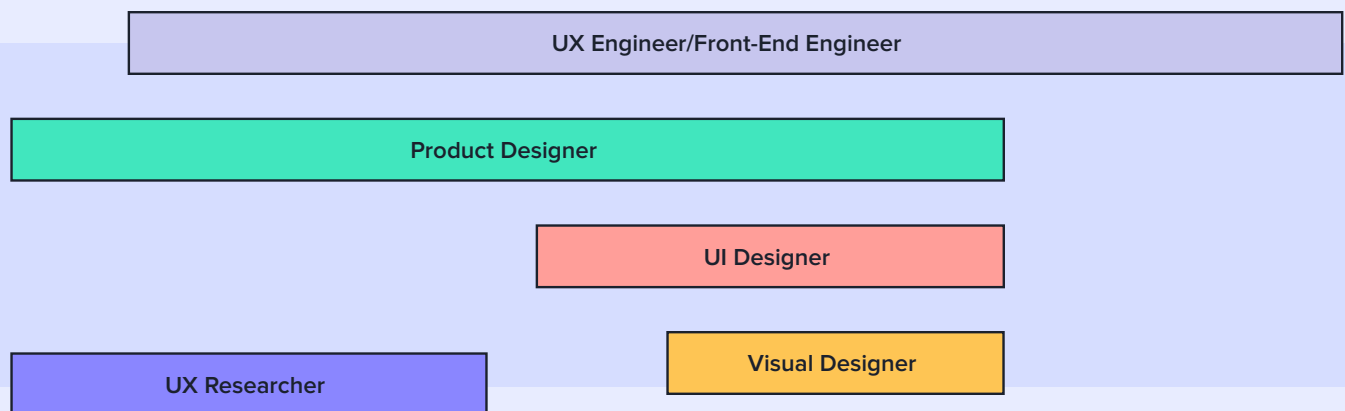
The term "UX design" is intentionally broad: Norman wanted to encompass all aspects of a product's design — from conducting research to building an interface to picking button colors and testing out a prototype. As a UX designer, you may find yourself specializing in just one area (like user research or user interface) or working on all areas of a product's design.

DESIGN**LAB**

What's the difference between UX and UI design?

Because UX design is such a broad term, there's a lot of confusion around navigating all of the **various UX-related job titles** out there. One of the more confusing distinctions is understanding the difference between UX and UI design roles.
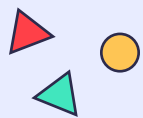
Put simply, UX design refers to the entire user experience of a product: everything from discovery and market research through prototyping and usability testing. UI design — designing the user interface of digital products — is one big, really important aspect of user experience. UI design focuses on how a screen looks to a user: the layout, color, typography and interactions between an interface and its user.

UX Engineer/Front-End Engineer

Product Designer

UI Designer

Visual Designer

UX Researcher

RESEARCH ⟶ **SYNTHESIS & IDEATION** ⟶ **PROTOTYPING & DESIGN** ⟶ **IMPLEMENTATION**

Designers in different roles can find themselves working in different stages of a product's development. Some designers focus on early stages (like research and brainstorming), while others focus on later stages (like visual design and user testing). And some roles cover it all! That's why UX designers are often also called product designers — they work on different stages of a product's design.

DESIGNLAB

Because building an effective and intuitive user interface is so important to a product's UX, some companies – especially larger, established companies with multiple design teams – will hire for dedicated UI design roles. After completing UX Academy, you'll be prepared to apply for general UX, UX/UI, and product design roles.
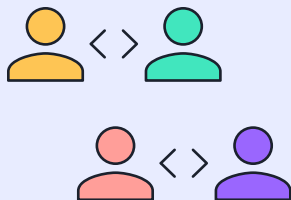
What qualities make a great product designer?

Do you have the qualities of a natural product designer?
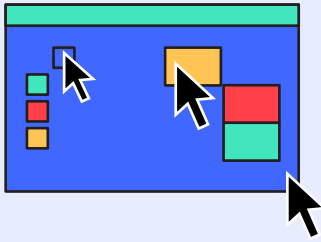
Every designer is different, but you may already have the interpersonal qualities of a designer in training!
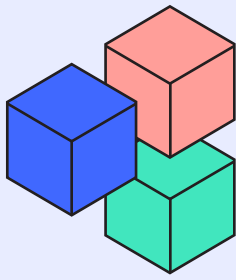
1. You like people

Not all UX designers have to be ultra extroverts, but to be a good designer, you should generally enjoy working with people and empathizing with others. We see students from backgrounds as diverse as fitness trainers to investment bankers, but one thing they all have in common is that they enjoy working with others.
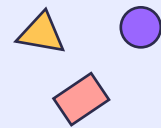
2. You enjoy solving problems

A lot of times, product thinking is really problem solving: designers are all about using design thinking to solve users' problems. If you're a designer in the making, you might love solving a good challenge, whether it's a board game, logic puzzle, or video game.

3. You're a creative thinker

In trying to create the best user experience, designers are always asking why things work and how to make them better. A creative doesn't necessarily have to be an artist, but maybe you find other ways to express yourself through channels like drawing, writing, filmmaking, baking, etc.

What careers transition well into product design?

We've had students come from every professional background you can think of: pharmacists, swimming instructors, teachers, even lawyers! There's no "right" career you need to have before switching into product design. But if you work in these fields, you've set yourself up for an extra-smooth transition:

Sales, Marketing, and Customer Service: Any experience in fields like sales, marketing, and customer support — especially if it involves technology — has given you invaluable insight into how your customers think and act. Now you're ready to get under the hood and influence those product decisions!

Graphic, Print, and Industrial Designers: Designers working in other disciplines probably already have a strong grasp of the fundamental principles of design like color theory, typography and ideation. Product design is an excellent choice for designers currently working in other fields, as it builds off your existing proficiencies, but offers opportunities to develop more analytical (and marketable) skills and exercise more control over a finished project.
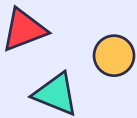
Psychologists and Behavior Analysts: The number one skill you'll need to develop as a product designer is empathy! Think of it as the holy grail of your UX design arsenal. So if your day job involves a lot of talking to others and understanding human behavior and choices, you've already got a working knowledge of how to create products people want.

Professional Communicators (that's you!): Whether you're a bartender, teacher, musician, or retail worker, or anything in between, you've probably had to develop strong communication skills to work with others and succeed at work. The ability to communicate feedback into designs and work with others to bring your designs into reality, is an essential skill of all creative professionals.

DESIGN**LAB**

If you haven't mastered all of these skills yet, don't despair! Rest assured that we'll teach you all of the skills you need to succeed. Designlab's flagship course, UX Academy, has been designed to focus on building up these fundamental skills in the first phase of the program, so that by the time it comes for you to create your own projects, you'll already be a design theory expert!
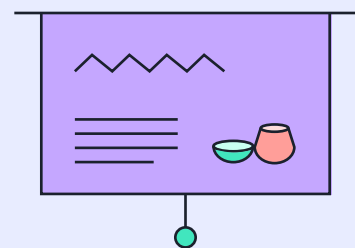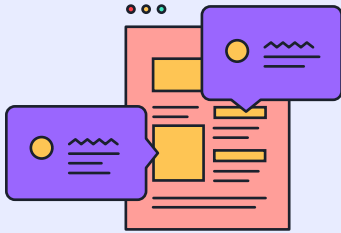
A day in the life of a product designer

Ask any product designer, and they'll probably tell you there is no "typical" day at the office. Each day is a little different, and daily tasks might vary by company, project or timeline. But there are a few core activities that crop up frequently for all UX designers:

1. Research

Think of research as the guiding light of the design thinking process. Before you can begin designing your perfect product, you need to understand who you're designing for and what they want. Conducting effective user research will provide you with a blueprint of what your product should do.

You might conduct calls with prospective users, or send out a survey to get a wide sampling of your users' experiences with similar products. While a lot of research is typically done at the beginning of a project, you'll be continuing to reference your findings throughout the design process to make sure you're staying on the right track.
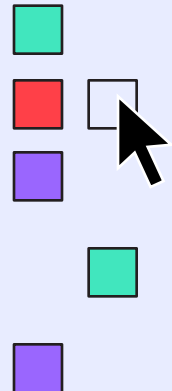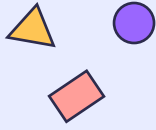
2. Wireframing

Before you begin adding beautiful colors and fun fonts to your design, you have to figure out the structure and layout of what you're designing: things like where the menu should be on your mobile app, and how you'll organize information on a homepage. Designers spend lots of time brainstorming and creating "wireframes", visual representations of an interface without branding, color, or pictures.

3. Designing in Pixels

This might be what you picture when you think of a designer at work: sitting in front of a computer and carefully, meticulously designing an app screen or product landing page. You'll need to become an expert with a design tool (like Photoshop or Sketch) and you'll also need to get comfortable giving and sharing feedback on others' creative work.

Depending on where you end up working (startup, agency, or big enterprise), you'll work with a team of other designers, engineers and product managers to improve your designs and ultimately turn them into living, breathing code.

Where can I work as a product designer?

One of the best things about product design is the amazing amount of opportunities that exist for designers. The different work settings you can find yourself in are almost as varied as the kinds of work you might find yourself doing:

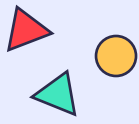**AGENCIES**　　　　**ENTERPRISES**　　　　**LOCATION**

STARTUPS　　　　**FREELANCE**

Agencies: Agencies offer a nice variety of project to work on, so things are always interesting. One day you might find yourself re-designing the mobile ordering app for a popular salad chain, and the next you could be creating a better flow for patients to book doctor's appointments online.
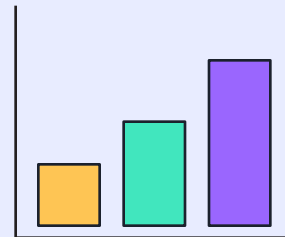
Startups: At a startup, you'll get used to working with engineers and product managers to turn your designs into reality. The work is fast-paced, and you'll have the opportunity to ship products quickly and directly impact your users. You'll learn quickly, and enjoy some sweet office perks along the way.

Enterprises: Big tech companies (like the ones even your parents knows the names of) can offer a lot of mentorship opportunities for young designers. Because these companies often have multiple design teams, it can be great opportunity to focus on what area of UX design you might be particularly passionate about (like interface design or user research).

Freelance: If you dream of being your own boss, you can always become a freelance designer. You can choose projects that are of particularly interest to you, and you can set your own hours, clients, and price. Plus, you can work in your pajamas, or from anywhere on the globe!

Location, Location, Location: Can you still become a designer if you're not in San Francisco or New York? Absolutely! Large urban markets certainly have a lot of design opportunities (cities like Chicago, LA, and Seattle included), but smaller markets are growing rapidly, too: places like Austin, Atlanta, Durham, and Denver are becoming smaller tech hotbeds with lots of open design positions. Keep in mind that where you live will play a part in how long it can take you to find a design job. Large urban markets have a longer average job search, about four to six months, and smaller, emerging markets will be more like two to four months.

Is design a growing and lucrative field?

Growth

The short answer? Yes! As more and more digital products compete for user attention, companies need to provide outstanding experiences to get ahead. And to do that, they need lots of talented UX designers! In the past year alone, big tech companies like Google, Facebook and Amazon have increased designer headcount by 65%.
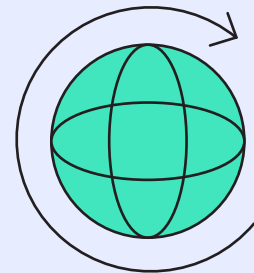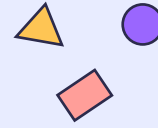
Compensation

Product designers are paid well for their work, too: the average starting salary is around $89,000. Design managers (experienced designers who supervise design teams) rank 19th in Glassdoor's list of the **25 Highest Paying Jobs in America**.
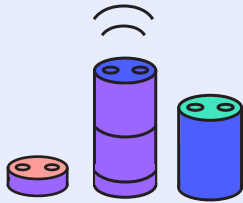
Global Opportunities

You don't necessarily need to be in a tech epicenter like San Francisco or New York to find work. UX sits at the intersection of technology and customer service: two major sectors of every developed economy. As economies around the globe develop, there will be more opportunities for product designers all around the world!

DESIGN**LAB**

Where is product design headed?

As technology continues to play a bigger and bigger role in our society, product design will continue to expand as a field.
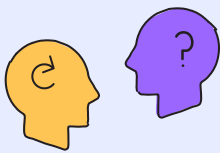
New Mediums

UX design is still mostly rooted in GUI (graphical user interfaces) but VUIs (voice user interfaces) like Alexa and Siri are getting smarter everyday. Product designers will have to think creatively about how to design experiences for non-visual interfaces.

Exciting Innovations

The design opportunities posed by the continued development of AR (augmented reality) and VR (virtual reality) are endless! UX designers will need to figure out how to take full advantage of such immersive technology to deliver new kinds of experiences.

Evolving Conversations

As technology advances, so will conversations around privacy and accessibility. Product designers will have an important role to play in designing products that are trustworthy, intuitive and accessible for their users.

Service Opportunities

Product design has the power to dramatically improve the landscape of historically complicated, bureaucratic systems. As more services digitize, expect more service design opportunities in fields like healthcare, education and civil resources.

Whether or not you see yourself designing apps or robots in five years, a foundational skill set in UX design principles is still essential!

DESIGN**LAB**

More questions? Let's chat!

We understand that switching careers can be a scary, overwhelming prospect. At Designlab, we want to make sure you have all the information you need, and that you feel confident and excited about every decision you make.

If you have any other questions or concerns about UX design and UX Academy, please don't hesitate to **schedule a call** with us so we can help!