



PAPER FIRST
Design in paper

DIGITAL MEDIA DESIGN • BRONX INTERNATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

Paper First

Drawing, Type & Ideation Before You Ever Open Software

By **Victor Pinnock** • Book Three of Three • A companion to **The Path to Design & The Digital Path** • 2026–2027 Classroom Edition

• 6 chapters • drawing • typography • ideation • mockups • no software required

PREFACE

“Paper First” was written by a Digital Media Design teacher at Bronx International High School for his own students, and is provided to them entirely free of charge. It is the third of three companion books. **“The Path to Design”** teaches why design works the way it does — process, psychology, history. **“The Digital Path”** teaches Photoshop itself, against the real Adobe Certified Professional exam. This book is the hand skill in between: drawing, typography, ideation, and mockup-building, all done on paper, all before software ever enters the picture. All three books and the companion class website are published online, free, for any other teacher or student who can use them.

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WHERE THIS MATERIAL COMES FROM

Every technique in this book was checked against a real, named source rather than invented — full citations are collected in the Sources & References section at the back of the book.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This is a workbook, not just a reading book — nearly every page has real space for you to actually draw in, and several activities give you a dotted guide shape to trace directly with a pencil. No software anywhere: pencil, eraser, ruler, paper, and for one chapter, scissors and glue. Chapter 1 sets the mindset. Chapters 2-3 build the actual drawing and lettering skill. Chapter 4 is a real toolkit of professional ideation techniques. Chapter 5 puts all of it together into a real paper mockup. Chapter 6 hands off directly into Photoshop.

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No software

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No software

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No software

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No software

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CHAPTER ONE

01

The Paper-First Mindset

No software here either. This whole book is paper, pencil, a ruler, and scissors — on purpose. Every skill in it has to work with nothing but what's already in your backpack.

Before any of the drawing, lettering, or ideation skills in the chapters ahead, there's one idea to actually believe, not just read: the best professional designers in the world still start almost every real project on paper, not in software. This chapter is about why, and about clearing out the one thing that usually stops a student from doing it.

1.1

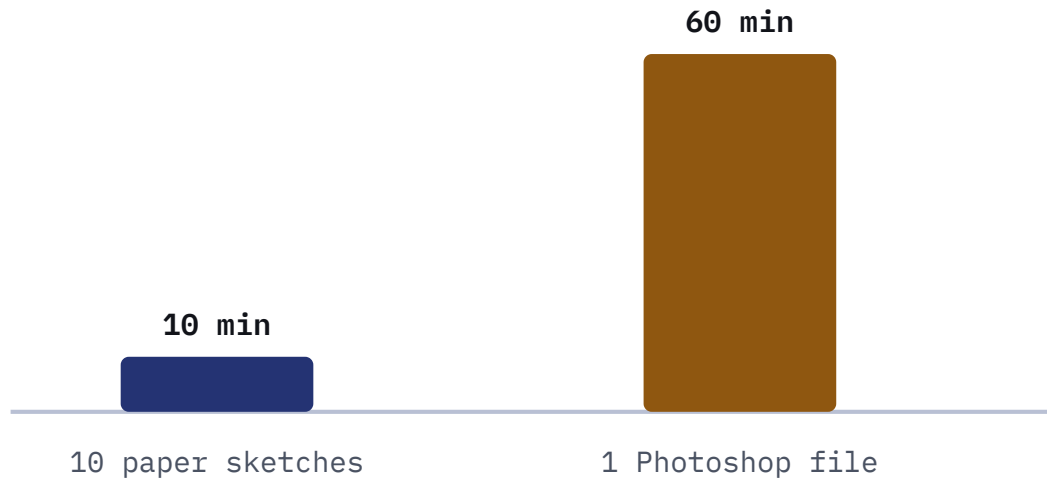
Why Professionals Still Sketch First

Three real reasons, not tradition for its own sake:

Speed. Ten rough ideas on paper take about ten minutes. One idea built in Photoshop, start to finish, can take an hour. If the goal is to find the *best* idea, not just *an* idea, paper lets you generate and compare far more options in the same amount of time software would take to produce just one.

Cheap failure. A bad sketch costs nothing — cross it out, turn the page, try again. A bad final Photoshop file costs real time, and by the time it's finished enough to judge, most people are too invested in it to want to start over, even when they should. Paper keeps failure cheap for as long as possible, which is exactly when you want to be doing most of your failing.

Staying on the idea, not the tool. Software is seductive — a gradient, a nice font, a drop shadow can all make a bad idea *look* more finished than it is, which tricks your own judgment. A pencil sketch can't hide behind polish. If an idea works in pencil, on paper, in thirty seconds, it's a genuinely strong idea — not just a well-decorated one.



Same block of time, wildly different number of ideas actually tested. **The point of Chapter 1 isn't that software is bad – it's that ideas should be found on paper first, then built in software once one is worth the hour.**

KEY TERMS

Paper-first	Starting any real design project with rough pencil sketches before opening any software.
Fidelity	How close a version of a design is to the finished, final product — paper sketches are intentionally <i>low</i> fidelity.

WORKED EXAMPLE

A real client brief: “design a poster for the school talent show.” A designer working paper-first spends the first 10 minutes sketching 6–8 completely different rough layout ideas — one built around a spotlight, one around a microphone silhouette, one built entirely from bold text with no image at all — before touching a computer. A designer who skips straight to Photoshop usually builds just one of those ideas, in detail, and never finds out whether one of the other seven would have actually been stronger.

DRAW IT – TALENT SHOW POSTER

Six boxes, six completely different ideas. One minute each — the timer is the point.

IDEA 1

IDEA 2

IDEA 3

IDEA 4

IDEA 5

IDEA 6

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1 Name the three real reasons professionals sketch on paper before opening software.
- 2 What does “fidelity” mean, and why is a paper sketch supposed to be *low* fidelity on purpose?

1.2

Permission to Draw Badly

Here's the thing that actually stops most students from sketching at all, and it's worth naming directly: the fear that a drawing has to look *good*. It doesn't. A paper-first sketch is not a finished piece of art — it's a tool, the exact same way a rough first draft of an essay isn't the essay. Nobody grades a rough draft's handwriting. Nobody should be grading a thumbnail sketch's line quality either.

A useful way to think about it: the sketches in this book's own “Try it” boxes are meant to look rough. If your sketch looks polished, you probably spent too long on it and generated fewer ideas than you should have. A messy page covered in 8 quick, ugly sketches is a *better* result than one neat, careful drawing — because it means more ideas actually got tested.

Say this out loud once, seriously:

“This sketch does not need to look good. It needs to get an idea out of my head fast enough that I can look at it and decide if it's worth developing.” That's the whole job of everything you draw in this book.

KEY TERM

Thumbnail sketch

A small, fast, rough sketch capturing only the core idea of a layout or drawing — speed and idea-generation matter, finished line quality doesn't.

WARM-UP: DRAW OVER THE DOTS

Before drawing anything of your own, trace these three shapes directly over the dotted line, slow and steady, pencil never leaving the paper. This isn't the “draw badly, fast” skill yet — it's just getting your hand comfortable moving a pencil in a controlled line before we push for speed.