

FAQs

1: Gaining work experience

Q: I want to get a job as a graphic designer but everywhere I go they say they want people with experience. I'm just out of university. How can I get experience if nobody will give me any work?

A: This is, unfortunately, a common problem. However, a useful substitute for work experience is an industry-recognized qualification such as Adobe ACA (Adobe Certified Associate) certification. This is aimed at school- and college-leavers who need to be able to demonstrate a recognized level of competence when job seeking. While the certification is currently only available in Photoshop, Flash and Dreamweaver, it will soon include InDesign and more. For more information on how to get certified see my website – www.markgatter.co.uk.

Additionally, being able to show some good work is essential. You must have a portfolio. If you don't, then try creating some book covers, page layouts, posters, etc. just as if they were real, paying projects, and use those. If you can put your work online so much the better – you then won't have to carry a heavy portfolio around with you, watching your samples get battered and dog-eared from repeated handling. Websites such as Flickr let you put images of all your work online for free. If you have a current Yahoo ID, you can create a Flickr account in just a couple of minutes. Alternatively, if you know how, you could get a domain name and create your own website.

If you're not sure how to go about creating your own website, take a look at <http://www.gbbo.co.uk/> ('Getting British Business Online'), a combined effort involving Google, BT, e-skills UK and Enterprise UK. Here you can select a '.co.uk' name for your domain which is free for the first two years, after which it only costs a few pounds to renew. They also offer free customizable website templates which you can update at any time, and a business email. Other sites offering free templates include <http://freesitetemplates.com/> and <http://www.moonfruit.com/>.

You could also try offering to work for free initially, just to prove that you have the qualifications to do the job. The agency/studio then has nothing to lose and it's an offer they'll probably have trouble turning down. If you turn in some good work, on time, they may start considering you more seriously.

2: Charging for work

Q: I'm just starting out as a freelance graphic designer. How much should I charge?

A: Every graphic designer begins their career with the same question – I did too. Quite by chance I found the information I needed in a type manual at the office of a local 'vanity press' publisher in California.

The publisher had created a 'type manual' so that clients could choose the text appearance for their own book from the different fonts, sizes and leadings included in it. As the basis for the whole thing they used an essay by Mark Twain – his reply to someone who had sent him a manuscript asking for his opinion on their writing skills.

In his response, Mark Twain said that his opinion didn't matter. If, for example, he praised it to the skies then he might be inflicting an idiot on the world. On the other hand, if he said it was awful he might be denying the world the next Shakespeare. What did matter, he said, was what other people said about it. 'Hang your sign out and offer to work for free', he advised, 'and if you find that you soon have more work than you can handle, put your prices up.'

This all made great sense to me, and I took it to heart as excellent advice. So, during the next six months I went from charging \$15/hr to charging \$100/hr. At that point I had as much work as I wanted, combined with enough free time to keep my sanity, and so I stopped there – for a while. As more time went by, I became faster and so completed the work in less time – so I had to put my prices up again!

However, I suspect that if I'd started with a fee of \$100/hr I probably would never have got a job. So start with low-ish fees – I know this sounds vague but you have to be comfortable with the number you come up with, so it's something that you have to decide – and then gradually increase them until you're getting what you think you deserve.

3: Fixing contrast in an image

Q: How can I fix low contrast in an image? Should I use 'brightness and contrast' in Photoshop?

A: Probably not. This used to be quite destructive, and while it's much improved I still recommend the use of a combination of the Levels and Curves windows instead. In the 'input levels' area of the Levels window, pull the white and black sliders in so that they just touch the 'pixel pile' histogram to produce a tone range that runs all the way from white to black without causing burned out pixels at either end. Then follow the advice given on pages 56–57 (Chapter 4: Calibrating a Greyscale Image) regarding the use of the Curves window to improve contrast. Finally, you should calibrate the shadow and highlight percentages as shown on pages 48–55 (Chapter 4: Calibrating a Greyscale Image).

4: Preparing images for the printer

Q: If I'm sending my work to a commercial printer, should I convert my images to CMYK right at the start?

A: It sounds logical, but in fact I stay in RGB as long as possible. The conversion to CMYK is usually one of the last operations I perform on an image. The reason for this is that ALL the Photoshop tools work in RGB mode, whereas some operations can't be performed on CMYK images.

5: Responsibility for printing

Q: I've just finished the design and production on a freelance job and my client has asked me to see it through the printing process. He says he isn't qualified to do it but he really wants someone other than the printer overseeing the work. The problem is I don't think I'm sufficiently qualified either. What should I do?

A: This is tricky. While it's tempting to agree – assuming that the client will be paying for your time – the financial liability is the real issue here.

Is your client suggesting that you pay the printer and then he pays you? If so, you'll be assuming total responsibility for the costs and if something goes wrong you'll be stuck with a large bill. Remember that if a mistake is caught during production, it's quick and cheap to fix – basically all you have to do is open the programme, make the change and then save it again. Let's say the cost is £5. But if the same

mistake isn't caught until the printer is making the plates, it's going to cost £50 to fix. And if it isn't caught until it's on the press, the cost will be £500. The trouble is that all these costs could actually be substantially higher. Don't carry the liability for printing if you don't feel confident about the result. Financially it could be a disaster and involve a lot of stress.

A reasonable alternative is to suggest to your client that while you are happy to oversee the work you feel uncomfortable in accepting financial responsibility for the cost of the print run and would prefer to agree to a separate fee. The client can then pay the printer for the printing, and you for the overseeing. It is a good idea to get this agreement in writing, making it clear that you don't have financial responsibility for the print run in the event that the client ends up being dissatisfied.

However, once you DO feel confident to take responsibility for the print run, it's not only a great addition to your services as a graphic designer, but can also prove financially lucrative. For example, let's say you have charged £1000 to design and produce the job and that your client plans on having 50,000 copies printed at a cost of 20p each – a £10,000 print run. If you are taking financial responsibility for seeing it through the presses – meaning that you pay the printer and then the client pays you – you can reasonably expect to add between 10 to 20% of the printing costs for your additional responsibilities. You would end up, in this example, with an additional £1000 to £2000.

6: Successful colour printing

Q: How can I make sure that the colours I see on screen will be the colours that print?

A: This is the big question. Successful colour printing depends on two main factors:

1. The first is whether your monitor is accurately calibrated. If not, using a 'Spyder3' display calibration device will help enormously (see page 45, Chapter 3: Understanding Colour). They're not only good, they're amazingly cheap. For more information see: <http://www.datacolor.eu/en/products/display-calibration/index.html>
2. The second is whether you have the correct colour management settings in place for ALL the components of the job (see pages 72–75, Chapter 6: Calibrating Colour Images). This ensures that all the objects created in Photoshop and Illustrator, as well as in the entire InDesign document, share the same settings, and that these carry through to the final PDF.

If you can answer 'yes' to both these questions you have a very good chance of seeing excellent colour consistency between the screen image and the final print. There is always the possibility of human error upsetting things, but generally these are the two most important factors involved.

Don't forget to get a couple of copies of the job run at a good digital print shop – one copy for you, and the other to send to the printer along with the actual file as a 'proof copy' for the work they're going to do. Good digital printers can emulate the colour settings you have in place in the file, which means the proof copies should be very close to how the job will look coming off the press.

7: Using PDF/X-1 in InDesign

Q: I'm using the PDF/X-1a preset in InDesign to create high resolution files for the printer. When I look at the PDF on-screen I can see several very thin white lines here and there. Is this safe?

A: Oddly enough, yes it is. These are 'artifacts' that appear on-screen but never print. However, even if this is known to be true they still fill most graphic designers with dread. The only way to put it to the test is to go ahead and send the file to the printer – but ask to see a proof before they print it so that you can set your mind at rest.

8: Using 'bookmarks'/hyperlinks in InDesign

Q: I want to output an InDesign document so that the table of contents (TOC) at the start acts as links to the appropriate page in a PDF output for web. How can I do this?

A: If the TOC was generated using the TOC controls in InDesign (they're under the Layout menu) you can choose to create 'bookmarks' as part of that process. Then, each one will act as a hyperlink to that page. If you're going to do this, it's also a good idea to add an actual hyperlink on each page so that the reader can quickly and easily return to the TOC. Fortunately you can just add one link which points at the TOC to the Master page rather than having to add one to each page individually. Then when you make the PDF be sure to choose the interactive options so that your bookmarks, hyperlinks, etc. are included. In CS5 you can export a PDF containing bookmarks, hyperlinks and buttons using the 'smallest file size' PDF preset, or as an 'interactive PDF' export. Additionally, you can export an InDesign file in Flash '.swf' format.

9: Creating thumbnail images for use on a website

Q: I have a folder full of images that I want to use as thumbnails on a website. Is there any way I can automatically resize them all to, say, the same height? I've tried creating an action using the Image Size window but the results are distorted.

A: The good news is yes, you can. It's a little-known feature that you'll find if you click on the file menu and choose 'scripts > image processor'. However, the first thing you should do is separate your images so that all those with a landscape format are in one folder, and all the portrait format images are in another. Then, in the Image Processor window do the following:

- In section 1 at the top click on the 'select folder' button and choose the folder in which you've put the landscape format images.
- In section 2 leave the 'save in same location' selected. This will create a new folder inside the original in which all the processed images will be placed.
- In section 3 choose the file type you want for the saved results to be saved in. If you're saving them for online use you'll want to choose 'save as JPEG', but use a quality setting of 10. You can always optimize the filesize down later, but you can't improve the quality.
- Make sure the 'resize to fit' box is checked, and enter the width you want to resize to. But then, and this is the critical part, enter a height that is greater than the width.
- This script resizes images proportionally. In other words, as soon as either the width or the height fills the measurement you enter, the process stops. As these are landscape pictures they'll fill the width before they can fill the height, so they'll all be saved at the width you want.
- Then click 'run' and the process will deal with all the images in the folder while you go and do something else.
- Once that's complete, repeat the process for the portrait format images – but in this case you enter the height you wish to resize them to and then a width that exceeds it.

10: Page transitions in Adobe Acrobat

Q: I want to put page transitions on a PDF produced from an InDesign document but when it opens in Adobe Acrobat they don't seem to work. What am I doing wrong?

A: So long as you've successfully added the page transition you want to ALL the spreads or individual pages (a small icon appears next to all the pages in the Pages window if you did this), AND that you choose the interactive options when you make the PDF, you still need to give the result the entire screen. To do this in Acrobat, hold down the 'command/control' button and press the letter L. Then you can use the left and right arrow keys to navigate from page to page. Choosing 'command/control + L' again will return you to the 'normal' Acrobat screen appearance.