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List of Frequently Asked Questions for Students

I get quite a lot of questionnaires from students and people who are thinking of going freelance, so have put the most frequent ones together in this document to try and help. If having downloaded this or been sent it, you would like to ask some more questions, please note the following (sorry if it sounds a bit fierce):
1 E-mail questions, without any attachments.
2 Be patient. I tend to save up questionnaires and do several at once (normally within 2 to 3 weeks of getting them). Please don't repeatedly send reminders or send a list of 50 questions through the night before your final assessment.
3 Ask interesting stuff. If you ask questions already on this document, please don't be offended if my reply is this document.
4 Tell me how you heard about me or found the site. If it was via a search engine, let me know what search words you typed in.
5 I'm afraid that I cannot give you any samples or printed examples of my work. However, you are welcome to use any of the images or information on the site, provided it is for educational purposes only.
6 I have no opportunities for employment, placements or internships at the moment. Apologies.

Working process

Why do you work in so many different styles?
Some designers do just work in one style, but I really like working in lots of different ways. If people do like a particular style, mind, it's good to be able to produce a few collections in that format. Clients seem to like the fact that I can produce work in pretty much any digital format, but can equally cut it with pencil, paint or any other traditional media.

What are your main inspirations?
Things that look like nothing I've ever seen before.
Things that look like everything I've ever seen before.
Things I wish I'd thought of.
Seeing something that looks just dandy and wanting to work out why it looks so great.
Almost anything except films, for some reason. I really like maps.
I keep a sketchbook on me almost all the time, as I tend to find I get ideas all over the place. For some reason, I seem to get a lot on train journeys and as I'm falling asleep.
Everything starts with drawing.

Do you design in repeat?
If I'm designing for furnishings, then the designs are always in repeat. If it's for fashion, my all-over designs do repeat; the rest are just designed to be placed in one area (like a tee shirt) and don't. Which I do depends on what the client or my agent asks for.

How do you get started on a project?
Whenever I get an idea, I do a little drawing or write a few words on the first piece of paper that come to hand (in a sketchbook normally). When I need an idea, I just go through sketchbooks and piles of paper until I find one that seems a good starting point. Of course, in some cases I get a brief of some sort; in this case I'll maybe do a series of paintings or drawings that explore the appropriate subject matter. I also have a big pin board in front of me that I stick up imagery that seems to fit (or in some case that deliberately doesn't). Over the years, I've built up a huge collection of postcards, tear sheets, photos and all kinds of scraps of paper and images; I just delve into this.

Do you design in collections? How do you present your designs?
For textile print designs, always (normally at least 7 or 8 designs, sometimes a lot more). For my fashion designs, I always do a little image of how the design could be used (for example a sketch of a t-shirt with the design as a print), and for the furnishing designs I include an image of how the design looks in repeat and maybe a couple of additional colourways. If I'm working directly for a client, I might do several quite similar designs and let them choose the one they want - normally this means that you can't then sell the ones that look very similar.

How long do you work on a project?
Anywhere between a few hours and a few weeks. Normally less time rather than more.

How many projects do you work on at one point?
Normally no more than two or three.

How do you personally find juggling more than one project at once, if you do? How do you manage your time?
Prioritising carefully, being honest with clients about how quickly they can expect something, never underestimating how much admin is involved in running your own business.

How do you keep your work fresh and to the standard required?
Drawing is the most important part. (I never buy and seldom refer to any form of published predictions or forecasts.) The agency I'm with produces idea sheets about twice a year after very chaotic (but ace) meetings with all the designers, but these very consciously try to break new ground and we don't really have to stick to them that much if we don't want to. I do spend a lot of time, however, looking at contemporary culture (whatever that means). I read magazines, buy lots of books, keep an eye on graphic design / illustration / fine art / photography / graffiti, do lots of browsing on the web, go to exhibitions etc.

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Media, traditional materials and CAD / IT

Do your clients prefer your designs being painted and drawn by hand or computer generated?
It depends on the client. Pretty much all the work I do starts off hand drawn or painted; even if it ends up as a digital image, I think (hope!) that shows and helps sell the design. There might be a bit of backlash against CAD, but to be honest I think the market has got used to it now and wants good ideas well communicated, whatever the media. From personal experience, clients seem to like the fact that drawing is central to what I do, but also that I've got good CAD skills.

What's your favourite medium?
I like working in almost any media except oil paint (then again, I like printing with oil based inks). I'm particularly fond of pencil, acrylic paint, collage (esp. with tissue paper) and Adobe© Photoshop©. Recently I've also done a lot of mono-printing and I use Adobe© Illustrator© more and more.

Which media do you prefer working in, CAD or traditional painting?
I like working in both, and use both on a daily basis. I generally find that most of my work starts in some kind of traditional media, normally drawing.

How big are your designs?
It depends on what the designs are going to be used for - I (obviously) always do them the size that they would be printed, so if (for example) it was a T-shirt image, it might be quite small. Having said that, I normally work on about 30cm x 40cm for fashion. For furnishing this can go much, much bigger - the standard repeat size I work to is 69cm x 64cm, but I have designed as large as 140cm x 200cm.

What resolution do you work with for raster / bitmap designs?
300 dpi and full size, unless a client specifically requests otherwise. The 140cm x 200cm design mentioned above was quite a large file...

What file formats do you use?
I normally work in .PSD or .AI. If working in the former, I provide copies as .TIF and sometimes with the latter .JPG. Often clients will have very particular requirements.

What software do you use?
Adobe© Creative© Suite©.

What sort of computers do you use?
PCs, running Windows© XP©.

How do you keep your drawing fresh?
When I was at college, one of the tutors said something along the lines of "drawing should be a way of asking visual questions, a process of finding out about what's in front of you". I think that sums a lot of it up. I try never to assume anything about what's I'm drawing; I attempt to forget what it is and make some sense of what my eyes find when they really look. I try to draw a bit every day – I think that this is probably the most important thing, along with drawing stuff you're interested in.

How long do you spend sourcing new drawings for a project?
Completely depends on the deadline. (Working professionally, you generally have very little time – what most clients call "research" is in fact ideas for final designs. Probably one of the biggest differences between a student project and a professional one is how little time you have to research in the latter.)

What spurs you on in your work?
Drawing and colour spur me on in the sense that they remain the absolute bedrock of what I do. I tend to be quite unsatisfied with a lot of what I do, which is good, because it makes me want to improve all the time. Put another way, I think my stuff is rubbish and everyone else's is fab, which makes me neurotic, but driven.

Being Freelance

What would you say are the advantages of working freelance rather than working in a studio?
I like being my own boss (although I'm a bit of a slave driver). My ambitions have changed a little since I started (I used to do some fine art, plus illustration that wasn't fashion and textile related), but I like the variety of working for different clients, doing (say) contract furnishings one week and high street fashion the next. I don't think you can be nearly as flexible in a studio set up.

Will I have to work hard if I'm freelance?
Be prepared to work very, very hard. Think run up to degree show, add an extra bit and imagine that pretty much the whole year round, especially when you first start. You do need to be really self motivated, especially if things aren't selling. This isn't meant to put you off; if you love doing it, it will be fine, but unless you're very, very lucky, it is a lot of work.

Is it important to hit deadlines and answer briefs?
Being able to keep to deadlines and briefs is completely important – if you produce something that is too late and isn't what the client wanted anyway, they are unlikely to use you again.

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What made you go freelance?
I chose to go freelance because I thought it would give me more variety and challenges. I like working in lots of different styles and really like being my own boss. Doing this is definitely a vocation for me rather than just a job. I'm very lucky. I know what I want to do, I get to spend all day doing it, and people seem to want to give me money for doing it.

What advice would you give the following advice to people getting started freelance?
To a large degree, it's not what you know but who you know. This is a cliché, but is very true. Your address book should be one of you most prized possessions and you should always be adding to it.
Don't wait for people to come to you. It's vital you get your work seen. Get it out there, knock on doors. Art and design is a worldwide business - don't be afraid of trying to make contacts anywhere.
Don't be scared. The worst that can happen is that someone can say no. If they do, be polite and ask them if there's anyone else they know you might be interested in what you do.
Be patient. It can take months or even years for a client to get back to you.
Be prepared to work very hard.
Never, ever be tempted to mess with copyright laws.   It's a surprisingly small world and if you rip some people off, others won't touch you with a bargepole.
Be flexible, but not stupidly so. You should try and say "yes, I can do that for you" to as many clients as possible (especially when you first set up), but you need to be realistic about what is physically possible for one person to do in the allotted time.
Don't waste any time doing lots of research to find the best bank; they're all pretty much the same. If ethical investment is important, go with a co-op. You should have a business account, but if you trade in your own name and don't tell the bank, you can just make this a normal current account and not have pay business account charges.
Keep on top of your books (accounts). If you don't think you can do this, or if you're just starting out, get a good accountant.
Self-motivation is vital; you also need to be able to enjoy working under pressure and to have good time management skills.
Finally, if you enjoy doing the designs, it will show. Don't forget to have fun.

What's the biggest different between being a student and working freelance?
The time factor. Generally speaking, you have to work much, much faster that when you're a student and you don't have a lot of time to explore heaps of different ideas. It's important to get good at quickly working out if an idea has legs (or if it is good, but not right in this particular context). Of course, this is where past experience comes in handy, and these skills start to grow as a student when you have got the time. It's not unusual for me to put together a collection of ten or so designs in a couple of days.

Digital printing
Have you ever had any work done digitally? Have you any advice on that?
Yes, plus some designs I've sold have been digitally printed. I think digital printing will become more and more prevalent over the next few years. The chief problems at the moment are cost (but it is cheaper for very short runs in comparison to setting up screens), colour matching (expensive to get perfect, but the unlimited colour and blending effects with digital printing are a big plus), depth of colour (the dyestuff doesn't penetrate as deeply as a screen print), detail (I've yet to see a digital print that was as sharp as a screen print - although people said the same about screen printing when it took over from roller printing) and somewhat limited use of dyestuff and fabric.

Professional practice and working in the creative industries
How did you get into your chosen profession?
First, parents who encouraged me to draw when they saw I liked doing it. They used to give me big rolls of lining paper and leave me to it - lots of dinosaurs and then battle scenes that involved no historical accuracy what-so-ever (e.g. a tiger in a suit of armour parachuting into the fray).
Secondly, ace art teacher at school who taught us a whole load of mono-printing and screen printing techniques. A few of us loved this so much (or were very swotty, depending on how you look at it) that he blagged a load of photo silkscreen materials and showed us even more. One of the first things I did was a 1.5m x 4m repeat print bedspread of Siouxsie Sioux (ask yer dad) in a style that owed everything to Andy Warhol's "Marilyn Monroe". That was it, really. (Lots of T-shirts of ropey post-punk bands came next.)
The only thing I don't like about freelancing at the moment is that I don't have the facilities to do screen printing in my studio.
Finally, me deciding that I wasn't an electronic engineer, which is what I first attempted when I left school. My timing was woeful; I got out about the time history says that getting into computing was a really good idea. No regrets, mind.

When did you reach the point in your career when you decided to become a freelance designer?
I did it for almost two years when I finished my MA (mainly theatre set design / textile art / part time teaching). After that I lectured full time for seven years, then did six years of just freelancing. Now I do lecturing and freelancing.

Which designs have given you the most satisfaction/success so far?
To be honest, it's always good when anything sells and it's even better when you see it in a shop. I think my three favourite moments have been:
1 Sitting in a bar and spotting someone in one of my tee-shirts just as a friend said, "What are you up to now?"
2 Selling a design in 2.0 x 1.4m repeat on its very first showing.
3 Idly looking at tops in Oilily (Dutch fashion company) and thinking "that looks vaguely familiar". Brainy then realised it was because I'd done it.

How do you advertise your work?
At the moment, I don't really advertise my work in the sense of buying space in magazines or the Yellow Pages, although I am on some business directories. This is mainly because what I do is fairly specialist and I think (for me) it's better to either approach potential clients directly, or to sell via an agent. Please don't take this as being any kind of rule about how you have to do things if you're a freelance designer; I love creating new work and aim to spend as much time doing that as possible, but I'm realistic enough to know that promotion is really important.

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Why do you do what you do?
This might sound a bit simple, but because I really like it. It's really difficult (which is a good thing), but deeply satisfying. Doing this is definitely a vocation for me rather than just a job.

Can you describe your typical day in the studio?
There isn't really such a thing, but... I start work around 08:30 or 09:00. Check e-mails, do any urgent admin, drink coffee. Then I design stuff until lunchtime (around 12:30), then go on working after lunch until about 18:00, maybe later if I've got a deadline or I'm really into something. It doesn't sound terribly exciting, but I love it. You can replace the words "design stuff" with "draw stuff" or "work on new ideas" or "work on a client's brief" if you like.

Do you get annoyed of sticking to a strict design brief?
Some of the work I do has an absolutely fixed brief and that's fine. Some of the work I do has almost no brief at all other than "it has to be printable" and that's fine too. If someone is paying you to do something specific with your time and skills and you give them something else a) they probably won't pay you and b) they won't trouble you for any business in future. If you went into a shop to buy a tee-shirt and they took your money and gave you a couple of pairs of socks that didn't fit, you'd be (understandably) annoyed (if you see what I mean). A very big part of being a good designer is being able to answer a brief well. Sometimes this will be very fixed, sometimes this with be to make something that makes someone's jaw drop (or both).

How do you see your work developing in the future?
Having dabbled a bit with art and illustration, I'm now reverting to more and more straightforward textile design work - I'm particularly keen to build up the furnishing side of things. I think this will change a bit due to increased use of digital printing by manufacturers. Technology-wise, I think vector (e.g. Adobe© Illustrator©) based skills will become more prevalent in textiles too. I'm hoping to learn some programming skills to make generative images and I wouldn't mind getting to grips with some 3D software. Equally, I hope to not use a computer at all for extended periods of time. I expect to be doing lots of drawing and colouring in (I'm being deadly serious).
To be honest, I don't really know, and that's the exciting part.

CVs

What should my CV look like?
Make sure your CV is up to date, interesting and is well designed. Have a small, beautifully presented selection of copies of your work to send out too, and include a covering letter that explains why you think the recipient might be interested. Try to think how you can make it a pleasure for a potential employer to look through (but keep it professional).
According to their CVs, everyone is hard-working, highly talented, motivated etc. - you must give evidence of this, not just say you are. (Secretly, I'd love it if I got a CV that said "I'm a work-shy clock-watcher with negligible talent and a chronic lack of ambition", but don't start...)
Although I can't offer any type of employment or placements at the moment, I get quite a few CVs sent to me, and it amazes me how often they have:
- mistakes with spelling / grammar (if the CV is in your first language, this is unforgivable and if it isn't you should try to get a native speaker to run through it first)
- bad layout / print quality
- not considered why they might be of interest (in other words that they know what a potential employer actually does and why they could help with this)
Opinions on this vary, but I'd recommend sending stuff out via snail mail rather than e-mail and then following it up with a phone call a couple of weeks later. (A lot of people won't open attachments from unknown senders.)

Agents

How did you find your textile agent?
Before I started freelancing, I'd built up a collection of market research on agents, mainly from trade fairs (such as Indigo). I put together a CD of my designs, and sent it out to about 30 agencies I thought might be interested. Most I never heard back from; one (in the US I don't really work for any more) took me on the strength of the CD, another wasn't so keen about the CD, but really liked my web site, interviewed me with a portfolio and took me on (I now do the majority of my work with them). I've also worked with agencies who approached me (very flattering), an agency who I approached at a trade fair and agencies who've advertised in the press / on the web.

How can I find a textile agent?
This is probably the question I get asked the most... To contact agents, try and get hold of catalogues for the design bit of trade fairs such as Indigo, Heimtex, Surtex etc - the exhibitors are either agents or freelance studios. (Sometimes these also get posted on the web.) If you visit a trade fair (and you really should), bear in mind that the agents who exhibit have paid a lot of money for their space and are there to sell, and may give you quite short shrift - don't try and show them your work at the trade fair. If their stand looks quiet, however, you can try to make an appointment to visit them at a later date. If you can't do this, just get the address, and write to them, enclosing some good photos or copies of a few of your best bits of work. Don't expect replies, but they will contact you if they like your work.

What might a textile agent want to see in a portfolio?
Your portfolio should show you can work in a reasonable variety of different ways, but still put a collection of designs together (by this I mean have, say, seven or eight designs based around one theme, but able to stand alone, and then another group based on something different, another on something else and so on). The folio should show you can use colour well, and (particularly for fashion) can do summer and winter collections. It's vital too that you've designed with a product in mind - include garment visualisations of some sort (or of whatever the product is). Strong drawing and painting skills (in whatever media you use, could be CAD) are handy; I'd also suggest trying to figure out what could make your work unique and building on that. You should have (and show you have) a reasonable awareness of current markets and trends; from personal experience, I'd suggest that this can be as

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broad as you like - if you have an interest in contemporary art, graphics, illustration and so on that may help. Don't take too much to an interview unless they ask for it.

Do you recommend working with an agent?
For a lot of what I do, definitely. For other people, I think it depends on many things, but the main two are firstly to try and work out if the process of designing that suits you best would work with an agent and secondly to think about the money. For the first, some people don't want to be actually designing all the time - they find visiting lots of companies or trade fairs inspiring. Personally, I really like to spend as much time as possible creating new work; although I do work directly with some firms and visit exhibitions / fairs to research, I find that the day to day running of my own business means quite enough non-design work, especially now I spend the majority of my time lecturing. Also, I'm not very good at pestering people to see my designs! With the money, you basically have to balance the time and costs you would spend taking your portfolio to show with the commission cost that an agent would charge (see below). If an agent exhibits at a fair and doesn't sell anything, they've lost the money not you, but if they sell a lot, then they make a lot of money from you. From another point of view, I'm very lucky that I have an excellent working relationship with my main textile agent. When I started, I wasn't sure I'd need this type of input (which was frankly arrogant), but in fact I really like it. The other thing is that I find really important is that he really likes me to take risks and try out new ideas.

How regularly do you keep in contact with your main textile agent, and how do you keep in touch?
It depends a bit. If I'm working on a collection for him, I'll basically contact him whenever I need too. On average, I'd say we're in touch about once a fortnight, normally by phone.

How do you work with your Agent?
Some collections I do without any input from him at all; more usually, we tend to go through ideas – this is very informal, and is basically us getting excited about groovy stuff we've seen, found or made. Often I'll do a collection based on one of these chats. About two times a year, he gets all his designers together (normally before he does a big trade fair), and presents three or four themes. We have a bit of a brainstorm but it's sort of up to us to what extent we use them. (These meetings were the root of Mokummania trend book.)

What else do I need to know about textile agents?
If you get an interview with an agent, do use it to find out about them too - if they're any good, they won't mind telling you who they sell to, how long their designers stay with them and what sort of clients they sell to. Obviously you'll sort out percentages - 40 to 50% (to the agent) is typical for international sales; you should also establish if they'll let you work with anyone else, exactly what format they want you to work in, and so on. Some agents charge less than this, but ask for a flat fee per trip, regardless of any sales.

Miscellaneous

What's your favourite colour?
Lime green. I'm also very fond of yellow ochre and ultramarine. Frankly, people don't ask me this question enough, probably because asking me anything about colour will result in an over-long and over-enthusiastic reply. (Somebody told me once that you can sell a bad textile design with good colour, but you can't sell a good design with bad colour. This is almost always true.)