

Good Advice

Freelancing While a Student (and beyond)

In Winter 2007, I learned that several of my students were doing work for clients at little or no pay. What made this worse is I had recommended them for these jobs. As an instructor I get several people asking for students help to do design work for them. Sometimes it is a legitimate organization really wanting to help a student gain some professional experience, and these groups (mostly university or non-profit groups) have a great cause. Most of the time it is because a client does not want to pay the normal fees for a professional designer, and serve to gain more profit if they use student help. Because I do not always know what happens beyond my recommendation of individuals to people wanting design services I offer the following advice.

Avoid Spec Work

Speculative, or “spec,” work is when a client asks you to come up with design solutions without offering compensation for them. I have heard this line from a potential client several times, “Come up with a few different solutions, and if I like one I will pay you to develop it from there.” This situation happens all of the time, and as students you are the most susceptible to fall for it because you are desperate to get experience and money.

Avoid this situation at all costs. In most cases a client will end up running off with your ideas and try to implement them on his own before ever paying you a cent. Or, they have acquired several designers to do this, and have a large pool to choose from so you may be wasting time. Also, your time is worth money, if you are coming up with ideas/concepts/sketches you should be compensated for the time you spend creating them.

There is a norm in the field of architecture to do spec work. Often in the form of competitions and call for proposals. It is an acceptable practice in architecture mainly because the payoff is a multi-million dollar project. The time spent developing ideas is nothing in comparison to the time that would actually be spent on the project. It is rarely this case in the world of graphic design. So, unless you are expecting a huge payoff for you labor, avoid spec work.

In the end, a client is going to hire you for your abilities. Let your portfolio demonstrate what you can do, and let that be the basis of why they choose you.

Work with a contract

Just because you are a student does not mean you have to work without a contract with your client. Write up a contract make them sign it, it will help immensely. The contract should at minimum specify the following:

<i>your process</i>	conceptual design, design development, implementation, etc., more specifically this lays out what the client can expect from you. How many ideas does he get, how many revisions, etc.
<i>your fee</i>	hourly, hourly not to exceed, flat rate, etc. include material costs in there
<i>payment schedule</i>	when do you receive payment, how often, etc.
<i>client responsibilities</i>	what does the client need to provide you and when

Beyond that you can add in more detail. I recommend looking at AIGA's Standard Agreement which is under the Good Advice section on the course website. It is pretty solid and extremely helpful. As a student your contract doesn't need to be that specific, but it does need to be specific enough to protect you. I know many students who have worked with a verbal agreement of an hourly pay schedule and received nothing in the end. The contract serves as a binding document that they understand what they are getting from you.

Good Advice

Freelancing While a Student (and beyond) cont'd

Flat Fee or Hourly Fee

As a student it is difficult to know exactly how to charge a client. I recommend students ask for an hourly rate. The hourly rate protects you from a client who doesn't know exactly what they want, who can't make up their mind, who changes the scope of the project, and who asks for endless revisions. It compensates for a poor client. Unless you have the terms of your contract and what you are going to provide the client clearly defined in terms of time, revisions, etc. avoid working for a flat fee.

Also adjust your fee to your work ethic. If you work slowly, charge a bit less per hour. If you work fast and are extremely efficient charge a bit more.

Don't Allow People to Pay you Poorly

Last year I heard a student was getting paid \$8.00/hour for web design services. That is wrong! A professional web designer on average charges \$50.00/hour. Even though you are a student doesn't mean you have to work for the same amount of money as you would get washing dishes somewhere. You are offering a professional service and should be accommodated accordingly. The average entry-level freelance rate for the nation is right around \$25/hour, about half of what a senior-level designer would charge. I recommend working for anywhere between \$15-\$25/hr.

When is FREE Okay?

As a student, and even as a professional, there will be opportunities to accept free work. The best way to figure out when that it is okay is by asking what both you and the client serve to gain from the work. If you are doing an identity system for a start-up that serves to make a good amount of money down the road (or even an established business), most often they can and should be able to afford to pay you for your efforts. Watch out for the line, "we're just a start up now, but down the road we'll use you for all of our jobs." It takes most start-up businesses more than a year or even two to make a profit.

Family often expects you to work for free. Whether you do is entirely up to you. I have charged my own family, especially when the job has nothing for me to really gain out of it. Again, use your judgement; ask, what do they serve to profit from your services, what do you serve to gain?

Non-profit organizations, university groups, and even faculty will ask for assistance from time to time. Unless funded by grants or other external means, they serve to gain little profit from your help. This is a prime opportunity to work for little to no pay in exchange for creative freedom. Tell the client up front that is what your fee is, *creative freedom*. However if they break the contract of offering you creative freedom, move on, it is not worth your time and effort unless you are really gaining something from it. Most often these groups will be excited about giving you such an opportunity.

There are many ways to profit from a job beyond money. Creative freedom gives you something amazing for your portfolio. Some jobs have a high exposure to a broad audience and can lead to future work, some jobs can receive credit for internships, and others allow you to learn new things. In the end, use common sense and good judgement before taking on free work.

Having client work is what employers want to see, right?

A student once asked me if it was important he had real world experience upon graduating (actually more than one student asked this). I won't deny that it does help get a foot in the door to have experience. I have observed that many students feel the need/desire to take on any freelance opportunity, regardless of pay or compromising their ideas, because it gives them this experience. Not all freelance work is going to produce portfolio worthy work, and I have seen several students put that work in their portfolio only because it was done outside of school. To be honest most employers don't care. What they really want to see are your skills and abilities—production skills (reflected through craft) and creative skills (reflected through ideas). My advice, avoid falling into this mind set.