

# Thinking Like a Designer: Portfolio Development for Creative Professionals

Sunday, November 9, 2014  
The POP-HOP Books & Print  
Trade School LA

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0.

Some

Thoughts to

Begin With

# Why PDFs?

- You should have an online presence BUT
- Structured linear narratives are a great way to tell your story, show your work and show how you think
- Many companies still prefer/require PDFs
- This approach is similar for any sort of presentation + application

# My experience + bias

- Have applied for artists grants, grad schools, job opportunities and worked on grants, RFPs + RFQs (both as a designer and in collaboration with architect/designer teams)
- Have been in hiring position for junior designers
- Have helped friends in business, marketing + communication, architecture, sculpture, writing and design with their portfolios, resumes + cover letters
- Every field has its own best practices; you should take my advice with a grain of salt, given that I may be less familiar with your field

1.

Framing

the

Problem

# Who's the user?

# What is this for? UX counts.

- What are you applying for?
- What kind of candidate are they looking for?
- How can you frame yourself as fitting the requirements? (And if you can't—should you be applying?)
- Besides competence—what else are you bringing to the table that would be of interest for the opportunity?
- How can you show them that you've heard what they are looking for and can deliver?

TIP: If you're writing a cover letter, specifically mention the desired qualities they are looking for in your own words

# What your story?

- A quick summary of why you're the right choice. Emphasizes your strengths, your interests and what they get out of it
- It's not a jail cell: each story emerges in reference to a specific opportunity
- Why are you interested? Why are you interested enough to stick it out for the long run (duration of grant, job, project)? It's really annoying to choose a candidate and then have them drop out later on. Express true interest. Can you back it up?
- Doesn't have to be explicitly stated... but it is the common theme in the whole package (cover letter, resume, portfolio)
- This story is what you are trying to relate in words, the projects you are showing, and design

**“I’m an experienced magazine editor who is naturally drawn to project management (I once thought of getting certified!)”** (For a job at a project management magazine)

**“I’m a self-taught artist who could make amazing progress with a little bit of funding and/or mentoring”** (For an artist’s grant)

**“I’m a graphic designer with an interest in urban issues”** (For an internship at an urban think tank)

**“I’m an artist with an interest in art education because my art school was amazing”** (For a teaching position)

**“I’m an established artist who enjoys working with nonprofits”** (Bidding on nonprofit work)

**“I’m a DIY metal artist + fabricator who’s great with working with other artists to solve structural problems for their unique needs”** (Trying to get more fabrication work)

**“I’m not an experienced print-maker, but I am interested in books and how my varied skills can come together in book form”**

**“I’ve done a bunch of different things, but I’m really good at doing big projects from concept to completion”**

**“I’m linguist turned graphic designer. That seems like a jump, but it’s always been an evolving interest in communication.”** (When I was applying to grad schools)

# Customize!

A sampling of my portfolios folder...

1301 Portfolio Clean Folder	2/1/14 3:57 PM	316.7 MB		
__130129 Portfolio Clean Folder.zip	3/20/13 6:45 AM	84.3 MB		
__IND	3/12/14 1:23 AM	65.9 MB		
__PDFs	9/22/13 2:50 PM	75.8 MB		
130129 Portfolio	4/6/13 4:59 PM	5.9 MB		
130129 Resume	9/22/13 2:50 PM	87 KB		
130129 Resume Boston	1/30/13 1:17 AM	78 KB	Folder	Jan 30, 2013 1:17 AM
130129 Resume Chicago	1/30/13 1:16 AM	78 KB	Folder	Jan 30, 2013 1:16 AM
130129 Resume Los Angeles	1/30/13 1:15 AM	78 KB	Folder	Jan 30, 2013 1:15 AM
130130 Creative Circle	2/4/13 10:19 AM	1.4 MB	Folder	Feb 4, 2013 10:19 AM
130204 Creative Circle Materials_Betsy Medvedovsky	2/4/13 10:24 AM	8.9 MB	Folder	Feb 4, 2013 10:24 AM
130204 Creative Circle Materials_Betsy Medvedovsky.zip	2/4/13 10:24 AM	7.2 MB	ZIP archive	Feb 4, 2013 10:24 AM
130205 AIC Graphic Designer	2/5/13 1:53 PM	93 KB	Folder	Feb 5, 2013 1:53 PM
130205 Philadelphia Museum of Art	2/5/13 1:02 PM	11.9 MB	Folder	Feb 5, 2013 1:02 PM
130205 Resume LA and Portfolio in One	2/5/13 9:36 PM	5.9 MB	Folder	Feb 5, 2013 9:36 PM
130211 Stonehill	2/11/13 2:39 PM	6.1 MB	Folder	Feb 11, 2013 2:39 PM
130316 Portfolio Lower Res	3/16/13 4:20 PM	Zero bytes	Folder	Mar 16, 2013 4:20 PM
130326 KE Arch	3/26/13 6:42 PM	6.8 MB	Folder	Mar 26, 2013 6:42 PM
130406 Portfolio and Resume	4/6/13 4:58 PM	5.9 MB	Folder	Apr 6, 2013 4:58 PM
130515 Creative Circle	5/15/13 2:27 PM	5.9 MB	Folder	May 15, 2013 2:27 PM
130705 New Stuff	7/6/13 1:30 PM	84 KB	Folder	Jul 6, 2013 1:30 PM
130916 Rebranding MSA	1/30/14 12:18 AM	4.6 MB	Folder	Jan 30, 2014 12:18 AM
130922 Teaching	9/22/13 2:51 PM	4.6 MB	Folder	Sep 22, 2013 2:51 PM
Document fonts	1/29/13 6:09 PM	1.2 MB	Folder	Jan 29, 2013 6:09 PM
Instructions.txt	1/29/13 6:09 PM	2 KB	MXML File	Jan 29, 2013 6:09 PM
Links	2/12/13 3:53 PM	89.6 MB	Folder	Feb 12, 2013 3:53 PM
1309 MSA Application	10/20/14 2:03 PM	7 MB	Folder	Oct 20, 2014 2:03 PM
1309 Portfolio Folder	11/5/14 8:55 PM	255.4 MB	Folder	Nov 5, 2014 8:55 PM
1310 Teaching Course Proposals	6/27/14 9:15 AM	1.9 MB	Folder	Jun 27, 2014 9:15 AM
1401 Portfolios	2/6/14 8:31 AM	753.7 MB	Folder	Feb 6, 2014 8:31 AM
1403 Joshua Tree Residency	Today 5:01 PM	316.3 MB	Folder	Today 5:01 PM
1404 Portfolio	11/6/14 10:13 PM	62.3 MB	Folder	Nov 6, 2014 10:13 PM
1406 Portfolio		8.3 MB	Folder	Nov 6, 2014 8:48 PM
1407 Publication Design		155.2 MB	Folder	Oct 20, 2014 11:58 PM
1407 Teaching Resume		5.6 MB	Folder	Today 5:01 PM
1410 General Updated Resume		1.8 MB	Folder	Today 5:01 PM
1410 Museum Resume		1.8 MB	Folder	Today 5:01 PM
140315 Joshua Tree		140.4 MB	Folder	Jun 27, 2014 9:15 AM
Adaptation Stuff	2/11/13 4:04 PM	138.2 MB	Folder	Feb 12, 2013 3:12 PM
Betsy Medvedovsky Five Projects.pdf	3/16/13 4:19 PM	2.7 MB	Adobe...ment	Mar 16, 2013 4:19 PM
BetsyMedvedovsky CoverLetter.docx	3/23/13 7:14 PM	6 KB	Word...ment	Apr 4, 2013 6:47 PM
BetsyMedvedovsky Resume.docx	3/23/13 7:14 PM	7 KB	Word...ment	Mar 23, 2013 7:14 PM
iPad-Retina-Display-Landscape-Mockup-PIXEDEN	8/22/14 10:07 PM	68.1 MB	Folder	Aug 22, 2014 10:07 PM
Resumes	3/13/14 10:49 PM	3.3 MB	Folder	Mar 13, 2014 10:49 PM
website	4/19/14 8:37 PM	122.8 MB	Folder	Apr 19, 2014 8:37 PM

Resumes get customized too.



# The cover letter— a very basic template

Think of the cover letter as the one place where you can explicitly articulate how you are framing yourself.

## Short version

Hi,

I'm writing to apply for the \_\_\_\_\_ opening advertised on \_\_\_\_\_.

As a \_\_\_\_\_ who's interested in one characteristic related to job and experienced with another characteristic related to job, I'm excited by the opportunity to contribute/work with/take advantage of/learn from to name of hiring company/grant, etc.

Attached is my resume and my portfolio; more work can be found at \_\_\_\_\_. Please don't hesitate to get in touch should you have any more questions.

Thanks,  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Longer version

Hi,

I'm writing to apply for the \_\_\_\_\_ opening advertised on \_\_\_\_\_. As a \_\_\_\_\_ who's interested in one characteristic related to job and experienced with another characteristic related to job, I'm excited by the opportunity to contribute/work with/take advantage of/learn from to name of hiring company/grant, etc.

Currently, I work at \_\_\_\_\_ where I've first relevant achievement. One of the most interesting challenges was \_\_\_\_\_ which I'm excited to explore at current opportunity as well. (Repeat this idea up to two more times.)

Attached is my resume and my portfolio; more work can be found at \_\_\_\_\_. Please don't hesitate to get in touch should you have any more questions.

Thanks,  
\_\_\_\_\_

# The cover letter— advanced template

Hi,

I'm a self-description who saw job posting/news item that and wanted to write you a note. I was very impressed with something positive about the organization but was very struck by a two/three things.

Extended articulation of two/three fixable problems or two/three challenges of current opportunity. Indication of an approach of how to fix them. Remember, you don't have to solve the problems now—but you do need to articulate them in a knowledgeable way. Possible mention of why you might be qualified to solve problems.

Don't hesitate to get in touch if you'd like to chat—I'd love to talk more and present a more formal deck on the possibilities.

Thanks,

Website with past, relevant work. Create a separate URL if necessary.

This is a completely different approach from the simple template, aimed at those who are further along in their careers and who can be expected to start bringing ideas to the table.

It works for both posted opportunities and blind pitches. I'm just now entering the stage of my career where I do this, but so far it's had very good results.

This is essentially the RFP/RFQ approach but used in a wider context.

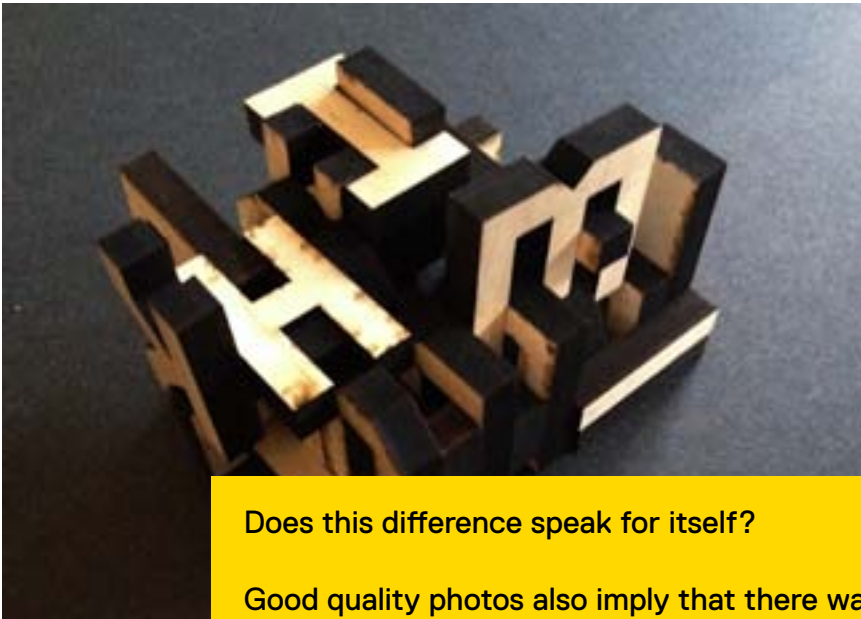
**2.**

**Mechanics**

**/ Putting it**

**Together**

# Good photos count



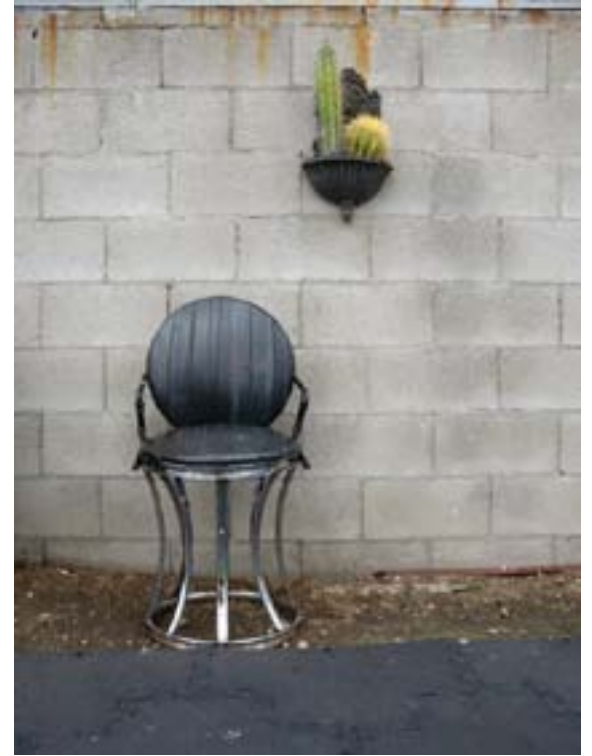
Does this difference speak for itself?

Good quality photos also imply that there was money behind a project. Which implies that someone paid you to do something nicely. Which means you can be paid to do something nicely in the future.



# Stage the work if necessary

- Use digital templates to show the work in situ
- Stage the work in context and then photograph. It's like a fashion designer using makeup + accessories to help show off their clothing in the ideal scenario
- Remember—how you portray your work gives off a vibe as well



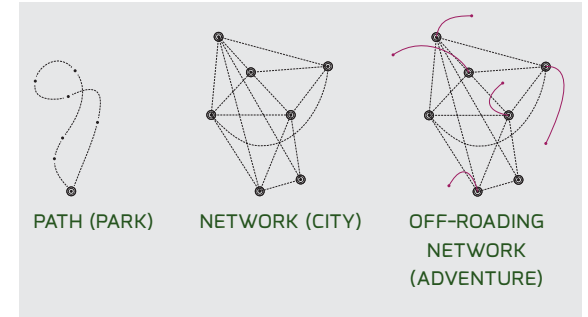
*"I have a gritty, edge, vibe"*



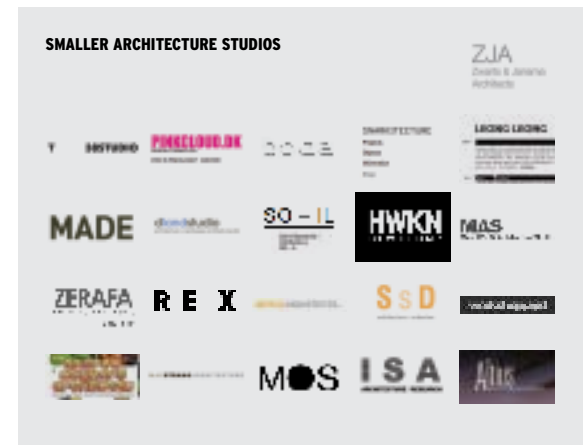
*"I'm an iPad app with a clean, Apple aesthetic"*

# Use diagrams + other graphics

- Every project needs a striking visual
- This visual can pull in the viewer to read more about it, serve as an illustration for complex concepts, become shorthand for the work in later conversations, and give the viewer something to look at while you explain the project (during an interview, etc.)
- Illustrating research, process, and works-in-progress is a challenge, but crucial. Be creative and have fun with it; check with others if your illustration is clear.



Illustrating an idea in an urban design RFP (by Greg Evans)



A graphic showing research done for an architectural-branding project

Also note the “Customize” page of PDF!

Architecture has a long history of placing importance on diagrams which can explain concepts, approach, and process. Google for some inspiration about how to approach. Here’s a fun one I found:

[conceptdiagram.tumblr.com](http://conceptdiagram.tumblr.com)







# Choosing a Typeface

In typography, a sans-serif, sans serif, gothic, san serif or simply sans typeface is one that does not have the small projecting features called serifs. The term comes from the French word *sans*, meaning "without". Sans-serif fonts tend to have less line width variation than serif fonts.

In print, sans-serif fonts are often used for headlines. Conventional wisdom holds that serifs help guide the eye along the lines of text. Sans-serifs, however, have acquired considerable acceptance for body text.

Sans-serif fonts have become the most prevalent because interlaced screens have shown twittering on the fine details of the horizontal serifs. Additionally, on lower-resolution digital displays, serifs may disappear or appear too large.

In typography, a sans-serif, sans serif, gothic, san serif or simply sans typeface is one that does not have the small projecting features called "serifs" at the end of strokes.<sup>[1]</sup> The term comes from the French word *sans*, meaning "without". Sans-serif fonts tend to have less line width variation than serif fonts.

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Sans-Serif	Examples
Modern	Helvetica
Clean	Arial
Architectural	Myriad
Cold	Univers
	Titillium
	Museo Sans

Serif	Examples
Classic	Times New Roman
Traditional	Roman
More old-fashioned	Georgia
Elegant	Museo Slab

## Tips

Poke around for free fonts  
[fontsqurrel.com](http://fontsqurrel.com)

Typography Examples  
[fontsinuse.com](http://fontsinuse.com)

## Sizing

- Current trends and screen-tired eyes are going into larger sizes
- Make it work both print and screen

## Don't Use

- Any sort of handwritten-like font
- Gill Sans
- More than 2 fonts
- Anything grungey or graffiti unless it is incredibly relevant

## Free Typeface Recommendations

### Titillium

techy, architectural  
[fontsqurrel.com/fonts/titillium](http://fontsqurrel.com/fonts/titillium)

### Source Sans Pro

clean, multipurpose  
(can mix and match with Source Serif)  
[fontsqurrel.com/fonts/source-sans-pro](http://fontsqurrel.com/fonts/source-sans-pro)

### Exo

contemporary, techy, playful  
[fontsqurrel.com/fonts/exo](http://fontsqurrel.com/fonts/exo)

### Museo Sans + Museo Slab

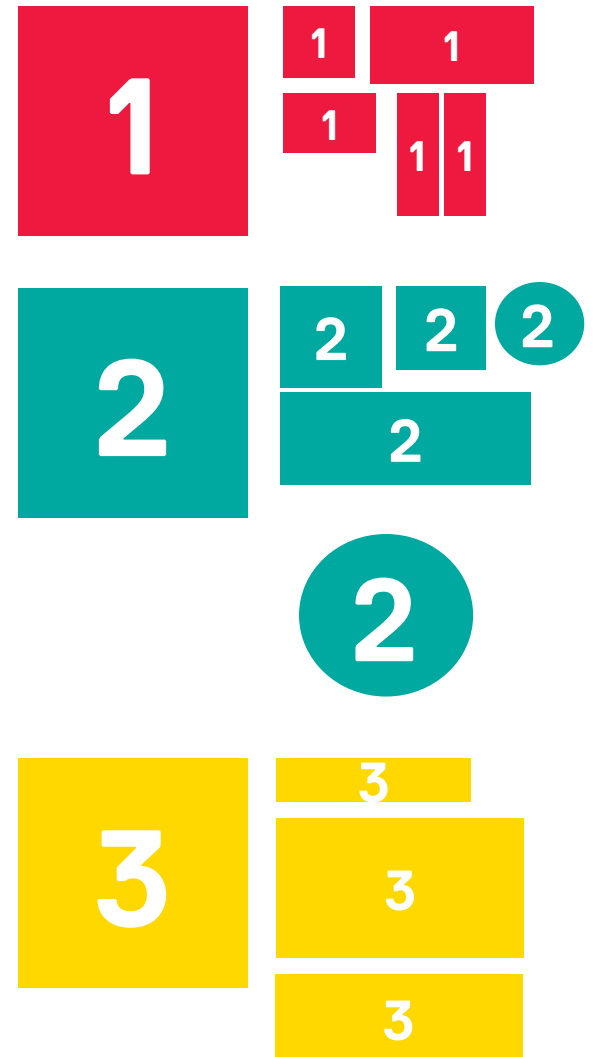
friendly, playful, quirky  
can mix and match  
[fontsqurrel.com/fonts/museo](http://fontsqurrel.com/fonts/museo)  
[fontsqurrel.com/fonts/museo-slab](http://fontsqurrel.com/fonts/museo-slab)

# Choosing a Typeface + Branding

- If you want “brand” yourself, choose a typeface you really like, which works in a variety of contexts, use it consistently and call it a day. You really. Do. Not. Need. A logo. (If you’ve made one you like—use it. But it’s not for all of us.)

# Keep it short + simple

- Classic portfolio advice is: 5 strong, large projects
- Customize as needed. Use only relevant projects for this opportunity
- No more than 15 pages of work



# Hierarchy

## Page Hierarchy

- Think of page components as having levels:
- Skimming (I only see photos and/or headers)
- Fast (I see photos and headers, maybe some descriptions)
- Medium (Photos, headers, skim descriptions)
- Interested (Photos, headers, descriptions and/or captions for the most relevant projects)
- Make the size and/or prominence of different components as corresponding to what interest level they are in

## Linear Hierarchy

- Most important things go first and last

# Grid + Alignment

- Use a grid, however simple
- Create flowlines where elements align to across pages
- If two things are VERY CLOSE to aligning but not aligning, FIX it!

*I love using a three-column layout.*

**3.**

**Polishing,**

**Examples,**

**& Questions**

# Polishing

- Spell check
- Triple check the spelling of any names
- Run through the PDF. Do all the images look ok?  
Does anything jump out weirdly?
- Use embedded links
- Edit, edit, edit!  
Portfolio: 5-15 pages is ideal  
Resume: 1 page  
Cover Letter: 3 paragraphs
- Small files: keep files under 5mb
- Name your portfolio nicely

# Example

## Cover Letter

Hi,

I'm writing to apply to the Graphic Designer position advertised on the AIGA site. As a graphic designer with a strong aesthetic and interest in how stories can be told through exhibition design, I'd make a great fit for the opening.

In my most recent role, I was the Project Designer at INABA, an architectural consultancy based in New York City. I was in charge of a publication on the city and technology, which included researching and concepting what the publication would actually be, coordinating contributions and interviews, managing the production schedule as well as doing the final design. Part of the challenge with the magazine was taking a somewhat esoteric topic -- technology and architecture -- and approaching it from a viewpoint that would make it new and accessible for the general public, whether through art, graphics or interviewees. This -- taking an old subject matter and finding a twist on it to make it newly interesting -- is one of my favorite challenges in graphic design and seems quite relevant for the Automotive Museum as well.

Attached, please find a resume and a portfolio of sample works. I'd love to meet with you and walk you through my past projects and of course, don't hesitate to get in touch should you have any other questions.

Thank you,  
Betsy

I got a job at a car museum with zero interest in cars--but an honest interest in museums, which I articulated well.



# Example Portfolios

- Currently only available in workshops

# Questions + Discussion

**Let's talk further!**

**Betsy Medvedovsky**  
**[e.medved@gmail.com](mailto:e.medved@gmail.com)**  
**[withandagainst.com](http://withandagainst.com)**