
Graphic Designers

(O*NET 27-1024.00)

Significant Points

- About 25 percent are self-employed; many do freelance work in addition to holding a salaried job in design or in another occupation.
- A bachelor's degree is required for most entry-level positions; however, an associate degree may be sufficient for some technical positions.
- Job seekers are expected to face keen competition; individuals with a bachelor's degree and knowledge of computer design software, particularly those with Web site design and animation experience will have the best opportunities.

Nature of the Work

Graphic designers—or graphic artists—plan, analyze, and create visual solutions to communications problems. They find the most effective way to get messages across in print, electronic, and film media using a variety of methods such as color, type, illustration, photography, animation, and various print and layout techniques. Graphic designers develop the overall layout and production design of magazines, newspapers, journals, corporate reports, and other publications. They also produce promotional displays, packaging, and marketing brochures for products and services, design distinctive logos for products and businesses, and develop signs and signage systems—called environmental graphics—for business and government. An increasing number of graphic designers also develop material for Internet Web pages, interactive media, and multimedia projects. Graphic designers also may produce the credits that appear before and after television programs and movies.

The first step in developing a new design is to determine the needs of the client, the message the design should portray, and its appeal to customers or users. Graphic designers consider cognitive, cultural, physical, and social factors in planning and executing designs for the target audience. Designers gather relevant information by meeting with clients, creative or art directors, and by performing their own research. Identifying the needs of consumers is becoming increasingly important for graphic designers as they continue to develop corporate communication strategies in addition to creating designs and layouts.

Graphic designers prepare sketches or layouts—by hand or with the aid of a computer—to illustrate their vision for the design. They select colors, sound, artwork, photography, animation, style of type, and other visual elements for the design. Designers also select the size and arrangement of the different elements on the page or screen. They may create graphs and charts from data for use in publications, and they often consult with copywriters on any text that accompanies the design. Designers then present the completed design to their clients or art or creative director for approval. In printing and publishing firms, graphic designers also may assist the printers by select-



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ing the type of paper and ink for the publication and reviewing the mock-up design for errors before final publication.

Graphic designers use specialized computer software packages to help them create layouts and design elements and to program animated graphics.

Graphic designers sometimes supervise assistants who follow instructions to complete parts of the design process. Designers who run their own businesses also may devote a considerable time to developing new business contacts, choosing equipment, and performing administrative tasks, such as reviewing catalogues and ordering samples. The need for up-to-date computer and communications equipment is an ongoing consideration for graphic designers.

Work environment. Working conditions and places of employment vary. Graphic designers employed by large advertising, publishing, or design firms generally work regular hours in well-lighted and comfortable settings. Designers in smaller design consulting firms and those who freelance generally work on a contract, or job, basis. They frequently adjust their workday to suit their clients' schedules and deadlines. Consultants and self-employed designers tend to work longer hours and in smaller, more congested, environments.

Designers may work in their own offices or studios or in clients' offices. Designers who are paid by the assignment are under pressure to please existing clients and to find new ones to maintain a steady income. All designers sometimes face frustration when their designs are rejected or when their work is not as creative as they wish. Graphic designers may work evenings or weekends to meet production schedules, especially in the printing and publishing industries where deadlines are shorter and more frequent.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

A bachelor's or an associate degree in graphic design is usually required for a job as a graphic designer. Creativity, communication, and problem solving skills and familiarity with computer graphics and design software also are important.

Education and training. A bachelor's degree is required for most entry-level and advanced graphic design positions; although some entry-level technical positions may only require an associate degree. Bachelor's degree programs in fine arts or graphic design are offered at many colleges, universities, and private design schools. Most curriculums include studio art,

principles of design, computerized design, commercial graphics production, printing techniques, and Web site design. In addition to design courses, a liberal arts education that includes courses in art history, writing, psychology, sociology, foreign languages and cultural studies, marketing, and business are useful in helping designers work effectively.

Associate degrees and certificates in graphic design also are available from 2-year and 3-year professional schools. These programs usually focus on the technical aspects of graphic design and include few liberal arts courses. Graduates of 2-year programs normally qualify as assistants to graphic designers or for positions requiring technical skills only. Individuals who wish to pursue a career in graphic design—and who already possess a bachelor's degree in another field—can complete a 2-year or 3-year program in graphic design to learn the technical requirements.

The National Association of Schools of Art and Design accredits about 250 postsecondary institutions with programs in art and design. Most of these schools award a degree in graphic design. Many schools do not allow formal entry into a bachelor's degree program until a student has successfully finished a year of basic art and design courses. Applicants may be required to submit sketches and other examples of their artistic ability.

Increasingly, employers expect new graphic designers to be familiar with computer graphics and design software. Graphic designers must keep up with new and updated software, on their own or through software training programs.

Other qualifications. In addition to postsecondary training in graphic design, creativity, communication, and problem-solving skills are crucial. Graphic designers must be creative and able to communicate their ideas visually, verbally, and in writing. They also must have an eye for details. Designers show employers these traits by putting together a portfolio—a collection of examples of a person's best work. A good portfolio often is the deciding factor in getting a job.

Because consumer tastes can change quickly, designers also need to be well read, open to new ideas and influences, and quick to react to changing trends. The ability to work independently and under pressure are equally important traits. People in this field need self-discipline to start projects on their own, to budget their time, and to meet deadlines and production schedules. Good business sense and sales ability also are important, especially for those who freelance or run their own firms.

Advancement. Beginning graphic designers usually receive on-the-job training and normally need 1 to 3 years of training before they can advance to higher positions. Experienced graphic designers in large firms may advance to chief designer, art or creative director, or other supervisory positions. Some designers leave the occupation to become teachers in design schools or in colleges and universities. Many faculty members

continue to consult privately or operate small design studios to complement their classroom activities. Some experienced designers open their own firms or choose to specialize in one area of graphic design.

Employment

Graphic designers held about 261,000 jobs in 2006. Most graphic designers worked in specialized design services; advertising and related services; printing and related support activities; or newspaper, periodical, book, and directory publishers. Other designers produced computer graphics for computer systems design firms or motion picture production firms. A small number of designers also worked in engineering services or for management, scientific, and technical consulting firms.

About 25 percent of designers were self-employed. Many did freelance work—full time or part time—in addition to holding a salaried job in design or in another occupation.

Job Outlook

Employment of graphic designers is expected grow about as fast as average. Keen competition for jobs is expected; individuals with a bachelor's degree and knowledge of computer design software, particularly those with Web site design and animation experience will have the best opportunities.

Employment change. Employment of graphic designers is expected to grow 10 percent, about as fast as the average for all occupations from 2006 to 2016, as demand for graphic design continues to increase from advertisers, publishers, and computer design firms. Some of this increase is expected to stem from the expansion of the video entertainment market, including television, movies, video, and made-for-Internet outlets.

Moreover, graphic designers with Web site design and animation experience will especially be needed as demand increases for design projects for interactive media—Web sites, video games, cellular telephones, personal digital assistants, and other technology. Demand for graphic designers also will increase as advertising firms create print and Web marketing and promotional materials for a growing number of products and services.

In recent years, some computer, printing, and publishing firms have outsourced basic layout and design work to design firms overseas. This trend is expected to continue and may have a negative impact on employment growth for low-level, technical graphic design workers. However, most high-level graphic design jobs will remain in the U.S. Strategic design, the work of developing communication strategies for clients and firms to help them to gain competitive advantages in the market, requires close proximity to the consumer in order to identify and target their needs and interests.

Job prospects. Graphic designers are expected to face keen competition for available positions. Many talented individuals

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-2016	
				Number	Percent
Graphic designers.....	27-1024	261,000	286,000	26,000	10

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

are attracted to careers as graphic designers. Individuals with a bachelor's degree and knowledge of computer design software, particularly those with Web site design and animation experience will have the best opportunities.

Graphic designers with a broad liberal arts education and experience in marketing and business management will be best suited for positions developing communication strategies.

Earnings

Median annual earnings for wage and salary graphic designers were \$39,900 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$30,600 and \$53,310. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$24,120, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$69,730. May 2006 median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of graphic designers were:

Specialized design services.....	\$43,410
Advertising and related services	41,600
Newspaper, periodical, book, and directory publishers	34,290
Printing and related support activities.....	33,930
Newspaper publishers	31,540

According to the American Institute of Graphic Arts, median annual total cash compensation for entry-level designers was \$35,000 in 2007. Staff-level graphic designers earned a median of \$45,000. Senior designers, who may supervise junior staff or have some decision-making authority that reflects their knowledge of graphic design, earned a median of \$62,000. Solo designers who freelanced or worked under contract to another company reported median earnings of \$60,000. Design directors, the creative heads of design firms or in-house corporate

design departments, earned \$98,600. Graphic designers with ownership or partnership interests in a firm or who were principals of the firm in some other capacity earned \$113,000.

Related Occupations

Workers in other occupations in the art and design field include artists and related workers; commercial and industrial designers; fashion designers; floral designers; and interior designers. Other occupations that require computer-aided design skills include computer software engineers, drafters, and desktop publishers. Other occupations involved in the design, layout, and copy of publications include advertising, marketing, promotions, public relations, and sales managers; photographers; writers and editors; and prepress technicians and workers.

Sources of Additional Information

For general information about art and design and a list of accredited college-level programs, contact:

► National Association of Schools of Art and Design, 11250 Roger Bacon Dr., Suite 21, Reston, VA 20190-5248.

Internet: <http://nasad.arts-accredit.org>

For information about graphic, communication, or interaction design careers, contact:

► American Institute of Graphic Arts, 164 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10010. Internet: <http://www.aiga.org>

For information on workshops, scholarships, internships, and competitions for graphic design students interested in advertising careers, contact:

► Art Directors Club, 106 West 29th St., New York, NY 10001. Internet: <http://www.adcglobal.org>