

Building a Portfolio

A 01 Scouting potential employers

B Application

02: Resume

03: Cover letter + Samples

04: Research + Portfolio

C Prepping for the interview

05: Practice + Communication

D Arriving to the interview

06: General information

07: Talking points + Interview questions

08: Portfolio presentation

09: Q & A

Presumably, you will be searching for an internship or permanent job this summer, and no time is better to start, than now. You may be bound by location, in regards to your, “dream gig” but you can still be selective, and find an internship/job that fits your goals. Where do you start your search?:

- Aquent
- AIGA
- Behance
- LinkedIn
- Freelance
- Go directly to company site’s that you admire, which may have jobs posted
- Cold call small businesses, acquaintances that may need design service
- Market yourself as a freelancer!

Start the process of finding an internship/job early. Don’t be discouraged by the job market, based on the descriptions listed. Even if you feel you are not qualified, or even over-qualified you should still apply. You are young, and many skills can learned on-site. It is okay to say you are not highly experienced, but you are willing to take the time to learn on-site. Where you lack in some skills, you may accel in other areas that could prove to be beneficial for the company!

If they do not hire you, they may direct you to someone else they know looking for your specific skillset. And, in some instances, they may not hire you as the full-time designer, but hire you on a project-by-project need. This could potentially launch you into the freelance world.

Before submitting your materials to an future employer, it may be a good idea to contact the point person at the company and ask if there is a preferred method of sending resume/samples. Find out if they prefer hard copies or electronic copies of your materials. Keep in mind the person you may be communicating with may not know any thing about the position, rather he/she may be the HR person in charge of organizing the process of selecting candidates. Be patient, as they may have to ask someone, and get back to you at a different time. So, ask questions early on so they are answered before applications are due.

When there is a deadline: Don’t think if you are the first person to submit your application, that it will make you ahead of the curve. Take your time on your application and have others review it before you send it out. Read for spelling errors, make sure your PDF works on multiple computers, etc...

Serina Sulentic

Visiting Professor, Graphic Design

School of Art and Art History

February 27, 2014

340 ABW | 7 pm

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On an average, a potential employer will skim your application and make a decision on average 30 seconds to 2 minutes. Your resume and cover letter is an extension of you. It is a representation of you when you are not there physically in person, so make sure it makes a strong and lasting impact with your future employer. It is the first entrypoint to getting your foot in the door.

- An elevator ride is 30 seconds from top to bottom. If you were given the opportunity to give your, “elevator pitch” to a future employer, what would you say about yourself? What would you say to convince them to hire you?

What should be included in a resume?

- Name/contact information/link to your personal web site
- Anticipated degree + graduation date
- Objective: optional
- Education (it is not necessary to list your high school)
- Work experience
- Honors/Scholarships/Major achievements
- Proficiency in software

General information:

- Typeset your resume and cover letter well.
- Make sure your resume and cover letter are cohesive - writing style and design aesthetics.
- Think of it as another piece to your portfolio.
- Create a sense of hierarchy with your information - most recent and important information first.
- Be sure it will photocopy and fax well – use image and color with caution.

Careful listing social media sites + other portfolio sites:

- Facebook: unless you know your link is clean of anything that could potentially harm your chances of landing the job. I would highly recommend not listing this. Be warned employers can and will do a general search for you on the internet, so be careful on what you post on any social media/blog forums. If you can remove questionable content/photos, please do so. If you can make them private, please do so. You are a representative of the company, and they do not want their image to be negative, based on their employees.
- Behance, Aquent, etc...: if the viewer is on the site, he/she may wander to other portfolios...so, list with caution because you may steer them away from.
- LinkedIn: is okay, especially if people endorse you in a positive and impactful way.

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Use this opportunity to brag about yourself (yes, this can be difficult to do!). Write the letter as if it is a conversation you are having. This is not the time to list your work experience, education and skillset - they will have a copy of your resume! But, if your past work experiences, education and skillset experiences make you more qualified, then explain how the past experiences will benefit your future employer. Consider the information above, plus:

- Introduce yourself
- Mention how you found out about the opening
- Why are you interested in the position?
- What do you have to offer to the creative team? (skills, enthusiasm, ambitious, driven, efficient, work well under pressure, fast learner, etc...)
- Include contact information

Some agencies or companies will ask to see a sampling of your work, along with your cover letter and resume. I would recommend not showing ALL your work at this point, or else you will not have anything new to show when you arrive to your potential interview. Please know that your portfolio is a, "living" document - meaning, it will constantly be changing based on new projects and targeted audience. There is no such thing as a, "one size fits all" when it comes to application materials (resume, cover and samples).

- Submit 6-10 pieces. Better to give less, that are strong pieces, rather than a large amount of mediocre pieces.
- Mix freelance/past design work with student work (if applicable).
- Re-work student work if it could strengthen your portfolio.
- Make sure you tailor your portfolio to appeal to your potential employers (if the project is solely a package design job - show more dimensional pieces, possibly include some sculptural/metalsmithing projects to show you can problem solve in dimensions).
- Include screenshots of the web site (if applicable), in case employers are looking at printouts of your PDF during the vetting and/or interview process. The less work it takes for the employers to find out about you/work, the better.
- Use web site links with caution, as layouts may not look like your original concepts after time goes by.
- If you have package design pieces, take high quality photos (multiple angle shots) as a page in your portfolio.
- Create a thumbnail sheet for yourself: review it before your interview. Have the fonts, project objective, short bits of information listed.
- Properly label the samples: project name, year completed, your role, etc...
- Use Flash-based sites with caution, as it does not work well across all electronic devices. If you use Flash, inquire to make sure they can support it on-site.
- Provide contact information either at the beginning or end of the PDF or hard copy.

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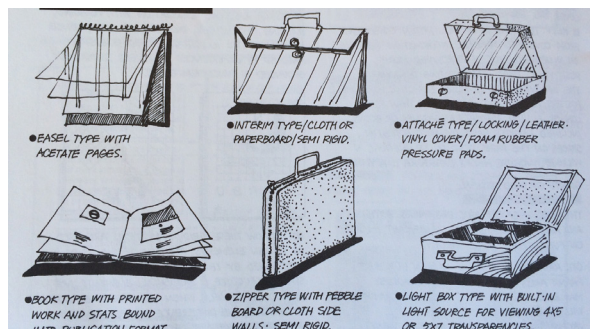
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Congrats on landing a person to person interview! Now you need to prepare for your interview. Consider doing research on the company, and even their competitors to understand their positioning in the marketplace:

- Demonstrate an understanding of customer/consumer needs/target audience
- Where are their weaknesses and strengths?
- Who are their major competitors?
- Are they a Cooperative, B-Corp, LEED certified, Non-GMO certified, etc... type of company? What does that mean?
- What trends are they following?
- Is their brand strong, or weak?
- What is your impression of the company?
- Could they do a better job marketing themselves to the public?

Portfolio presentation shows how much you care about your work and how serious you are about landing the job. Put your portfolio together a few days before your interview to ensure you are not rushing the process. Consider how you are going to present it.

- Common board size: 16"x20" - make sure your boards look clean (not full of spray adhesive, rough cut edges, etc...).
- Stick with blacks and/or grey matboard/foamcore for boards.
- Use some type of a case for your boards, so corners do not get damaged, or worse, get wet in case it is raining!
- If you use a binder, make sure pieces stay centered (glue to the backing paper), so it is not distracting to look at if they are angled in the binder.
- If you are bringing actual projects, secure well to boards or make sure they do not get damaged in transit.
- Make duplicates of your work, in case one set gets damaged before your interview.
- If you want to leave some, "leave-behinds" behind, but want them back, bring a pre-paid envelope/box with your address on it.
- Create multiple sets of your portfolio, in case one gets damaged and/or you are applying for multiple jobs at once!
- Use a unique case, or some type of acid-free/archival quality box to store your materials (Notes on Graphic Design and Visual Communication, Gregg Berryman.



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Use your roomies, peers or family to practice going through your portfolio. You should spend less than a minute explaining each project. Your interviewers will stop you and ask for clarification when needed. During your practice, even have your friends ask you the questions listed on page 6. Many of those questions are your typical questions asked, so it is good to have an answer!

A few days before the interview, you should communicate with the HR person, or whoever is in charge of setting up your interview. Inquire about:

- Parking: do they have reserved spots for visitors, or do you need to find the nearest parking garage? Do you need to bring your parking ticket in, and they will reimburse you?
- Find out the expected dress code. Don't buy that expensive suit if they expect you to be in casual clothing (there is the, "dress to impress" theory, but you also want to make sure you look like you could fit in with your future colleagues)
- Are they expecting a hard copy or electronic version of your portfolio? If you submitted a PDF earlier, you can keep the same format, but add a couple more projects to give a more well-rounded portfolio).

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At this point, you should have portfolio, extra copies of your resume, and you are ready to wow them at your interview. Consider wardrobe and other details before departing on the journey:

- Avoid low-cut shirts, overly-tight skirts/dresses. When in question, don't wear it. Make sure you can sit comfortably if you are wearing a dress/skirt/trousers, etc... You will look skirmish and nervous-looking if you are not comfortable in your clothes. Practice wearing the outfit, standing and sitting for an hour just to make sure you are not feeling uncomfortable.
- Don't wear extremely tall shoes. You are going to be nervous already – don't add to anxiety by wearing shoes that could make you fall over while you reach over to shake hands.
- If you are traveling, bringing extra set of clothes in case something happens while you are driving (spill ketchup on your interview shirt). If you are flying, gently fold/roll up a back-up shirt/sweater in your carry-on.
- Change at a nearby gas station or the bathroom on site of the interview, whatever it takes.
- Leave with plenty of time, in case you get lost, cannot find parking, need to change at a gas station, etc...
- Make sure you have tons of quarters in case you can only find metered parking. Inquire with HR as to where to park. They may have reserved spots in a ramp or special parking lot for visitors. Connect with HR and even ask them the dress attire, and the length of the interview.
- Don't chew gum in your interview.
- Eat a healthy meal and sleep well the night before.
- Go over your portfolio and refresh your memory about what you know about the company the night before the interview.
- If you are presenting your portfolio online, bring a backup USB drive or have an alternative method to showing your work in case plan A does not work. Use Dropbox, an extra USB, burned CD, email it yourself, etc...)

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Another component to the process of interviewing is how well you can sell yourself. Start thinking about your work styles, work ethics, sources of inspiration, etc.. These are topics that often come up in interviews - use these as talking points, as they may also be questions they will ask you:

- How do you take initiative to lead a project or discussion?
- Do you actively seek out data/research to understand your core audience?
- Do you seek clarification when you need more guidance?
- How do you communicate with others in your team to ensure everyone is on point with the messaging?
- Do you regularly help team members assess the strategy to ensure seamless transition from one phase to another?
- Do you articulate well to others in order to get your message across?
- Can you demonstrate the ability to take on leadership roles to achieve the company goals?
- Do you make every effort to provide the right resources for others in your group, so they can also be successful in their projects?
- How well do you work under pressure?
- How would you handle a situation when you found out an error was printed because of an oversight on your behalf?
- Do you work better by yourself or in a team environment?
- How would you react if a colleague took all the credit for a concept you worked on and talked with him/her before presenting to a large group?
- How do you like to communicate with others?
- Do you prefer to be micro-managed, or mostly work independently?
- How do you stay organized?
- Why do you want to work for us?
- Where/who do you look for inspiration?
- When can you start to work, if we were to offer you a position by end of day?
- What are your salary/benefit requirements?

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I like to lead the 2nd strongest piece, strongest at the end, and fillers in between. However you decide, make sure you create a nice flow from one project to another.

- If I could make this a requirement, I would make you include at least one well typeset piece in there, integrating type and image.
- Group, “like” items together. If you are into logos, either put on one page or put them back-to-back in a sequential manner.
- Cater this portfolio to fit the job description you are applying for. Example: if the job description is heavy in package design projects, show more examples with forms and working in dimensions. If you are going to work for a publisher, show more typeset projects or the ability to work in layouts with type + image.
- Omit projects you cannot talk highly about.
- Be consistent in presentation from page 1 to 2, all the way to the last page (whether it is a page layout in a PDF, or how your boards are mounted).
- Even if they ask for a PDF portfolio, you should still bring in hard copies, if applicable. Interviewees like to hold projects and look at them how they should be viewed.
- Consider bringing a process book, to show them your thought process. Either scan it in and make it look like a nice booklet or bring an actual binder (remove your grading sheet or any thing not needed for the interview!).

Talking points for when you discuss each piece:

- Be honest – what role did you have in the project?
- What did you learn from the project?
- What were the processes behind it?
- Did you take the photographs, and/or create the artwork?
- What was the concept behind it, and why did you make the design decisions that you made?
- Indicate if it is student work or not. It is expected to have student work in your portfolio, but please indicate whether or not is a student work or professional.
- If you feel strongly about one of your projects, consider making an extra as a leave-behind (know that you may not get it back).

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Even though they are interviewing you, you will also be given the opportunity to ask questions. You are interviewing them, just as much as they are interviewing you! Write down your questions and bring them with you. It is okay to show up with a list of questions - it shows you have done your research, and there are some gaps you want filled in, or you just want clarification on the job description.

- What is the typically day-to-day operations?
- What will my role be?
- Who would I report to?
- What is the general attitude around here?
- Am I expected to work over 40 hours?
- Am I expected to check my email and work on projects after I leave the office?
- Are there professional development opportunities?
- Is there a reward/recognition program for meeting professional goals?
- Is travel expected of me?
- Are raises based on annual adjusted cost of living percentages and/or annual performance evaluations?
- What opportunities lie ahead for advancement within the company?

To be honest - even the interviewers get nervous, too! They want to make sure you are comfortable, so you can perform your best and answer the questions with accuracy and thought behind them. As well, they know you are, “interviewing” them just as much as you are being interviewed by them.