What is a design process?

When you are working on a creative project of any sort, it’s useful to develop a design process so that you can concentrate your effort into the creative production without having to look sideways at every stage to make sure that you are remembering all of the technical steps.

Having a design process also gives you your own set of rules to break. Rules give you something to hang your creativity from on the way to completing your project.

So here is just one design process; look at it, evaluate it, then develop your own process.

Identify and define

Ask yourself about the project: Who is it for? Who is the target audience? What should it do? Are there any specifications or constraints for example size, cost, time etc.?

Try to find a focus for the project. You can always go back and redefine this focus, but it will give you a solid starting point.

Research and develop

This is the stage to ask questions; get as much information as possible from your client or the person/company that you are making the project for. But don’t stop there; find out what competitors have and look like. Research the area they are involved in. Collect together ideas, drawings, photos, images, words, typefaces, magazine clippings, print materials, screenshots...everything and anything.

Brainstorm; draw and sketch ideas for the project; you’ll find a pen and paper much more flexible than a computer for this stage.

Try word maps/spider diagrams to expand your ideas.

Try to develop at least two concepts for each project.

Evaluate and refine

After you’ve created some initial designs and ideas, evaluate them.

Identify which of your concepts you like best and why. Try to be objective, and refer back to the project identification and requirements.

Develop your best concepts further. Re-evaluate and decide which one(s) you want to produce.

After this stage you might need to present your concepts to the client.

Collect and structure

Collect together all of the information that you need to present on the website; both images and text. Don’t wait for your client! If content isn’t forthcoming, use placeholder text and images; once they see your fantastic design they’ll be falling over themselves to get the content to you.

Structure the site semantically using HTML and XHTML.

Layout and style

Use CSS to style your HTML markup, at each stage testing the page or pages in the target browsers.

Use standards-compliant CSS wherever possible; if you find yourself trying to find non-standard solutions to problems, approach the problem from a different angle; refine your design if necessary.

Add ‘extras’; animations, Javascripts, sound etc. at the end of the project.

Test and adjust

As well as testing your site for technical problems throughout the build, you should also dedicate a portion of time towards the end of the project for user testing; watch other people using your site.

Can they find their way around? Do they know where to click? Can they find the information they need? Survey them afterwards to find out whether they had a pleasant experience negotiating your site.

Based on that user testing, make any necessary adjustments to the site. Don’t be precious! Listen to your audience and if they consistently don’t like something, get rid of it!

Finish and present

The presentation of your final design solution is an important consideration, especially if you are dealing with a client. Make sure all of the technical aspects of a presentation will go smoothly; don’t waste your client’s time by setting up equipment in front of them.

Make sure that all of the files you hand over to a client are neat; in a couple of your time someone else might need to decipher and adjust your design and code.