53 Design Portfolio Tips

A guide to optimizing your portfolio, getting noticed, and landing your first design job!

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About This Guide

I remember how frustrating it was piecing together my first design portfolio. I didn't really know what to do other than throw a few of my projects together in one single place.

Now, after being in the design industry for a few years, I look back and think about all the things I wish I had known while working on my design portfolio.

I've compiled a list of 53 portfolio hacks, tips, and tricks to help you land your first design job.

For more clarity, I've broken the tips into the following five color-coded sections, all of which I'll explain in more detail on the following pages.

I've also highlighted the takeaway message on each page for those of you that like to skim read.

Getting Noticed

Sometimes the hardest part of the getting a job lifecycle is just getting people to take a look at you especially your design portfolio.

In this section, I'll break it down into some of my favorite tips to make sure you increase the chances your portfolio will get looked at by design managers.

I'll also cover a few non-portfolio topics, including emails and cover letters.

Tips in this section are marked with red.

Tangible Skills

Showcasing your tangible skills throughout your portfolio is not always an easy task.

Tangible skills include the design software you've learned, your sketching skills, and any other skills that can be measured in some way.

In this section, I'll show you some of my favorite tips for highlighting the design skills you've worked so hard to develop.

Tips in this section are marked with purple.

Your Personality

Often overlooked by design students, your personality plays a huge role in whether or not you'll land that intern or full-time design position.

When it comes down to it, the person hiring you will have to spend hours each week with you.

In this section, I'll cover some ideas and tricks to really help your personality shine through in your design portfolio.

Tips in this section are marked with green.

Story Telling

Thoroughly explaining your projects, especially through storytelling, can take a good design portfolio and make it really stand out.

In this section, I'll explain how to make your portfolio even better by explaining the things that design/hiring managers are looking for.

Tips in this section are marked with pink.

Tips & Tidbits

This section is for all the other tips and tidbits that don't fit in the previous four categories. The little things I really wish I had known years ago when I was piecing together my first design portfolio.

Some of these may catch you by surprise - you'll think "really? Do people really do this?" Nonetheless, there's nothing better than a little reminder of the things you should be doing anyway.

Tips in this section are marked with light blue.

Back It Up

I have to start with a little story. I hit a huge roadblock my Jr. year of college. I still remember how pissed off I was. Someone had broken into my apartment and stolen not only my MacBook but my backup hard drive. I lost about half of my college design work that I had done at that point and a lot of it was my most recent work.

So here's your first lesson. Back up your damn portfolio and all of your design work! Not once, not twice, but at least three times!

I had a lot of my work backed up to a physical hard drive and it obviously didn't matter after it was stolen...Back up your work to a few different places and at least one online cloud (DropBox, Box, Google Drive, etc).

Research

You may be surprised I have to include this one. Then again, you'd be surprised to hear that the average person spends more time planning a week-long vacation than planning out their career.

The first thing you should do is research companies that you actually want to work for. Make a list of 5 to 10 companies you actually want to work for. Then figure out how they approach design and what they look for in prospective employees. It seems so simple, yet most people don't take the time to do it.

Often times consultancies need a well-rounded person where a corporation may be hiring someone for a very niche skill set, such as being a CAD designer. Ultimately, it really depends on the company itself, so set yourself up for success by doing some initial research and planning.

Intro Letter

You should be sending a cover letter or introductory letter along with your portfolio - stating who you are, a little bit about you, and why you are interested in working for their company.

Be sure to use a different intro letter when applying to different companies. It takes more time, but trust me it will be well worth it.

Your letter should be tweaked based on the specific position you are applying for and the types of employees the company historically hires.

You would be surprised how many people talk within the design industry, and they may even talk about your portfolio or projects.



Don't Email

You've finally "finished" your portfolio and you're ready to start sending out emails left and right with your portfolio's URL (or in .pdf form).

STOP!

You need to build a connection with the person first.

Imagine if every single email you received from someone was a sales pitch. You'd never want to listen to them. You need to warm them up first. Show you're interested in them and their company.

Don't email an unsolicited .pdf of your portfolio. It will likely just get deleted anyway, and your email may even get blocked.

Printable

Your portfolio may be a website (what I highly recommend) or a PDF document. More often than not hiring managers will be viewing it for the first time on a digital device.

With that said, whether you make a website of a .pdf, consider how it will look when printed out.

Some designers will print out your portfolio, or pieces of your project, to pin it on a wall and compare it with others.



Artwork

If you want to increase your chances of getting your dream design job then you need to increase the number of people that take a look at your portfolio. Getting a job is a glorified game of numbers.

Good artwork makes someone stop in their tracks. It captures their attention, it makes them think and makes them react.

When designing your portfolio treat it like artwork. Create something out of the ordinary.

Get more looks at your portfolio by making the photos artwork oriented. They should look good enough to hang on your wall and capture someone's attention.



Applicable

This one may take you by surprise.

If you're looking to get hired for a furniture design job then your portfolio better have furniture in it. If you're looking to get hired for a toy design job then your portfolio better have at least one toy design project in it.

You get the point.

The projects (at least one) in your portfolio should be applicable to the type of job you're applying to.

Your portfolio should adapt based on the job you are applying to. When you apply to a company and don't have any relevant projects they will toss it out (most of the time). Whether its true or not you'll look like you're desperate. They'll think you're trying to land any job that you can.

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No Branding

Try to include at least one project in your portfolio that doesn't have any branding. Ir designers often get caught up in fancy branding and don't spend enough time doing the nitty-gritty work to develop the design.

I also see Jr designers spend way too much time redesigning popular social apps - Facebook, Snapchat, Tinder, etc. There are a few reasons why you should leave these types of projects out of your portfolio.

First off, design students often neglect that many of the changes and design features of these popular apps were developed over time through research and real users.

Second, the more popular the app the more chance the hiring manager uses it. This means they will already have their own subjective opinions about your proposed design.

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Resume

Your resume is often times what gets you a look at your design portfolio. Be sure to spend as much time "designing" your resume as your portfolio.

The branding of your resume should be seamless with your website.

Make sure your resume is a .pdf unless of course, they ask for a different format.

Lastly, when naming your resume be sure to include your name and the word "resume." Example - "Kevin-Kennedy-resume.pdf"

Hiring managers will download many resumes at once. You don't want to lose a shot at getting an interview or look at your portfolio because they tossed out all the resumes named "resume.pdf."



Concepts

Many design professionals argue that the best portfolio pieces are "concept driven."

At least one piece in your portfolio should reflect a broader concept, one that may not even be completely finished.

A concept piece may not be completely finished due to unknown, unadvanced, or uneconomical technologies.

The conceptual project should show your creative ideas and ability to really push the limits of what is possible.



CV Tegser

A curriculum vitae (CV) provides a summary of one's experiences and skills. A CV is typically at least 2-3 pages long, whereas a resume is only a brief summary that shouldn't be longer than one (or two pages in some scenarios).

If an internship or job ask specifically for a CV then you should take full advantage of it.

Just like your resume, your CV needs to be well designed and cohesive with your personal branding.

Additionally, you should place eye-catching product images on your CV. The goal of each product image is to tease the viewer into wanting to see more - your whole design process.

You should also state somewhere on your CV that you can send a "complete portfolio" upon request.

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Process

A portfolio screams "design student" when it focuses solely on the end product and omits the design process itself.

All of your portfolio pieces should include the nitty-gritty details of your design process. Take as many photos as possible (even if it's on your smartphone) throughout your process. This will add a ton of value to your portfolio piece and help reinforce the steps you've taken to get your end result.

Here are some often overlooked photo opportunities:

- Touring a factory (manufacturing process)
- Design fails prototyping fails, material fails, etc.
- White-boarding mind-maps, brainstorms, etc.
- Napkin Sketches doodles at unexpected times
- Form Exploration exploring different shapes

Craftsmen

The introduction of new and more affordable technology, such as 3D printers, has helped designers and design students streamline their processes.

But 3D printers (and other technologies) have also become detrimental to the skills required to craft high-quality models and functional prototypes.

If you have an "above average" skill set in model making then be sure to showcase it.

Design consultancies and studios are struggling to find designers that can handcraft a physical model, especially one that doesn't utilize 3D printing.

Sketching

[This one makes me laugh as I look back and reflect on my own (and classmates) college portfolios - we were all guilty of it!]

A good designer or hiring manager will look at the worst sketch in your portfolio and assume that it is your "average" sketching ability.

You're obviously going to omit your really bad sketches and try to highlight your best sketches. Thus, the rest of your sketches must be typical given your current skill level.

Keep this in mind when you piece together sketches in your portfolio. Try to keep it "natural" and show sketch pages without making too many digital alterations.

Show > Tell

Another common way to tell a design student from a professional is how they show their design process.

Design students often forget to reinforce each piece of their process by actually showing what they did.

Be sure to have proof of everything. Don't just "tell" the viewer what you did. Show them.

For example, if your design evolved based on user feedback then show the user research that you conducted. Show pictures or videos of your users using your prototypes. This will help designers and hiring managers better understand your knowledge, skill set, and how you approach the design process.

Barriers

Young designers often get fixated on one of their initial design solutions. This is often a result of not being able to break through barriers in the design process related to the problem at hand.

Show that you can push past design barriers that other people may not be able to get past.

Additionally, you should show where and why you pivoted in your design process.

Show and explain why you abandoned certain ideas over others.

Visuals

Every designer should have some sort of way to visually communicate the ideas in their head.

Try to put extra emphasis on the skill set that helps you visually communicate your ideas.

For example, if you are not good at sketching, but are really good at SolidWorks, then you should really be showcasing how you use that to communicate your ideas.

Your visual communication skills could be sketching, illustrations, computer drawings, physical prototypes, etc.

Graphically

Sometimes the only difference between a good portfolio and an excellent portfolio is the graphics that make it up.

Be sure to use a grid and pay close attention to your typography and other graphically related elements.

Try taking a day or two off if you spend many consecutive days working on your portfolio. This will help you get a fresh look. Often times you'll notice graphical details that need more attention.

Consistency

Sometimes its hard to really decipher the true skill set of a designer based on their portfolio. Often times this is due to the inconsistency of skills showcased throughout their projects.

For example, the viewer of your portfolio will be very confused if one project showcases really good sketching and another project showcases terrible sketching.

When you are building your portfolio be sure to strive for consistency when showcasing your skill set.

Review your portfolio as a whole and analyze each project, making sure they all have a consistent feel.

Explore Form

Form is another area that sets design leaders apart from others.

Each project in your portfolio should showcase how you really explore your ideas.

Show dirty prototypes, cardboard mockups, and other items that helped you explore and finalize the form of your design.

Tip: Save all of your prototypes throughout, then photograph them when you are taking photos for your final model or renderings. This will help them be more cohesive with the rest of your portfolio, and viewers won't be fixated by the dirty shop or studio in the background.

Digital is #2

Most design professionals consider digital media to be second to analog (traditional) media.

You can sketch through more ideas on paper and pencil, and most importantly won't be as restricted or tempted to undo your ideas or mistakes.

Sketching by hand helps you keep moving forward in the process instead of spinning in circles.

If you prefer digital media, such as sketching on a Wacom, then practice sketching through ideas without hitting the undo button.

Highlight

Your portfolio is meant to get you a job, right?

If so, your portfolio should really showcase or highlight your skills.

Review your portfolio and be sure it's not highlighting any of your weaknesses.

Nothing is more disappointing than being brought into a portfolio with an eye-catching CAD rendering, sketch, or mockup, only to not find any more of it throughout the portfolio.

Personality

You're unique. Be yourself and let your portfolio really shine. The person viewing your portfolio should feel like they know you as a friend.

Ask fellow classmates, designer friends, or anyone that knows you really well to take a look at your portfolio. They should be able to feel parts of your personality shine through by the way your copy is written, your design style, etc.

I see most designers go wrong when they decide to use a restrictive website builder, such as Weebly, Squarespace, Wix, and so on.

To really show your personality you should design your portfolio first then figure out how to build it. Don't let a website builder dictate the style of your website. I recommend creating a self-hosted WordPress site for ultimate flexibility.

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Focus

Put simply, be better than those around you.

Your portfolio is always a work in progress. Be sure to spend adequate time reflecting on your portfolio, analyzing your strengths and weaknesses.

Having focus, drive, and determination will ultimately show in the way you present your work.

A design professional can tell when you throw together your portfolio site in one night. Plan ahead and stay focused.

Tor I Shaped

Companies know what type of person they're looking to hire. Don't waste your time applying to companies that are looking for someone else.

Spend time figuring out what type of designer you are, then be sure to only apply to companies that are looking for your type.

T-Shaped Designer

A "T" shaped designer has two kinds of characteristics. The vertical stroke of the "T" is a depth of skill, whereas the horizontal stroke of the "T" is their ability to collaborate across disciplines.

I-Shaped Designer

An "I" shaped designer offers a lot of depth in one area but doesn't offer much else in other disciplines. For example, someone who 3D models products, but doesn't take part in any other areas of the process.

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Social Resp.

Multi-national corporations, design studios, and companies alike are all taking part in showing a sense of social responsibility.

In design, this could be coming up with solutions to social problems, considering sustainability, and more.

Socially Responsible Design is an attitude that emphasizes the needs and experiences of people over concerns of form or aesthetics.

Socially Responsible Design goes by a number of names including Design Activism, Public Interest Design, Human-Centered Design, Social Impact Design, Social Design, and more.

Be sure to show you've at least considered your sense of social responsibility in every portfolio project.

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Developed

If you're a design student at a University or College then it's important to show in your portfolio how you have developed from one year to the next.

Designers and hiring managers understand that some skills may need to be developed further upon hire. Therefore, they are more interested in understanding your ability to develop your skills.

Don't be afraid to include a project from the previous school year if it helps show good progression and development of your core design skills.

Your Picture

There's an English language-idiom that you've likely heard, and it goes like this...

"A picture is worth a thousand words."

There's no doubt it's true. That's why it's important to be very critical of the photo you include in your "about you" section of your portfolio.

Here are some things to consider:

- Does it emphasize your personality?
- Does it look professional?
- Does it stimulate any emotion?
- Does it put forth a sense of trust?
- Does it show your creativity?

Passion

While piecing your portfolio projects together you should make sure that each piece displays your passion for design.

Take it a step further by showing your passion for a specific niche (i.e. sustainability, minimalism, etc...).

This passion can and should carry over to your resume, cover letter, initial emails, and your in-person interview.

Think about how brands market their beliefs and values. Take TOMS shoes for example. Everyone knows that they believe in giving away a pair of shoes for every pair that's sold.

Unique

One problem with student portfolios from the same school is that they all aim to solve the same design problems. Consequently, many students will end up with the same or very similar solutions.

Be sure to show originality and how your design is a unique solution that has never been done before.

I always recommend design students work on side projects along-side their class projects. They don't have to be completely different projects. They could be an extension of the original prompt, taking it a step further than the professor will let you for the actual class assignment.

Then, when it comes time to make your portfolio you'll have the choice of leaving out your school projects - showcasing your side projects instead.

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Inner Google

The Internet has made it easier than ever to take a look at other design portfolios. This has many pros and cons. On one hand, it may help you think differently about your portfolio, on the other hand, it makes more portfolios look alike.

Nowadays too many portfolios also have similar solutions because everyone sees each other's portfolios on the web.

Try to use your "inner Google" to search and think more for yourself. Don't get too caught up in what you see online. Tier thinking, or thinking in different directions will help you stand out more.



Storytelling

Your design process may or may not be similar on a project to project basis. Regardless of whether it is or not, be sure to tell a different story.

Focus on the storytelling aspects of your research and design process that helped you get from initial concept to final product.

The copywriting that accompanies your images should be written in a captivating storytelling format that holds the viewer's attention.

Take a look at how products are marketed online, in stores, and through TV ads. Pay close attention to the stories they tell that represent their brand.

Additionally, be sure to make sure your storytelling aligns well with your personal branding.



Problem

Every good design starts with a good problem that needs to be solved.

Be sure to frame the problem at the beginning of each portfolio piece. The problem should be detailed, easy to understand, straight to the point.

For example, let's say you came up with the idea for laundry detergent pods. Your original problem statement was about solving pain-points of traditional liquid detergent. Here's what your problem statement may look like:

Good: Pouring the liquid laundry detergent into the bottle's cap can be hard to measure and can get all over the user's hands.

Bad: Liquid detergent is annoying and not easy to use. It is not that easy to measure sometimes.



Be Explicit

If you have a team or class project in your portfolio then you better be extremely explicit on what part of the project was yours.

Don't just throw all the names of your teammates at the beginning of the project. Take ownership of the parts you did. This will also let the viewer know what parts you didn't do.

Always be honest. Don't say you did the sketching because your teammate is a sketch master. You never know when it may come back to haunt you. Your classmate may end up applying to the same place.



Redo Project

Sometimes a project you complete may be limited by the time or resources available, the way you think, or another determining factor.

Don't be afraid to redo a portfolio project. Show both projects (as one) in your portfolio. Describe why and how you improved your project.

Redoing a project shows you're ambition. It can also help show any skills that you have developed from the time you did the first project to the second one.

Source

Show where the project came from. Was it a class prompt or a chosen topic?

This will help viewers of your portfolio better understand the way you approach design.

Did you spend a few weeks really narrowing down the problem?

Did you have no choice on the problem at hand?

Is there a personal reason you chose that specific problem?



Near Future

On a previous page, I mentioned including a design concept in your portfolio - one that is really outside of the box and may be unrealistic due to current technologies or resources.

Your portfolio could also include a solution that considers the near future.

For example, self-driving cars are in the media every day. There's no doubt their realization is only a matter of time.

Your portfolio project may show certain aspects of the technologies currently available, and how it may change based on further advances.

Be sure to explain or show why it is in the near future.

Bad Ideas

Bad ideas just show that you aren't willing to get rid of them - OR - that you don't take criticism well. Don't be afraid to let go of a project with a bad solution or idea.

As a designer its inevitable, we will all have bad ideas at some point. In fact, many times the initial bad ideas help lead us to good ideas.

With that said, don't showcase a portfolio of bad ideas. It surely won't get you any job offers.

Make it?

The company or companies you are going to apply to may be very curious whether or not your project solutions are realistic.

Be sure to answer all of these questions in your projects:

- Can it be made?
- Did you research how it could be manufactured?
- Did you figure out the cost of manufacturing?

It's okay if one of your projects isn't realistic. But at the end the day, some of your solutions need to be realistic or companies will gain little to no benefit in hiring you.

Relevancy

If a good design isn't selling, then is it truly a good design? A good product is often determined by its relevance in the marketplace.

Companies spend millions of dollars every year conducting market research to figure out what the next hot trends, styles, and colors will be.

Be sure to show how your problem and solutions are relevant in the current market.

If it's sold online, can it be shipped? If it's sold in a store can it be displayed properly?

Tip: Study how competitor or similar products are sold in stores - both online and brick and mortar stores.



Hierarchy

A design portfolio is typically looked over in a quick 30 seconds to a few minutes.

You will need to have exceptional visual hierarchy in order to grab the viewers attention and bring them in for more.

Be sure to really think about what is important to not only you but the viewer. This is where it becomes important to tweak your portfolio based on where you are applying.

deas ideas

Designers are paid to generate ideas.

Therefore, there should be lots of ideation work displayed in your portfolio.

Ideation does not just have to be pages of sketches. It can be physical mockups, doodles, CAD models and so on.

Regardless of how you ideate, there should be a lot of it.

Feedback

There are many reasons you should start your design portfolio as early as you can.

Not only will it give you more time to reflect and fix things yourself, but it will also give you time to get critical feedback from design professionals.

Getting feedback from design professionals is a great way to further develop and improve your portfolio before sending it out to prospective employers.

You should have at least two or three design mentors that you can get feedback from. Additionally, you can get feedback from Professors and fellow design students.

Keep in mind, that everyone has their own opinion and sometimes design can be very subjective. Gather all your feedback, prioritize it, and react accordingly.

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Document

Get in the habit of documenting everything throughout your design process. This will make it a heck of a lot easier when it comes time to piece together your portfolio.

Use your smartphone to snap photos at all stages of the design process. Take pictures of those napkin sketches, cardboard mockups...everything!

You may not need to include photos of everything in your portfolio, but the photos will also help you reflect back on your process and figure out the best way to present your story.



Attached

This is another one I wish I had known while developing my first design portfolio.

You will spend hours developing the design portfolio, but you should never get too attached to your portfolio!

Accepting that your portfolio can always improve as your skills improve will play a huge role in setting yourself up for success.

Don't be afraid to scrap projects, switch out projects, and so on - especially after getting feedback from design professionals.

Spell Check

What? Who doesn't do this?

It seems so simple, yet so many designers (especially students) forget to do it. Spell check your portfolio.

It also never hurts to have a few friends or family members read it.

Spelling mistakes in your portfolio just show the prospective employer that you don't pay attention to details.

Foundations

If you're a design student at a College or University then it's extremely likely you had to go through a "foundation" year of life drawing, exploring materials, and developing your creative skills.

When it comes down to it, your design portfolio should be focused on the job you want to get hired for. Don't put foundation projects in your design portfolio.

No one wants to see your life drawing... Not even your best friend.

Your Worth

As a student or "JR designer" it's extremely important to know your worth. Knowing your strengths and weaknesses will help you better prepare for your resume, portfolio, and the interview process.

It's okay to accept your weaknesses - we all have them. Before interviewing you should practice framing your weakness to show that you understand them, and reassure the interviewer that your weaknesses won't hinder your ability to complete the job.

Lastly, knowing your worth will help you negotiate a proper salary for your skill set.

Personally, I don't believe in unpaid internships. I've always valued my time and skills more than that - but ultimately, the choice is yours!

Coworkers

When you're preparing for an interview it's important to understand the people interviewing you. Do your research and learn as much as you can about them.

Then, ask relevant questions that truly peak their curiosity and get them excited. Some of the questions can even be related to their personal hobbies (that you saw on Instagram).

Remember, these are your future (potential) coworkers. They're looking for someone that they want to spend 8+ hours a day with!

The same goes for you - don't take a job if you feel that team you'll be working with just isn't a right fit.

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Templates

Here's one of my favorite quotes from my not-so-favorite website builder, Squarespace.

"Use one of our templates to create a unique website."

Think about that for a second. Do template cookiecutter websites seem unique to you?

Don't use template sites!!! Spend time designing your portfolio.

Now I'm not saying you can't and shouldn't start with a template. But ultimately, you should take the time to learn self-hosted WordPress so you can design your portfolio site exactly how you want. If you're in full control and your design skills can really shine.



Start Early

You've probably realized by now that the design portfolio is A LOT more work than you thought it would be.

Some of the best advice I can give you is to start as early as possible.

I've seen way too many design students start their portfolio a week or two before a portfolio review or job fair. If you decide to be one of those students, then you're just setting yourself up for failure.

You should be starting on your portfolio months before you plan on applying for jobs. Even if you don't know what projects you'll use yet, start designing your personal branding, gathering photos and other elements, and figuring out the story you want to tell.

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Versions

Just like your CV or resume, you should have different versions of your portfolio based on the company or position that you are applying to.

The different versions may be small tweaks, or it may be as different as showcasing different projects.

Whatever it may be, accept that your portfolio is a design problem itself.

Put yourself in the shoes of the hiring manager, based on the job listing, and try to come up with a problem statement. Then, develop your portfolio around it.

Have More

Leave at least one solid project out of your portfolio. If you have a successful interview you may be asked to provide another example of your work.

Having another strong piece set aside will really WOW them.

If the person interviewing you has already seen your portfolio, then you can show this extra piece in the interview itself.

This will help captivate their attention and leave them wondering what else you may have to show.

It Never Ends

Acknowledge that a design portfolio is a living document - a design problem itself. Be sure to continue to learn, iterate, and adjust your portfolio accordingly.

Imagine if we were still using the iPhone 1. Think about that for a minute. It's hard to imagine because the iPhone has come such a long way through feedback, iteration, and new solutions.

Students often say "I'm not done with my portfolio yet," but the reality is you'll never be done. So design it fast, launch it, and iterate quickly!



Hooray. You made it!

I've spent a lot of time developing this information, designing this PDF, and of course sharing it with designers like you.

You can share this document and the information in it all you want (just don't try to sell it).

Put in the work and you will land your dream design job!

I believe in you! Kevin Kennedy

PS. Check out bit.ly/pdo-tips for more free resources.

