GRAPHIC DESIGN STUDIO PRACTICE

Spring 2026

CFA AR 523

Professional practice

LEVEL	BFA · Professional practice
CREDITS	4
MEETS	Wednesdays, 2:30–5:15 PM · Section A1
DATES	January 21 – April 29, 2026
LOCATION	[confirm]
INSTRUCTOR	Associate Professor Nicholas Rock
OFFICE	808 Commonwealth Ave — 406A
CONTACT	nickrock@bu.edu
OFFICE HOURS	By appointment — Tuesdays and Thursdays 10:30–12:30, Wednesdays 11:30–2:30 · fantastical.app/nick-kSSb/office-hours

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Overview

> *"To be a good artist / letterer / designer / guitar player, it takes practice. A lot of it. More than you can even fathom when you're starting out." — Jessica Hische, Letterer and Designer*

What This Course Is About

You're good at design. But being good at design isn't enough to have a career in design.

This course focuses on the professional practices that support a sustainable and meaningful career in graphic design. While studio courses emphasize making, this class centers on how designers work in the world—how they communicate, collaborate, present ideas, navigate clients, price work, and articulate value.

We'll engage with the practical skills, real-world scenarios, and professional habits that designers are expected to develop but are rarely explicitly taught. You'll build tools,

documents, and confidence that extend beyond the classroom and into internships, freelance work, and full-time roles.

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Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Articulate your skills, interests, and point of view clearly and confidently
- Present work professionally to peers, clients, and employers
- Develop polished resumes, portfolios, and professional profiles ready for real use
- Understand pricing, proposals, and contracts and how to negotiate your value
- Communicate effectively in professional settings across different contexts
- Navigate collaboration, feedback, and critique with confidence and professionalism
- Understand multiple career paths within graphic design and make informed decisions

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Course Structure

Our Professional Community

We are a group of design professionals. This isn't a typical classroom dynamic—we're colleagues preparing to enter (or advance in) the design industry together. We come from different backgrounds, with different experiences, career goals, and definitions of success. Some of you want to freelance. Some want to work in agencies. Some want in-house roles. Some don't know yet. All of these paths are valid, and we'll prepare for all of them.

We operate as professionals:

- We show up prepared and on time
- We give and receive honest, constructive feedback
- We support each other's growth and success
- We treat this space as we would a professional studio

We embrace diverse perspectives: Our cohort includes people from all over the world with varied backgrounds and experiences. We learn from each other's different approaches to professionalism, communication styles, and career aspirations. We commit to understanding each other through the contexts of culture, identity, and lived experience.

We practice honesty over performance: Professional practice requires talking about money, rejection, failure, and fear. These aren't comfortable topics, but we'll tackle them with honesty and mutual support. Real professional development happens when we're willing to be honest about what we don't know and what we're struggling with.

We stay flexible and adaptable: I made a syllabus and a schedule. I will shift and adjust the work and the due dates to adapt to our class and what opportunities arise. This mirrors professional practice, where adaptability is essential.

I'm here to support your success: My role is part instructor, part mentor, part connector. I'm committed to helping you grow and learn, and I'm committed to learning from you. If you're struggling with anything—course content, workload, job search stress, career decisions, life stuff—talk to me early. I can't help if I don't know what's going on.

Five Parts

This course is organized into modules that mirror common stages of professional development:

PART	WEEKS	FOCUS
1 · Professional Identity	1–4	Articulating who you are, what you do, and how you present yourself
2 · Client Communication	5–8	Presenting work, writing proposals, pricing, and managing relationships
3 · Production & Tools	9–10	File preparation, commercial printing, and professional workflows
4 · Professional Contexts	11–13	Studio visits, career paths, and industry perspectives
5 · Launch	14	Final presentations and individual consultations

Course Values

This course values:

- **Honesty over performance** — Be real about what you know and don't know
- **Clarity over jargon** — Communicate directly and plainly
- **Curiosity over certainty** — Ask questions, explore options
- **Preparation over improvisation** — Show up ready
- **Respect for diverse career paths** — There's no single "right" way to be a designer

Professional practice is not about having all the answers—it's about learning how to navigate uncertainty with intention and care.

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Projects

Assignments in this course are practical and cumulative. They're designed to be directly usable beyond the course.

Major Deliverables

1. Professional Resume — Due Week 3
2. Professional Bio — Due Week 4
3. Pecha Kucha Presentation — Due Week 4
4. Client Presentation — Due Week 7
5. Project Proposal — Due Week 8
6. Portfolio (website or PDF) — Due Week 11
7. Written Reflections — Printing tour + 2 studio visits
8. Final Professional Package — Due Week 14

All assignments must be completed according to the brief and submitted on time. Emphasis is placed on clarity, seriousness of effort, and responsiveness to feedback rather than polish alone.

GameDay

Concept presentations · Weeks 8–9 · brief given verbally in class

Studio Visits & Guest Speakers

Studio visits. TBD. Before each visit: research the studio thoroughly · prepare 3 thoughtful questions · dress professionally (business casual). After each visit: written reflection on Basecamp.

Commercial printing tour. Meridian Printing (meridianprinting.com) — Week 11 (April 8).

Guest speakers. We'll host 3 guest speakers throughout the semester from various areas of design practice: Erin Kelly, Julie Ostrow and Nikita Singh. Before each guest: research their work · prepare 2 questions.

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Assessment

AREA	WEIGHT	WHAT IT COVERS
Engagement & Participation	30%	Attend class and participate actively in conversations · engage respectfully with peers and guest speakers · contribute to critique and feedback sessions · practice professional communication—listening, asking questions, offering feedback

AREA	WEIGHT	WHAT IT COVERS
Assignment Completion	50%	Meeting the requirements of each brief · clarity and professional quality · responsiveness to feedback · seriousness of effort
Professionalism	20%	Written and verbal communication · in-class behavior and preparedness · respect for others' time and work · meeting deadlines and commitments

This course depends on discussion, presence, and shared experience.

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Calendar

WEEK	DATE	TOPIC	IN CLASS	DUE / ASSIGNMENT
1	Jan 21	Introduction & Current State	Course overview and expectations · discussion: first steps in presenting yourself to prospective employers and clients · what alums say about the transition to professional practice · introduction to the Professional Identity Package (semester-long project)	Bring your current resume and portfolio (even if rough) to Week 2
2	Jan 28	Resume & Portfolio Workshop	Peer review and critique of current materials · what makes a standout resume and portfolio · workshop: refining resumes + PDF portfolios · examples of strong and weak materials	Due: current resume and portfolio · revise resume · begin refining portfolio (5–7 strongest projects)
3	Feb 4	Personal Storytelling & Presentation Skills	Telling your personal story authentically · writing exercise: professional bio (150 words) · talking about yourself without sounding rehearsed · Pecha Kucha format and expectations	Due: revised resume · draft 3-minute Pecha Kucha (10 slides × 20 seconds) · write bio · practice (timing is strict!)
4	Feb 11	Pecha Kucha Presentations	Each person presents (3 min) · what landed, what could be stronger · effective vs. awkward presentations	Due: Pecha Kucha + bio · refine bio
5	Feb 18	Proposals & Scope of Work	Lecture: anatomy of a proposal (scope, deliverables, timeline, budget) · proposal tips · defining scope (what's in, what's out)	

WEEK	DATE	TOPIC	IN CLASS	DUE / ASSIGNMENT
6	Feb 25	Presenting Creative Work	Guest speaker: Erin Kelly · professional client communication basics · structuring creative presentations · case studies of client presentations	Prepare a 10-minute project presentation as if to a client (problem, process, solution, rationale)
7	Mar 4	Client Presentations & Feedback	Present design work as if to a client · peer feedback on clarity · managing difficult client feedback · translating “I don’t like it” into actionable direction	Due: client presentation · draft a project proposal for a hypothetical or real client
8	Mar 18	Pricing, Billing & Contracts	How do you price design work? · contracts, licensing and usage rights · invoices and estimates · invoicing platforms and business systems	Coming up: project proposal · finish GameDay concept presentations
9	Mar 25	File Prep & Print Production	Guest speaker: Julie Ostrow · GameDay concept presentations in class	
10	Apr 1	Preparing Files for Print	Lecture: preparing files for commercial printing · preflight, packaging, specifications · working with print vendors · common mistakes	Prepare print-ready file + print request · research printing facility before tour · update web portfolio
11	Apr 8	Commercial Printing Facility Tour (tentative)	Field trip: Meridian Printing · tour of commercial printing processes · Q&A with print professionals	Due: portfolio update
12	Apr 15	Studio Visit #1	Studio visit: TBD (pinkergreen.com) · studio tour and conversation · comparative observation (before: research the studio, prepare 3 questions)	Due: studio visit #1 reflection · comparative analysis of both studios (750 words) · finalize all materials
13	Apr 22	Portfolio Review & Networking	Guest speaker: Nikita Singh · updated portfolios + resumes · peer feedback · career paths and next steps	Due: comparative studio analysis · final polish on materials
14	Apr 29	Individual Consultations (optional)	One-on-one meetings by appointment: career guidance · portfolio and job search support · specific questions	

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Materials & Tools

Required Texts

1. *Graphic Artists Guild Handbook: Pricing & Ethical Guidelines*, 16th edition (2023).
2. Monteiro, Mike. *Design Is a Job* (A Book Apart, 2012). Client relationships and professional boundaries.

Readings, resources, and links will be provided throughout the semester. Most materials will be short, applied, and discussed in class.

Professional Tools

Throughout the course, you'll become familiar with tools that professional designers use:

- **Portfolio & presentation** — Adobe Portfolio, Squarespace, Cargo, or custom website · PDF portfolio best practices · presentation software (Keynote, PowerPoint, Google Slides)
- **Business & communication** — invoicing platforms (Studioworks, FreshBooks, Wave, Harvest) · project management tools (Asana, Notion, Basecamp) · communication tools (Slack, email best practices)

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Policies

Attendance

Because this class meets once per week, attendance is essential.

- You get 2 absences, no questions asked
- 3rd absence drops your final grade by one letter grade
- Missing a studio visit or guest speaker counts as 2 absences
- Late (>15 minutes) = half absence
- If you must miss class, email me before class begins

Much of the value of this course comes from discussion, guest speakers, and shared context, which cannot be replicated outside the classroom.

Late Work

Extensions available for legitimate emergencies—talk to me early.

Communication

Email me at nickrock@bu.edu (response within 24–48 hours on weekdays). Book office hours: fantastical.app/nick-kSSb/office-hours. If you're struggling with anything, talk to me early.

Academic Integrity

Present your own work. Cite sources. Don’t plagiarize. If you use AI tools (ChatGPT, etc.) for writing or content generation, disclose it and explain how it was used. Using AI without attribution is plagiarism.

Accessibility

If you need accommodations, please contact me and BU’s Office of Disability & Access Services. I’m committed to making this course accessible for everyone.

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Resources

- AIGA (professional organization)
- Design job boards
- Boston design community events
- Online learning platforms

Specific resources and links will be shared as relevant to weekly topics.

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Closing

This course is meant to be useful.

The goal is for you to leave with tools, language, and confidence that you can carry forward into your professional life. Not theoretical knowledge—practical skills you’ll use immediately.

Show up. Participate. Be honest about what you don’t know. Support your colleagues. Take this seriously, but don’t take yourself too seriously.

Let’s get to work.