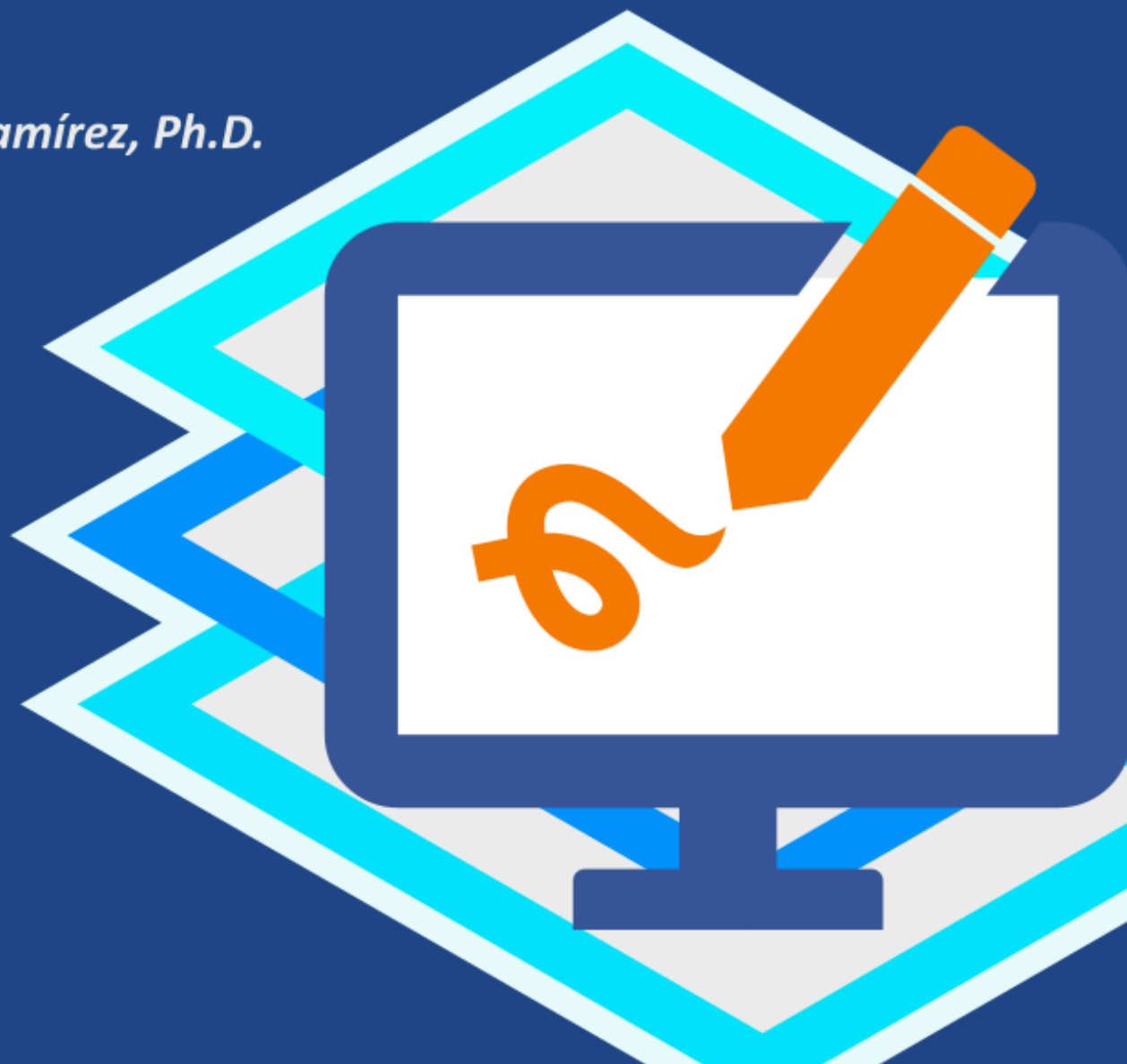


# The Accelerated Graphic Designer

A Proven Shortcut for  
Learning Graphic Design  
Once and For All

*Rubén Ramírez, Ph.D.*



# **The Accelerated Graphic Designer**

A Proven Shortcut for Learning Graphic Design

Once and For All

*Rubén Ramírez, Ph.D.*



**THE ACCELERATED GRAPHIC DESIGNER**  
**A Proven Shortcut for Learning Graphic Design Once and For All**

Copyright © 2023. Rubén Ramírez. All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

All images in this book are used for educational purposes only. All images are copyright to their respective owners and are protected under copyright laws.

# Table of Contents

## **PART 1**

### **Learning Graphic Design on Your Own 1**

#### **CHAPTER 1 2**

It's Possible to Learn Graphic Design on Your Own (If You Know How) 2

#### **CHAPTER 2 14**

My Promise: A Shortcut to Learning Graphic Design 14

## **PART 2**

### **Defining Graphic Design for the 21st Century 21**

#### **CHAPTER 3 22**

What is Graphic Design Today? 22

#### **CHAPTER 4 27**

What Skills Do You Need to Become a Graphic Designer? 27

## **PART 3**

### **The 80/20 of Graphic Design Theory 36**

#### **CHAPTER 5 37**

Learning to See As a Designer 37

#### **CHAPTER 6 40**

Elements of Design: Building Blocks of Perception	40
Putting It All Together: Learning to See	74
<b>CHAPTER 7</b>	<b>78</b>
Essential Principles of Graphic Design	78
<b>CHAPTER 8</b>	<b>83</b>
The Seven Main Design Principles	83
<b>PART 4</b>	
<b>What You Need to Understand About Software</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>CHAPTER 9</b>	<b>136</b>
The Role of Software in Graphic Design	136
<b>CHAPTER 10</b>	<b>152</b>
Which Software to Use at the Beginning	152
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>162</b>
Beginning Your Accelerated Journey Into Graphic Design	163

**PART 1**

**Learning Graphic Design on Your Own**

## CHAPTER 1

# It's Possible to Learn Graphic Design on Your Own (If You Know How)

If you're reading this, you want to become a graphic designer on your own. Well, in many ways, becoming a graphic designer today has never been easier or cheaper. Technically, anyone with access to a computer and internet connection could potentially learn graphic design.

And yet, despite these conditions, learning graphic design has also become harder. Let me explain:

Even if we have all the information and training we need to learn a skill such as graphic design, we also face the incredible barriers to learning imposed by the sheer scope of information available on the internet.

Today, in order to learn a skill, we must first navigate the vast amounts of conflicting information out there, the endless amount of “gurus” trying to sell us the next big thing, and the distractions of social media. In sum, even if the information you need “exists,” you lack a clear path to learning the skills and



knowledge necessary to start becoming the designer, or writer, or blogger, or developer you must become.

Even with all the free information out there, it would take a tremendous amount of discipline, structure, time, and commitment to create a plan from scratch that would allow you to learn graphic design effectively.

I recently asked readers of my blog, [selfmadedesigner.com](http://selfmadedesigner.com), the biggest obstacles they face in learning graphic design. These came up:

- Lack of motivation and commitment
- Software is too difficult
- Selecting and organizing learning resources
- Not getting proper feedback
- Progress is slow and time-consuming (time)

Are any of these obstacles familiar to you? They are to me because I know what learning a new skill from scratch feels like.

About 15 years ago, I started learning graphic design and web development on my own. You see, I got my Ph.D. in Communication in 2007, right at the beginning of the financial crisis. After having applied to more than

30 positions in academia, I came to the harsh realization that job descriptions were increasingly requiring digital skills along with academic expertise, which was a rare requirement at the time.

I already had my “specialization,” but job descriptions were increasingly asking for applied skills in design, programming, and all sorts of production software. I had excellent credentials, yet it became incredibly difficult to find a job at a university. The reality was that I had no practical skills in digital media.

I finally landed a post-doc position at Georgia Tech, which required all fellows to create a personal homepage. Instead of paying someone to do this for me (like some of my colleagues), I decided to build the website myself.

So I taught myself how to create a basic homepage using HTML and CSS. I was hooked, so I continued learning web development and graphic design on my own.

As a new professor forced to update my academic background to find a job, I became obsessed with graphic design and web development.

Moreover:

Having completed a Ph.D. equipped me with the unique ability to understand *how to learn*. This crucial understanding led me to learn graphic

design relatively quickly and with great efficiency. I discovered that graphic design could be learned on your own, if you know how.

Today, I'm proud of many accomplishments:

- For almost a decade, I have been teaching graphic design at the college level
- I co-designed a platform that won a prestigious entrepreneurship award
- I founded [selfmadedesigner.com](http://selfmadedesigner.com)
- I develop websites for fun and profit
- I provide value designing for myself and the communities I'm involved with

As you can see, graphic design has had a powerful impact on my career and life, not only because it has broadened my horizons in terms of valuable skills that are always in demand, but also because it has provided me with a creative outlet that is refreshing and rewarding. There's always something new to be learned, and you can always take yourself to the next level.

After successfully teaching hundreds of students with NO prior experience in design, I've come to understand the knowledge and skills that

matter the most to becoming an *effective* designer. These fundamental skills are precisely what I want to teach you in this book.

Believe me, you can become an effective self-taught designer too.

## **Becoming A Graphic Designer Is a Journey**

When I first started learning web development and design, *I started with a specific purpose and direction*. I knew what I wanted to create, I just needed the knowledge and skills to help me get there. Later, I found out that this was crucial to my success.

So I took on the specific project of building a website *as an excuse for learning*. This is very important. It means that, in order to endure the journey of learning graphic design, we need to find a motivating factor to help us along the way.

A project is a powerful motivator because we can organize our learning around it.

For me, in the beginning, it was a website. Later, I became obsessed with designing t-shirt graphics. Then, I started developing websites for people I

knew. As time went by, I became a graphic designer and web developer in the process.

One project led me to the next, and the more projects I completed the more knowledge and skills I acquired.

Why do I tell you all this? Because, as I say to my students, there is only one way of being something, and that is by *becoming it*.

Think about it for a moment.

A degree in creative writing or journalism will not *make you* a writer or a journalist. Only by “writing” consistently can you become the writer you want to become.

The same is true for any other discipline, such as painting or programming. Only by constantly doing over and over the tasks associated with a skill or discipline can you become the painter or programmer or journalist you want to become.

The same is so very true for graphic design.

## Why Do You Want To Learn Graphic Design?

For me, one of the most critical aspects of learning graphic design on my own was this: A sense of purpose.

From the beginning, I clearly knew why I was learning graphic design. In my case, I knew that if I didn't learn digital skills quickly, I would be "left behind" in my chosen career path.

In other words:

My career depended on learning new skills.

And it was true: Graphic design and development skills have opened up many doors for me and have put a premium on my credentials.

So, I ask you: Why do you want to learn graphic design?

Maybe:

1. You need to create graphics for your new venture or business
2. You want to become a better communicator
3. You want to learn a new set of skills
4. You want to learn complex software

5. You want a career change
6. You need an additional stream of income
7. You want a creative, fulfilling outlet for yourself

The reasons can be endless, but the objective has to be clearly defined. You must have a sense of purpose. You must be able to visualize what you want to accomplish. And you must stick to that vision. If your objective is compelling enough for you, it will guide you and fuel your learning.

No matter what your reasons are, the skills and knowledge associated with graphic design will give you professional and career value, whether you end up “working” as a designer.

One compelling reason to learn design concepts and skills is that we live in an increasingly visual culture. This means that we value images over words as a vehicle of communication.

Think about it: We are surrounded by visual interfaces and screens, and content is predominantly organized around images. Images are a very powerful and complex form of communication. I believe that, in today’s world, it’s the people who have basic fluency in these forms of communication who are most likely to succeed in their respective careers.

Having design skills will add value to *anything* you currently do.

## **Can You Become a Graphic Designer?**

As I said before, it would seem that anyone can become anything they want in the digital age. However, not everyone will be able to learn the skills to become a self-taught graphic designer.

In fact, you must be having thoughts like “I am not a talented person,” “I can’t draw,” or “I’m not good with computers.”

This is what you need to realize: Pure talent, drawing skills, and computer savvy don’t matter, for the most part.

What I have learned from my own journey, my students, and some successful designers I know is that the real capability to learn the necessary skills to become a graphic designer comes from persistence, discipline, passion, and the courage to put yourself out there. And this is true for any undertaking.

Do you need talent to be great at design? Sure. It really helps. The most successful designers I know and who inspire me every day are super talented.

However, absolute talent is not required.



For example, George Bokhua is one of the best contemporary logo designers I know. He has worked with companies such as Disney and Wired, just published a book on logo design, and has almost 300 thousand followers on Instagram. He posted this a while ago on social media:



He is an amazing designer, and yet he sucked at first. And this is what you need to internalize: We all suck in the beginning. We just have to keep practicing.

If you want to become a designer in the professional sense of the word, chances are that you already are talented, or are in the process of polishing your talent in the raw. You know you have what it takes, even if you (still) don't have the confidence or the advanced skills to let it shine through.

Furthermore, maybe you *don't have to be* a graphic designer.

That is, you don't need the *identity* of a designer for understanding and applying the fundamental concepts of graphic design and visual

communication. Perhaps you want to learn graphic design skills for enhancing your business, helping out a friend with her startup, or making your blog more appealing.

This is my point:

You don't have to win an award or be featured in the most important publication or teach a course in order to call yourself a graphic designer. *You only have to be effective.*

Think about this again:

You only have to be effective at design. This goal is completely achievable. I've seen this over and over in my teaching career: People can go from having no idea to becoming *effective*.

It takes some theory, experience (that is, action), and persistence. It takes time, but not necessarily years. Some of my best students (with no previous graphic design experience) have accomplished excellent results in only one semester. Some have even gotten their first jobs as graphic designers after one course.

But they all had some common traits: They applied themselves, they studied graphic design principles, they practiced computer skills: They applied the method.

In the end, there really is no mystery. You can learn these skills, and you can learn them well, in a way that can guarantee lifelong learning and practice of design.

And this is what this book is all about: Starting you on a learning path to become an effective self-taught graphic designer. My aim is to demystify and simplify what I believe is the *only way to learn graphic design effectively*, which is by creating a solid conceptual foundation of design.

## CHAPTER 2

# My Promise: A Shortcut to Learning Graphic Design

If you have read graphic design books, you'll know that most introductory books offer vast amounts of information, often written in a complicated way. Many books also include aspects of graphic design that, although interesting, might not directly contribute to your *immediate* learning.

This book is not your typical introduction to graphic design, because my approach is not to give you an academic overview of graphic design, including its history or philosophy.

My aim is not to provide complicated explanations that might be more appropriate to academic debates or college talk.

My approach is very simple: To explain in the clearest way possible the very fundamental aspects of graphic design theory that you need to understand right away in order to get started as a graphic designer as quickly as possible.

In other words:

My objective is to provide an effective shortcut not only to get you started as a graphic designer but also to provide you with a foundation for learning graphic design on your own from here onwards.

After teaching an introduction to graphic design in college for almost a decade, I have come to realize the most crucial aspects of graphic design that can give students the fastest results. And, believe me, I've seen excellent results with my methods throughout the years.

## **My Unique Approach**

Throughout the years, I've stripped down my method to include the aspects that are most critical to the task of graphic design. Before, for example, I included graphic design history and styles in my course and discussions about the differences between analog and digital technologies.

But I quickly realized that these became obstacles in students' eagerness to get started in graphic design quickly.

Thus, after experimentation and testing, I have been able to provide a simple, repeatable framework that will not only get you started in graphic design but also provide you with a system that you can use to accelerate your learning of graphic design as you continue your journey.

I'm a big fan of the 80/20 principle, which states that about 20 percent of actions or inputs produce 80 percent of desired results.

And this, precisely, is the logic of my approach:

To provide you with the least amount of knowledge and skills you need to learn an actionable foundation of graphic design to quickly get you started as an effective designer in the least amount of time possible.

## **My Approach is Simple**

Simplicity is key to getting things done quicker and more efficiently. My approach, in fact, aims to decrease complexity.

Here's my approach in the simplest terms:

- Understand the fundamental aspects of design theory, only focusing on elements of design and the six fundamental principles of design
- Understand the task of graphic design in the 21st century
- Understand the role of software and the best options for starting out

Having said this, if there's only one single action you can take to learn graphic design effectively, it is this:

**Understand and apply the principles of graphic design.**

This is what's lacking in most of the free instruction and tutorials you find on YouTube or the web. You can find a tutorial on executing a logo, for example, but without the conceptual framework of what makes a logo work. You will find a tutorial on how to create a business card, but no explanation of how layout and hierarchy are used to produce visually effective communication.

This is what most self-taught students of graphic design struggle with.

However, this understanding of design principles is what separates truly effective designers from ineffective ones. This is what separates professionals from amateur designers. And not understanding these principles from the very beginning of your journey is the *greatest obstacle and source of frustration* for self-taught graphic designers.

If you've made it thus far, congratulations, you are well on your way to learning the fundamental knowledge that is at the base of any form of graphic design. If you spend some time and effort in truly understanding and applying these principles, your learning of graphic design will become so much easier, more focused, and more effective. In the following chapters, I will explain in simple terms how you should see the task of graphic design today and will lay out, with visual examples, the most important principles of design.

## **PART 01: Key Points**

- Having a defined objective and purpose are key for learning graphic design.
- Design skills will add value to your personal and professional profile, no matter what you do currently.
- Because graphic design skills can be learned, pure talent or drawing skills are not required for becoming a graphic designer.
- Your main objective is to become an effective graphic designer,



which is a completely achievable goal.

## TAKE ACTION

### Why Do You Want To Learn Graphic Design?

#### 1. Take some time to think about *why* you want to learn graphic design

Make a list of all the reasons why you want to learn graphic design. Be as specific as you can. For example, instead of saying “To have a creative outlet” say “To finally express the creative side which has been repressed for X reason”. List as many reasons as you can come up with.

Next, edit the list to only include those items that suggest why you *need* to learn graphic design. There is a difference between wanting and needing to do something. Needing entails a sense of urgency. Is there a single item on the list that is the most important or pressing?

Write it down, in the form of a sentence: I need to learn graphic design because I have to \_\_\_\_\_.

Put this in a notebook, your phone, or wherever you can quickly look at this sentence. As you progress in your journey, look at this statement from time to time to be reminded to persevere.

## **2. Make a list of projects you would like to accomplish**

Write down graphic design projects you would like to accomplish, even if you don't know how you would do them yet. Projects can include creating graphics for your social media page, creating an ad for your band, or even creating your first logo. Be sure to include things that truly interest you.

Keep this list handy during your process. When you feel without direction or motivation, remember all the projects that you need to accomplish.