21 Graphic Design Tools You Can’t Live Without

No designer can push boundaries without having the right graphic design tools by their side. In fact, think of graphic design tools as your right-hand man. You see, the graphic design industry comes with a lot of surprises—good surprises, of course. Aspiring graphic designer’s often enter into the industry expecting one thing, only to have their education and experience shed a new light on what a career in graphic design could actually be.

Art and technology can be combined in surprising ways to

create practical, purposeful and beautiful things. The industry is constantly evolving to pave a path towards more creative freedom and lucrative career opportunities. One designer's career may be very conventional at first and then they might end up pursuing an opportunity they could have never dreamed of.

Your creative liberties are endless. Unlike other careers, your education should teach you to break the rules and shatter preconceived notions, not conform to "norms" that promise comfort and safety. Soon enough, you could be using Jungian psychology, gothic architecture and Malevich's *Black Square* as influences when designing your own controversial typefaces. Anything less and you may have never heard of Jonathan Barnbrooke.

In order to stay agile and easily adapt to whatever the situation calls for, you'll find yourself using a wide range of graphic design tools and hardware. That's why we put together this list of the 21 most important tools no designer should live without in 2020.

1. Notebooks

> ***This is a no-brainer. No creative is ever without a notebook at home or in their bag. Smart notepads and other digital tools are great tools for graphic designers to have, but nothing can beat a good old-fashioned paper notebook.***

Every creative has a preference between softcover or hardcover; between a small or large-sized notebook. Whatever your preferences, you need something that works for you—the perfect place for your spontaneous doodles, sketches, ideas and notes.

The quality of the paper needs to be strong enough to handle whatever type of medium you regularly use, while also

convenient enough to carry around with you to school, a coffee shop or on a bus. Take your time and invest in a high-quality notebook. Many companies have come up with a variety of notebook designs that include grids, lines, dotted pages, pockets, page markers and more.

It can be tempting to simply pick up a Moleskine at the nearest kiosk and call it a day, but with very little effort you can find a few gems that will not only warehouse all of your best ideas but might inspire a few as well.

2. Creative Software

You can sketch out a lot of designs and ideas in your notebook, but every designer should consider creative software as a necessary piece of graphic design equipment. Whether you're a little newer to graphic design software or an experienced designer, having the right digital graphic design tools can make a significant difference to your finished designs. Most are easy-to-use while also having more superior features depending on your experience level, but all give you more control in how you create.

You know a few off the top of your head, like Adobe and Sketch but there are many others to look into before you choose your favorite. Start on the cheaper side with more affordable software, but then begin to make your way up to see if there's paid software you might like a little better. Most will offer you a free trial so you can have a feel for the product before you commit to paying for it. Then, compare the features offered to the type of work you do most often.

3. Large High Definition Monitor

A large high-end monitor can seem more like a luxury than a necessity. However, the quality of the monitor you use can make a dramatic difference in the work you produce. When it

comes to monitors, most people are pretty clueless about what to look for. It’s easy to get lost in the jargon, we know. Regardless of whether or not you buy a 4K monitor, you will need to pay attention to the resolution.

Most graphic designers will choose a UHD (3840X2160 pixels) or a QHD resolution. In this case, size does matter, so most designers will tell you that between 27 and 32 inches are ideal. There are a number of other bells and whistles that you can get when setting up your workstation, but the monitor isn’t the place to cut corners.

4. Wacom Tools

No list of tools for graphic designers would be complete without a serious nod to Wacom and its line of digital tablets, styluses and software that have become an industry standard. As far as graphic design hardware is concerned, Wacom is a great fit for designers of all levels. Graphic designers love how well Wacom pens and tablets are integrated with Adobe’s suite of products, including Illustrator.

> ***Wacom’s pens deliver precision performance and a natural feel. Animations become richer and other visual effects are much simpler with pressure-sensitive pens and tablets.***

5. External Hard Drive

Having a reliable external hard drive is a necessity for anybody whose work uses a lot of data or whose work depends on so many external files. Hard drives are portable, easy to use and can provide an immense amount of storage. Even if you don’t use them to backup existing files, they can expand your computer’s storage exponentially, which is especially important for projects that include animation, film or other large files. Although external hard drives aren’t explicitly

graphic design tools, no serious designer could function without at least one.

6. Monitor Calibrator

Another piece of graphic design hardware that often goes without mentioning but is such an invaluable tool is a monitor calibrator. No matter how beautiful your photos or video turns out, your project may suffer if you find yourself working with a monitor that warps colors (I know, we just shuddered at the thought too!).

Unfortunately, this kind of warping can be hard to spot with your naked eye and, at times, nearly impossible to adjust after the fact. Of course, this assumes that you are also using a quality camera and lens and that your monitor is up to the task of displaying images that are true to life. No amount of calibration can compensate for poor-quality tools. However, using a monitor calibrator ensures that your images are just as beautiful after editing as they were when you took them, if not even more so.

7. iMac Pro

Of all of the graphic design equipment, you may have thought would be on the list, of course, the iMac Pro is one of them. How could it not be? It’s so commonly used in the creative community that it’s become the go-to hardware for design houses and ad agencies the world over. Whether you are a freelancer, student or employed by an agency, it is worth investing in an iMac. And it is an investment. This powerful tool is easily one of the most expensive all-in-one computers available to graphic designers, especially if you get the extras.

8. Procreate

Procreate is poised to take over the spot once reserved for Photoshop, with one significant drawback: it’s only designed for the iPad. Procreate allows you to create rich and detailed paintings, sketches and even animations, making it arguably one of the best tools for graphic design. It comes with an assortment of over 200 brushes that include charcoal, ink, paints and pencils—and you can even make your own custom brushes.

> ***Being able to create works with layers and texture makes it easy to see why it is one of the most useful graphic design tools around.***

9. Sketch

Photoshop used to be the be-all and end-all of digital design. But as the industry continues to evolve, so has the technology available to graphic designers. The new software has been very promising, but Sketch seems to be standing out among the rest. Sketch is a vector graphics editor with a design toolkit that can help you create amazing logos, graphics and layouts. The design of Sketch itself is slick and intuitive and its features allow you to collaborate with other users on your designs.

10. Ergonomic Furniture

Designers spend long hours at their workstations, which can lead to many different health problems over time. We know this isn’t a very positive note, but it’s also an extremely important one. You love to create, so don’t let your passion be overcome by pains and other issues that can occur from long periods of sitting or staring at a screen. What a literal pain in the neck.

This is where ergonomic furniture comes in. Consider your desk and chair just as much a part of your toolkit as your other graphic design equipment. You could even go as far as to say that a comfortable chair is one of the best tools for graphic design as comfort is just as crucial to creativity and productivity than anything else.

11. Walking/Standing Desk

When designing your workstation, whether at home or in a professional setting, we often forget that human bodies aren’t meant to sit still for long periods of time. In fact, being sedentary is one of the leading contributors to lifestyle-related illnesses, weight gain and back pain. Long working hours can keep you shackled to your desk, so the solution could be as easy as adding a rise to your current desk, effectively converting it into a standing desk.

The act of simply standing while working is beneficial for your health and productivity. If you are prepared to splurge, spend a few more dollars to get a treadmill desk. You can stroll slowly as you work, helping you to achieve the recommended 10K steps a day without missing out on work or even breaking a sweat (killing two birds with one stone!).

12. Headphones

Headphones aren’t exclusively graphic design tools, but they are necessary tools for graphic designers. Chances are you are asking yourself why graphic designers need headphones at all. Graphic design is a visual-based medium, right? While the visual side of graphic design is undeniable, the fact is that the field has expanded so that many graphic designers are not only designing visuals but coordinating entire experiences, including audio.

Whether it’s working on an installation or a project that

includes video, a good designer is going to need a great set of headphones to be able to get the best results. Also, sometimes you just need to listen to a little music to get you in the mood to create.

13. Digital Camera

When it comes to graphic design equipment, a sturdy digital camera for crisp and beautiful photos and videos is a must-have. We know that graphic designers work in a wide variety of mediums, but even sketch artists often use photos to draw inspiration or accurately capture motion or subjects that will later appear in the final work. While a good smartphone camera can work wonders and is a great substitute for a DSLR in a pinch, for large projects and special events, nothing beats a high-quality digital camera.

14. Behance

In case you didn’t know, Behance is a social media platform designed by creatives for creatives to showcase their work and gain inspiration. This is especially beneficial for up-and-comers who have just started experimenting with different types of design. Behance is a great place to develop an online portfolio that is easily searchable and user-friendly as well.

If you aren’t good at or interested in building a website for yourself, Behance is a great alternative solution (although we recommend that you eventually invest in a website for yourself). The platform is well established and part of the Adobe Creative Cloud plan and chances are, you probably already have a subscription.

15. Cloud Storage

Ok, so you sprung for the extra-large memory on your PC and you even use an external hard drive. Why would you need cloud

storage? The limitations of both your computer memory and your external hard drive are that they are physical and only accessible one way.

Should you meet with a calamity such as a fire or having your bags stolen at the airport, your work is gone. You can't recover it. However, if you back up your work to cloud storage, not only do you have access to all of your files, you can have access from any device, anywhere in the world.

Need to pull up a schematic you were working on at home? You can access it from your phone, attach it to an email and get back to enjoying your vacation. It goes without saying that both Microsoft and Google now offer cloud storage as a standard part of their packages, but they aren't the only options available. Shop around and find what works best for you.

16. High-End Smartphone

You wouldn't normally consider your phone as one of your graphic design tools, but the ubiquitous device has become a must-have for nearly every career field, including graphic design. A great smartphone isn't just about connectivity. Some of the newest phones are capable of taking videos and photos that are comparable to those produced by high-end digital cameras.

They can also access a treasure trove of tools for editing and publishing. I like to think of a great smartphone like an EMT's first aid kit. It is designed to handle big jobs while out in the field.

17. Antivirus Protection

Reliable antivirus protection is vital for anybody who uses the internet regularly. It is doubly so for those who work

remotely or use public wifi. A premium subscription to virus protection and/or antivirus software are undeniable tools for graphic designers.

18. VPN

What is a VPN and why do you need one? A Virtual Private Network acts as a secure backdoor to the internet, allowing you secure access. This is an essential tool for those who travel frequently or work in common spaces. If you frequently use public wifi or frequently work remotely using your smartphone, a VPN is an ideal investment. In countries such as China, where parts of the internet are completely blocked, a VPN can be essential.

As a bonus, it also allows you to access your home country's version of websites even when you're abroad. And when one of the benefits of a graphic design career is flexibility for traveling, this is essential.

19. Pantone Swatch Book

Swatch books are a little bit of a throwback to the early days of graphic design, but they haven't lost their usefulness or charm. For this reason, we felt it was important to add it to this list of graphic design tools. Pantone color tools enable you to make sure that you get the right color, across all mediums, every time.

> ***This uniformity and the ability to consistently get the right shade of any one color is especially important when it comes to branding.***

Take, for example, CVS and Walgreens. Both friendly neighborhood pharmacies use the color red. It would be easy to mistake CVS red for Walgreens red. In fact, however, they have managed to distinguish themselves from one another, due in

part to the way they use slightly different shades of red.

20. Productivity Software

Another set of graphic design tools that aren't specifically for graphic designers is productivity software. One favorite is Google Docs. It is way more than just a web-based version of Microsoft Office. Google's suite of templates, tools and collaborative features help you stay organized and allow you to access everything you need from any device. If you need help staying focused, analyzing how you use your time or staying motivated there are other productivity tools that can help you with all of that. Like Google Docs, many of them have both paid and free versions.

21. Tablet and Stylus

Of all of the tools for graphic designers, tablets and pens are perhaps the most overlooked. Wacom has held the crown for graphics tablets and design tools for so long that we tend to overlook its limitations. Some designers just can't afford to spend hours every day tethered to their computers. This is particularly true for designers whose careers demand mobility.

> ***Freelancers, digital nomads and those who do a lot of work "in the field" will tell you how invaluable tools like the iPad Pro and the Apple Pen are to their work.***

It allows them to keep creating and taking notes even on the go and with the variety of apps available for iPad, they don't have to sacrifice quality for mobility.

The field of graphic design is a wide and vast ocean of creative opportunities. With the right set of tools, you can build a career and a portfolio that is beyond what was even thought possible a decade ago. Investing in the right tools is not only an investment in your career, but in the future of

your own creativity.

Now that you know all the tools graphic designers need to get the job done, you may wonder what about all the fun gadgets designers love? If you follow the latest technology and want to push your skills to boost your creativity, make sure to add these gadgets to your list.

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