

‘Making a Working Portfolio’

based on a text by Sara Eisenman

Audience

What are the first decisions you’ll face when planning your portfolio?

How should you approach those choices?

Depending on your design training, it is possible that you already have formed some ideas or received guidance or advice. Maybe you have seen presentation boxes you like in the art store, or perhaps another student or designer created a portfolio that has influenced you.

One way to begin is to remember that this is just *one portfolio*; you can redesign it next year or next week. Knowing this can make any big project less intimidating. There is NO best way to design your portfolio.

Instead, approach it as a design project where you are the subject.

It’s also important to consider the audience you expect to address.

Do you intend to show your portfolio to corporate decision makers, advertising creative directors, publishers, museums directors, or merchants? Does the presentation need to be distinctive to show off your strengths? No matter how you answer these questions, one of the most important things to recognize is that the container is secondary to the content. It shouldn’t be so fussy or pretentious that it overpowers your work. And what’s in the container should be an assemblage; a grouping of design pieces that composes a cohesive, unified whole.

For recent graduates, design work generally addresses problems they were asked to solve in class, and those samples inevitably reflect the influence of specific teachers. The danger is that an art director may review several portfolios with similar work, making it difficult to distinguish between applicants from the same school. Consider designing extra pieces to help your portfolio stand out. Completing an internship is also a good strategy for producing professional work in a specific area. If your dream is to work in an advertising agency, for example, an internship at a reputable firm IS likely to provide both valuable portfolio material and professional experience.

No matter where you hope to work or for whom you hope to work, remember that reliability, hard work, initiative, and competence can be just as important as talent. Every piece in a portfolio needs to project these qualities, along with design ability or personal style. Very few top designers make their mark within the confines of a nine-to-five schedule. Employees who are willing to put in extra hours, solve problems, take advantage of freelance opportunities, or tackle extra projects are almost always valued.

A designer who shows ambition is extremely attractive to most clients and prospective employers.

Tone

The tone of a portfolio should reflect the kind of work that most interests you. If your goal is to design corporate work for a health organization, an investment firm, or a country club, it is probably appropriate for your portfolio to be elegant and formal. For this sort of client base, you should present your art in a uniform fashion, using simple gray or black mats with beveled edges or similar professional touches. This probably isn't the time to include a developmental sketchbook: rather, it is the perfect opportunity to present a box or case that's sleek and elegant. Many design schools encourage students to use foam core boards trimmed to hold their work snugly in place, or to lay ribbons under the work, allowing the viewer to pull the pieces out without damaging the foam core. This system helps to unify design projects with many different dimensions and serves to make the box more cohesive. This style of presentation appeals to many, but not all, art directors. It will likely appeal more to non designers, such as corporate executives, hotel or restaurant managers, or merchants who look to designers for organization and sleek packaging.

When the goal is to get work designing for younger or non corporate audiences – perhaps CD jewel cases for a hip-hop label, book jackets, or zines – a sketchbook, along with an informal or daring presentation, is a good idea. The portfolio can be eclectic and informal, using unexpected materials and colors. Instead of aiming for a uniform look with matching mats or beveled edges, you can change the mat colors as well as the dimensions of the pieces; your case can be a purchased metal case, a handmade container, or even a vintage suitcase. You can take a unique approach to different pieces: for example, you might have a notebook with a collection of found objects, a smaller portfolio within the larger one, or a flip book of photographs. Even though this portfolio might be informal, it's important that it be neat and in good order. There can never be poorly trimmed edges on boards or sloppy assembly; **craftsmanship and attention to detail are important in every aspect of design.**

Range

Once you have determined the tone of your portfolio, **be sure to show a wide range of design work.** Many art directors and employers do not respond well to a portfolio unless it indicates how a designer would approach the art director or employer's area of design. For example, if a portfolio features mostly illustrated posters but no samples of text design, charts, tables, or photographs, the designer is not likely to be hired to design annual reports. There is, however, some overlap between disciplines. You don't need to have one of every item in the design lexicon. Many art directors can imagine a CD designer creating a book jacket, or a book designer creating a brochure, or an annual report designer creating a corporate identity with stationery. But it is wise for designers to produce portfolios with a wide range of design materials-more is better as long as the designer feels confident about each piece. A good range of materials might include Identity work with a letterhead and logo, a poster, product design, publication design, postage stamps, a web site, and even a screensaver or a CD case. Try to include roughly twelve samples of work. Within those twelve, according to Geoffry Fried at Lesley University's Art Institute of Boston, you can group some items together, such as a set of three posters or a book series mounted together as one piece. He believes that occasional groupings of work make a great addition to a portfolio. Many schools will guide students to produce a wide variety of finished pieces as class projects for this exact reason. That being said, it's important not to pad your portfolio with repetitive, unfinished, or redundant designs.

Portfolios in book format

Instead of preparing traditional loose-leaf portfolios, many designers now produce bound single edition books, attempting to unify a body of design work and experience into a cohesive whole. They arrange materials thematically or link them in a biographical manner, explaining different class projects, typographic exercises, goals, and aspirations somewhat like chapters in a book. While the traditional design portfolio sends the message that a designer IS a workhorse ready to take on the next assignment, the book approach can seem extremely impressive and sophisticated. The designer presents himself or herself as a master of his or her own work and creations. In other words, book presentations tend to make designers seem more like artists and less like standard problem solvers looking to join a design staff.

Margaret Morton, a professor at Cooper Union in New York City, teaches a very demanding course titled Art of the Book. Students who take the class are committed to making personal books when they enroll. By the time they complete the course, they have gained experience in both traditional and experimental book design and binding methods. Many of these students participate in a junior-year foreign exchange program that requires them to submit a portfolio as part of the application. Morton encourages them to send a book instead of slides, as slides aren't always the best medium to show graphic design, especially if they aren't projected. She points out that the book format IS practical and keeps the portfolio fluid; with the availability of personal computers and high-end printers, making a limited edition book portfolio is now feasible where it might not have been twenty years ago. Morton says her design mentors always stressed the idea of analyzing design shifts and trends within the broader context of technological advancements.

Morton's students aren't the only young designers creating books. Louise Sandhaus at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), in Valencia, California, requires her graduate students to make a book that both documents and reflects their studies. Although these are specific class projects and are not intended as portfolios, they often become substitutes for portfolios because they can be produced in multiple editions, mailed, and even left with the recipient. Geoffry Fried of the Art Institute of Boston points out that a well-done book of this type can be a home run, because it is so well written, designed, and produced that it takes the place of the more traditional grouping of school assignments. Noted designer Ellen Lupton and her students at the Maryland Institute College of Art have also put together - a book about design for publication. Lupton's students used their design samples as content and collaborated with her on the text. This project makes both a unique presentation within a portfolio and an impressive give-away portfolio when necessary.

There are some drawbacks, however. Book portfolios, like web sites, show your work as a group of reproductions, and as such they're a step away from the original design. The viewer cannot see the original size or experience the tactile qualities of the original materials, including three-dimensional features such as foldouts, pop-ups, or variations in paper stock. Many art directors even feel a sentimental attraction to slightly unpolished art school design projects, which can be particularly attractive in the sterile one-dimensional world of computers.

Showing process

Many design directors like to see thumbnails, rough sketches, or text pages that reveal the path taken to the final design solution. Thumbnails are a good way to gain insight into a designer's methodology; the images allow a designer to explain the problem that was presented, restrictions that were imposed, or any specifications from the teacher or client. A creative director with design training is likely to respond favorably to thumbnails and developmental sketches.

That being said, explanations and thumbnails are more appropriate for some interviews than others. A restaurant owner hiring a design firm to design menus, signs, and a logo may be less interested in the thought process behind the problem than the solution itself. The restaurant owner is probably more interested in seeing samples of successful design work created for popular and profitable restaurants. A creative director, on the other hand, wants to know how a designer thinks and arrives at solutions. One way to offer something for both types of clients is to use foldouts or flaps that reveal developmental sketches. This way the viewer can opt to investigate thumbnails and descriptive copy or ignore them.

Another approach, used successfully by the design firm Modern Dog in Seattle, is to include some developmental variations and alternatives for a few select pieces at the beginning of the portfolio. Modern Dog includes a limited-edition matchbook style book of logos with a flowered paper cover as part of a larger group of design products. The piece opens with several introductory paragraphs that discuss the complexity of professional logo design in a world where everyone wants to be a designer. Next come two samples of logos, showing developmental work and explanatory text along with the finished logos. These examples are extremely helpful in understanding the firm's design ethos and problem solving methodology. Finally, the reader encounters a series of finished logos covering a wide array of subjects, from soap and software to the state lottery.

Create flexible content

A third and highly effective method for presenting both work and process is to tuck a separate sketchbook into the back of your presentation box or portfolio, which you can remove and show upon request. Portfolios are best when you can adjust and rearrange content. The ability to add or delete pieces is crucial to making your book appropriate for any particular interview. Having a separate process book offers the best of both worlds; it's available if you need it and hidden if you don't.

Robin Lynch, a design professor at the State University of New York at Purchase, believes that designers should always show process in their portfolios, regardless of the potential employer's design training. She advises her students to carry a sketch or process book with them at all times so they can enlighten and engage prospective employers by showing the thought process that led to a good design solution. Melle Hammer, cofounder of the working symposium Design Inquiry in Portland, Maine, agrees. He thinks that looking at a design piece without some understanding of how formal decisions were made is meaningless during a review of a designer's work.

Ultimately, it is essential to keep a presentation flexible during an interview. It IS up to you to subtly control an interview whenever possible, adjusting the order and depth of the presentation intuitively to match the interest of the client or art director. You must remain aware of what a prospective employer is looking for and rearrange the content on the spot if necessary. If a client is responding well to sketches, continue to show them. When the viewer begins to look bored, move on.