



Inside Design

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FREELANCING

The freelancer's guide to getting hired full time

10 min read



We recently hired for a designer position at [Scout Books](#). We got over 150 applications that we had to sift, filter, sort, rate, interview, interview again, and finally, make the offer. The move to hiring for a full-time designer was a pretty significant move for us, and a departure from having design done by one of our co-founders—someone who grew the brand from scratch.

Our new designer will touch every customer file that moves to print, and they'll be a significant contributor to the voice of our brand. After going through so many candidates, we wanted to share some tips on putting your best foot forward if you're a designer looking to move to a full-time position.



Images: Scout Books

Leverage your extra skills

One of the things we noticed right off the bat was how many designers were transitioning from [freelance work](#) to a full-time gig. Not a total surprise for us—our biggest single demographic of both customers and clients are designers, so we know that world well. What surprised us more was the difference in how well applicants leveraged freelance experience in their applications.

Especially as a small business, many of the skills outside the typical toolbox of a designer are extremely useful to us. Our team is comprised less than 20 people.

We all wear a lot of hats, often rolling what could be several jobs into one position. Every employee here needs to be self-directed and work with little management.

Does this sound familiar to you, freelancers? If you're a freelancer, you're also a small business owner, a project manager, a marketer, a webmaster, a social media manager, an accountant, and a customer service representative. Make it count and sell us on that experience!

“Getting hired comes down to giving the hiring manager as few reasons to say no as possible.”



We get it: when you apply to a job, it's really hard to promote your own work. But when it comes down to hiring, exceptional skills, an outstanding portfolio, and the ability to meet deadlines are table stakes. Every serious candidate will have high-quality work, so it comes down to this: what other outstanding qualities make you the one we can't turn down? Do you know CSS? Can you whip up a landing page in your sleep? Are you a wizard with spreadsheets and time management because you ran your own business? Have you developed [empathy](#) and those ever elusive "soft skills" that make you a dream to work with? Let us know—and most importantly, prove it.

To be clear, this isn't saying to *focus* on things outside what the job description is asking for. It's to acknowledge that, to a certain extent, those are table stakes for any quality applicant. What makes you the one we hire versus the 20 other people just as qualified is probably going to be hashed out in other things you can bring to the table.

Related: [8 things to know about building a design portfolio](#)



One of our teammates at the Scout Books headquarters

Polish your portfolio

Okay, this one seems obvious, but it's an area where you really can't afford any mistakes. If there's one thing that needs to be tight and leave an impression, it's your portfolio, AKA your website. Beautiful Behance, [Dribbble](#), and Instagram profiles are great, but they should be icing on the cake. A place that you've designed from start to finish is a chance to prove your skills and bring it all together. Portfolio websites are particularly revealing because they show what you care about. How's the UX? Is your page bursting with color? Movingly minimalist? How clearly are you communicating what you did for each project

and why:

Here are a few tips for adding that extra layer of polish that will please any potential employer (or any new gig!)

- Speed. Matters. The person reviewing your application will likely have 5 minutes or less to look over everything, including your website. Value speed over flair every time.
- Check every link, especially your social handles. A hiring decision will come down to a synthesis of thousands of little impressions, and hiring managers are basically looking for reasons to say no. Don't give them any—especially on the little things that you should be getting right.
- Include only your very best work. Highlighting fewer projects you're the most proud of is usually better than sharing more with mixed quality. Edit, edit, and edit again. When in doubt, ask a trusted friend who's familiar with design to let you know what's working.
- Tell a story. Why did the client need your work? How did you meet their needs? A gallery full of JPGs (or PNGs) is so much more effective if you can tell us what we're looking at.
- If you aren't sure how your portfolio comes off, show it to a friend who hasn't seen it and watch what they look at. Do they understand your work? What do they miss? Try not to explain it away. Listen and take notes on changes you might be able to make so you can put your best digital foot forward.

“Your portfolio should showcase only your very best work.”



How about that cover letter?

Ah, the cover letter. In one page or less, please share about your personality (while not getting too serious), why you'd be the perfect fit for the job (without retreading your resume), tell us why we're a perfect match (but don't lie), and make it funny (but not too funny). Quite the trick! There's a lot of great advice out there on crafting the perfect cover letter, but here are a few things that surfaced for us after looking through hundreds of applicants.

- Use bullet points. It's a great way to call out specifics in a sea of text.
- Drop "To whom it may concern." Talk like yourself. Try "Dear team at [company]" or "Dear [company]" even "Hello!" if the company you're applying for seems casual. Avoid naming anyone specifically unless you're 100% sure they're going to make the decision. We share our applications with 2-4 people on a hiring committee. If you address it to only one person, you've just distanced yourself from everyone else on the committee.
- Make things easy to find. Link to your portfolio in your cover letter. Don't make people dig around in PDF for a link (but make sure it's there as well).
- Provide a specific experience in your cover letter. Everybody is "excited" and "passionate" about the job they're applying for. Use a specific experience with the company or area of expertise that gives us something to remember you by.
- Emphasize the company, not just the position. On top of hiring you for your specific skill set, you're going to be a part of our team culture. Let us know that you'll be buying in to the company with your whole self, not just showing up to do the job.
- Don't leave anything (relevant) out. References upon request is fine, but outside of that, if you want us to see something you've got to include it. We're not going to ask.



Show that you can work on a team

Being a freelancer may mean that you have a ton of awesome, useful skills outside of design, but one thing that we like to look out for is how well you'd play in a team environment. At Scout Books we're a highly collaborative team, but this applies to anywhere you'll be applying. You're no longer the lone wolf, and, yeah, you'll have a boss. How well do you take feedback? Can you roll with someone else's creative decisions, even if you don't agree with them? Can you state your opinion without being overly attached to it? A lot of these are skills that you pick up doing freelance work, and they're great to highlight!

We also noticed a certain carelessness when it came to dates on previous employment. Those details matter too, so be sure to include them—even if you're getting fancy with the design of your resume. A great way to demonstrate all this is to show the customer service experience side of your freelance business. You should have a few interactions in the bank that you can reference if you're asked about turning a tricky situation around, or delighting a customer. Ultimately, every business in the world wants to make sure their customers are happy.



Making Scout Books

A meme is not a joke

One of the things we ask for from every applicant is their favorite joke. This has become one of our favorite tools to see how closely applicants read and follow instructions. Plus it gives us an idea of what people find funny, which is a great indicator of a good culture fit.

In our latest hiring, 16.5% of our applicants failed to submit a joke at all. It's not an automatic "no," but it signifies to us that all that "attention to detail" in your cover letter is more talk than walk. If we ask you to submit your resume as a PDF, don't submit it as a .doc or .pages—we want a PDF! Details matter.

Also: a meme is not a joke! We appreciate a good meme or [GIF](#) as much as the next person, but when we ask for a joke, we want a joke! Save your cat memes for your first day on [Slack](#).

The devil is in the details

As you can see, so much of this stuff is just the nitty-gritty details of getting the little things right. It really comes down to giving whoever is in charge of hiring as few reasons to say no as possible. In the first round, all a hiring manager is looking for is a way to whittle down the pile of applications on their desk. Later on in the process, it becomes about finding the perfect match. So many of the issues we see on the regular are things that could be solved by submitting your application to someone with an eye for writing, style, and typos! It's tough, but if you're applying for that #dreamjob, isn't it worth it to spend an hour with a friend going over your materials?

Good luck!

Hopefully that helps you get that perfect application ready as you transition from freelance to a full-time position, or even just land your next gig! Did we help you out? Let us know on [Twitter](#), and check out the beautiful books our clients are designing around the world every day on [Instagram](#).

If you're interested in putting your creative energy to work at Scout Books, they're hiring! [See their careers page for details on applying](#). Applications are