Graphic Design Skills: Core Skills and Practice

- By the end, you can build, explain, and defend design decisions
- Skill map: visual fundamentals, tool fluency, conceptual thinking, workflow
- 2026 hiring signals: Figma, Photoshop, Illustrator most named; typography close behind
- Recruiters hire for thinking — the "why" separates juniors more than polish
- Self-assess now: name your strengths, gaps, and one thing to practice



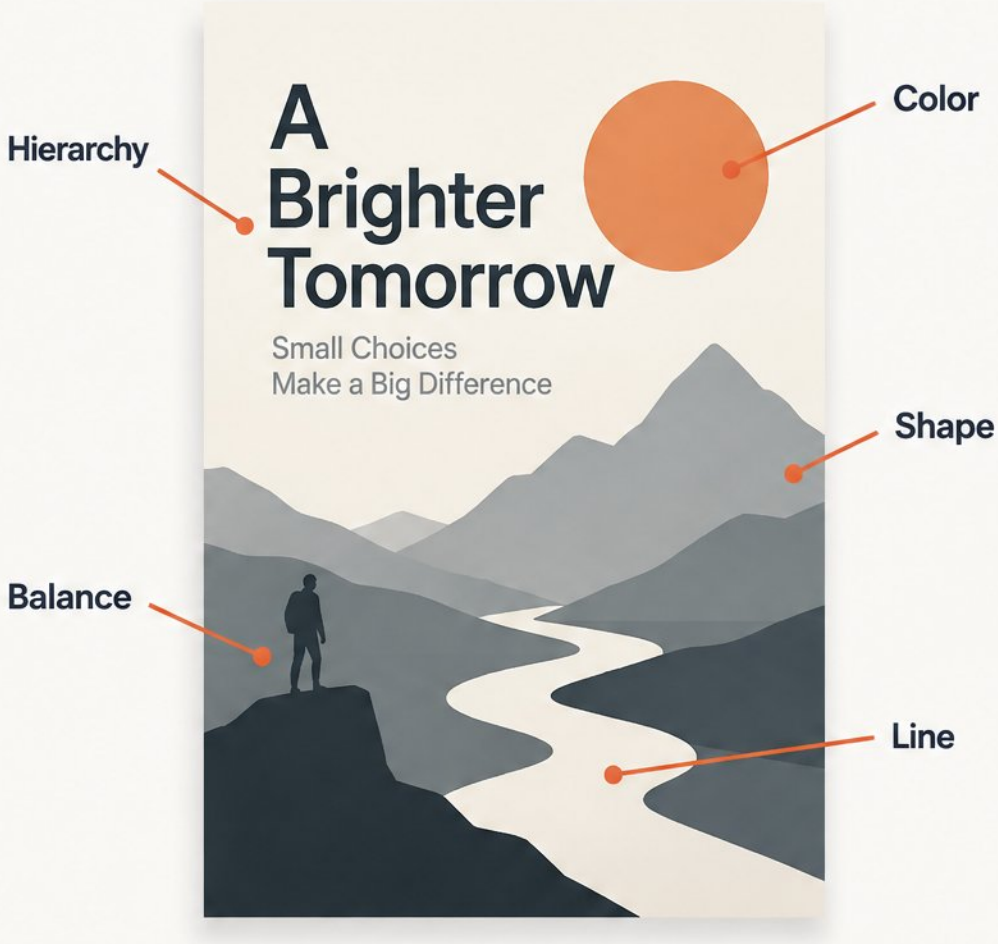
What Junior Designers Actually Do

- Lay out content, set type sizes and styles, prep print files, revise from feedback
- Core competencies: typography, color theory, composition, print and digital production, concept development
- Soft skills decide hiring: clear communication, feedback openness, time management, attention to detail
- Attitude and curiosity often outperform raw talent in early-career hiring
- Every session gives you a practice artifact to show that thinking



Visual Fundamentals: Elements and Principles

- **Elements** are building blocks:
  line, shape, form, color, value, space, texture
- **Principles** are decisions:
  balance, contrast, hierarchy, alignment, proximity, repetition, rhythm, unity
- **Hierarchy** tells the viewer what to read first
- **Visual weight:** a small dark element can balance a large light one
- **Mini-exercise:** find three principles in a poster or app screen and explain their effect



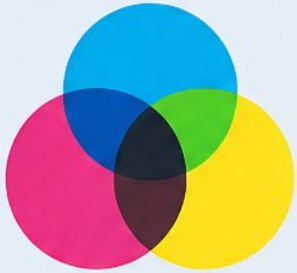
Color Systems and Accessibility Contrast

RGB



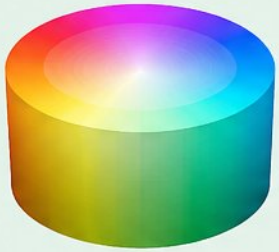
For screens

CMYK



For print

HSL



For intuitive adjustment

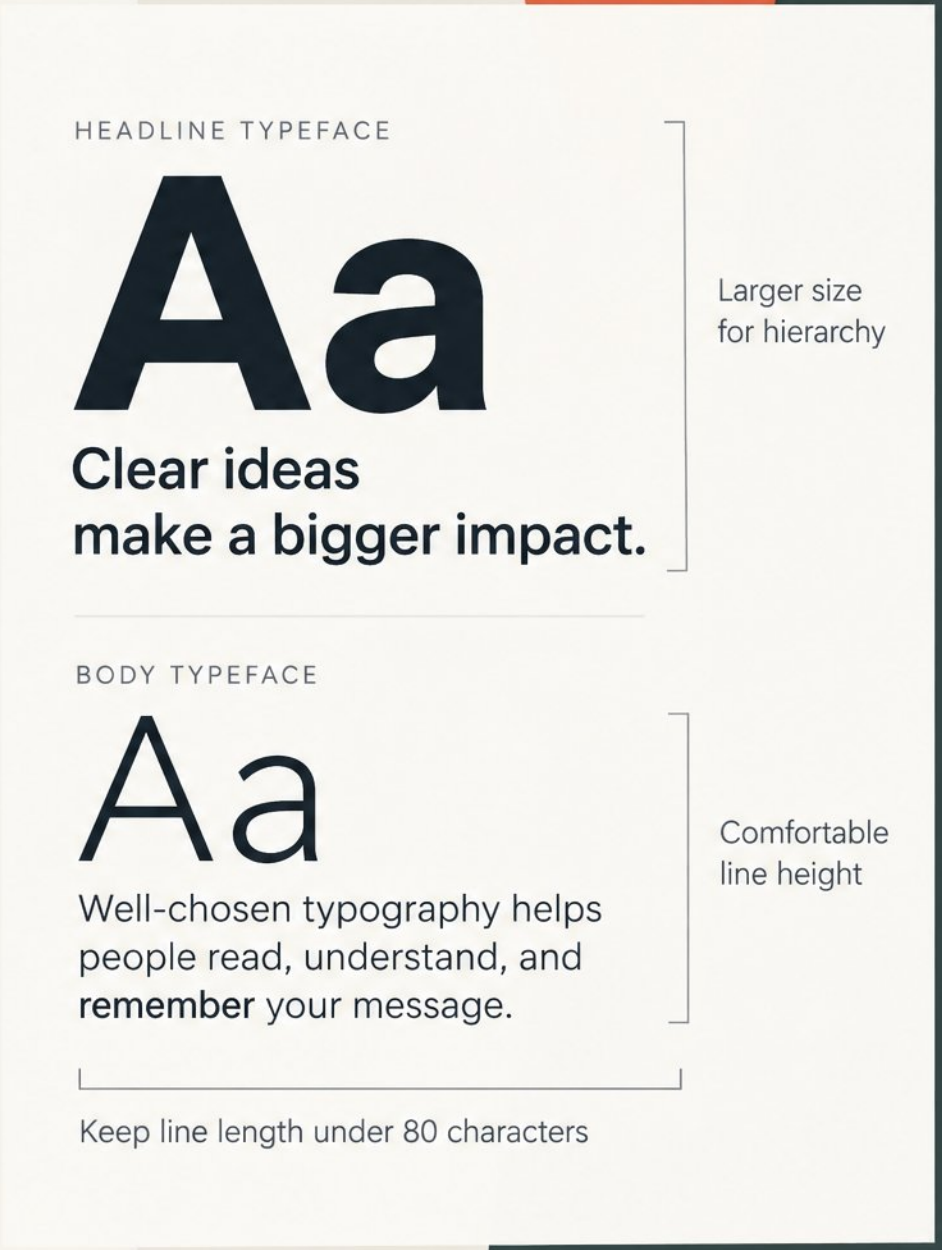




- RGB for screens, CMYK for print, HSL for intuitive adjustment
- Build palettes with primary, secondary, accent, and neutral roles
- WCAG AA: body text 4.5:1, large text 3:1, UI and icons 3:1
- Large text = 18pt/24px, or 14pt/18.5px bold; 4.499:1 fails 4.5:1
- Never use color alone — add shape, icon, underline, or label

Typography That Works

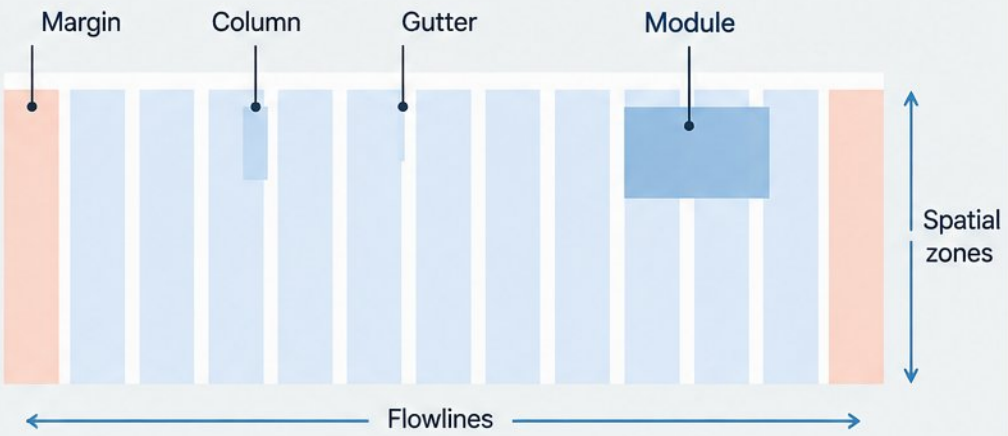
- Type anatomy and classification shape a family's personality
- Build hierarchy with 2–3 sizes and weight contrast, not many fonts
- Pair one headline typeface with one body typeface
- Readability: line length under 80 characters, line height near 1.5, left-aligned text
- Practice: build a two-typeface, three-color system and test contrast



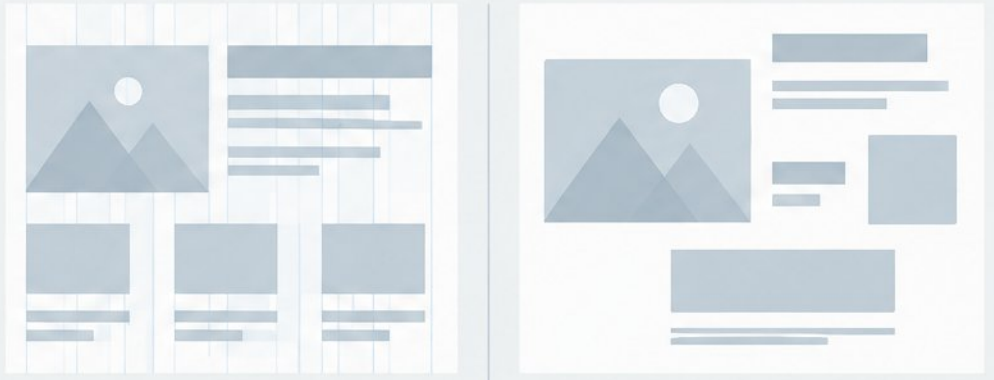
Layout, Grids, and Composition

- Grid anatomy: margins, columns, gutters, modules, flowlines, and spatial zones
- Grid types: manuscript, column, modular, baseline, and hierarchical
- 12 columns work because 12 is divisible by 2, 3, 4, and 6
- Responsive layouts use relative widths instead of fixed pixels
- Grids are decision tools, not cages — let content shape the grid, then break it with intent
- Practice: lay out the same content on a grid and off it, then compare

12 Column Grid Anatomy

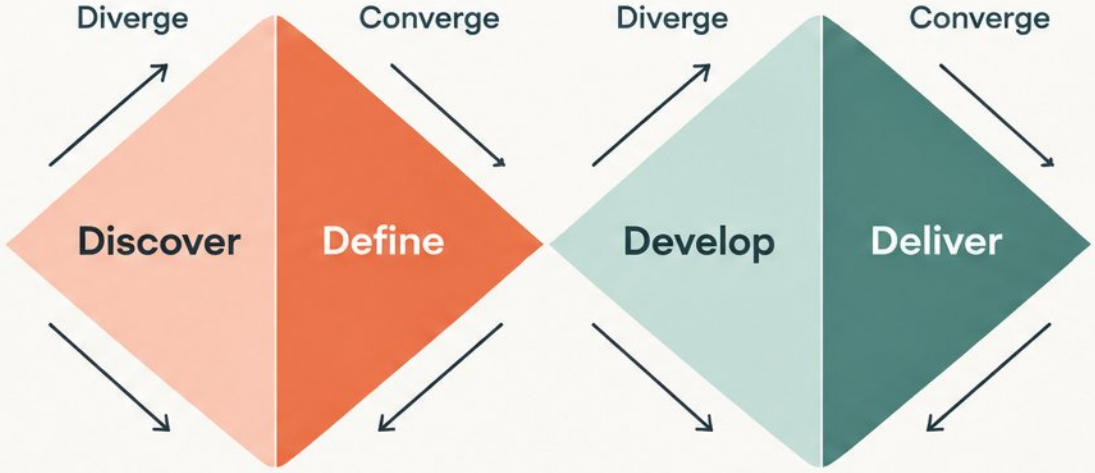


On-Grid vs. Off-Grid Layout



Concept and Problem-Solving: Designing With Intent

- Double Diamond: Discover, Define, Develop, Deliver — alternate divergent and convergent thinking
- A brief sets direction, not the answer — ask questions before opening any software
- Find the real problem: a brochure request may hide unclear messaging
- Diverge first: moodboards, thumbnail sketches, quantity over quality
- Practice: write a one-sentence concept statement and justify it





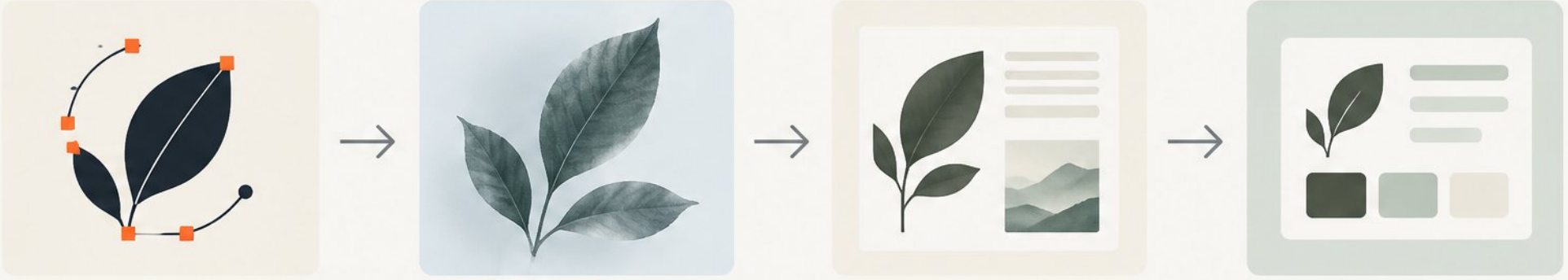
From questions to better design

Tools and Workflow: From Sketch to File

IDEAS
TOOLS
SKILLS
REAL WORK

- Match tool to job: Illustrator for vectors, Photoshop for images, InDesign for layout, Figma for UI
- Identity projects move across tools: vector core → image treatment → print layout → digital system
- Figma is the most-requested tool in 2026 postings, then Photoshop and Illustrator
- File hygiene: named layers, linked assets, non-destructive edits, reusable components and styles
- Practice: set up a clean, reusable file structure for a small project

SAME IDEA.
FURTHER.



Illustrator
VECTORS

Photoshop
IMAGES

InDesign
LAYOUT

Figma
UI

Branding and Identity Systems

- Logo types: wordmark, pictorial, abstract, combination — plus lockups and secondary marks
- Flexible marks scale from favicon to billboard and reduce to one or two colors
- Identity extends beyond the logo: color palette, typography, imagery, secondary marks
- Brand guidelines set clear space, minimum size, approved colors, and type hierarchy
- Practice: adapt one logo across three formats and sizes



Design for Screens vs Print

- Print is fixed: CMYK color, 300 PPI at final size, 0.125 in (3 mm) bleed, safety margins
- Screen is fluid: RGB, responsive layouts reflowing down to a 320 CSS-pixel viewport
- Print type is controllable but unforgiving; screen type must adapt to zoom and device variation
- Accessibility beyond color: visible focus states, large touch targets, pausable motion, no horizontal scroll
- Practice: adapt one layout from print to screen and check what breaks



High contrast



Print



Screen

320 CSS-pixel viewport

Giving and Getting Critique

- Four-step frame: describe, analyze, interpret, evaluate
- Critique the work, not the person—tie comments to the brief
- Ask why before judging to avoid taste-driven feedback
- Separate personal preference from objective criteria, then prioritize by impact
- Practice: critique a peer’s layout and record what you will change



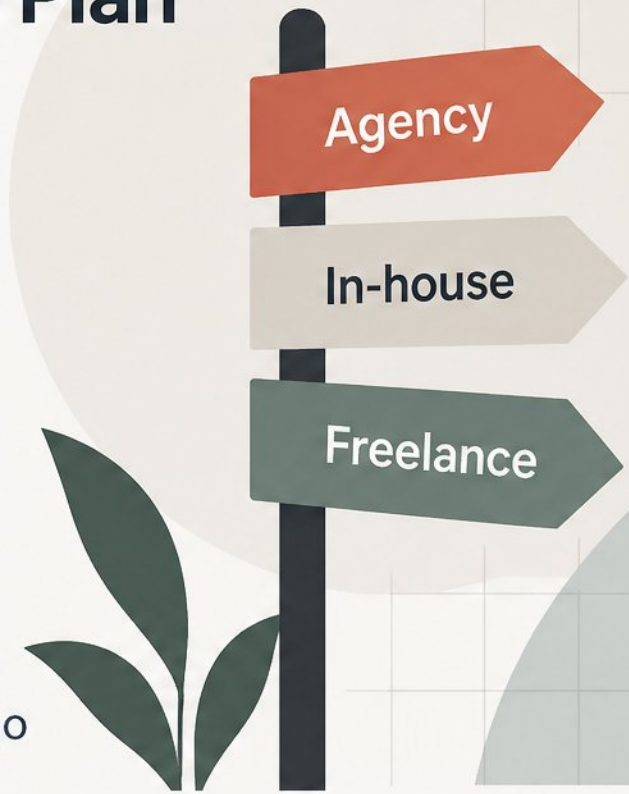
Building a Portfolio: Case Studies That Land Work

- 4–6 strong projects beat twenty unedited pieces — depth over volume
- Case study order: problem, your role, process, decisions, solution, outcome
- Show full systems: identity, applications, production specifics, mockups
- Tier the book: deep case studies, short range pieces, a gallery
- Label self-initiated work as concept work; never invent client outcomes



Career Paths and a 30-Day Action Plan

- Agency, in-house, or freelance: each differs iin range, pace, and client contact
- Treat the portfolio as a design piece — neutral palette, two typefaces maximum
- Interview ready: explain the 'why' behind decisions and a time critique changed your direction
- 30-day plan: one project, one case study, one critique session
- Keep building range and document your process as you go



30-Day Plan

One project

One case study

One critique session

Capstone Workshop:
Putting the Core Skills Together

- **Brief:** design a small identity or poster system for a fictional organization with a stated audience
- **Produce:** concept statement, two-typeface and three-color system, grid-based layout, one print and one screen adaptation
- **Quality checks:** WCAG contrast ratios (4.5:1 body, 3:1 large text/UI), 0.125 in bleed, safe margins, correct export settings
- **Peer critique** using describe–analyze–interpret–evaluate, with documented changes
- **Deliverable:** one case study page covering problem, process, decisions, and outcome



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