SKILLSTACK SUITE

Graphic Design & Visual Communication — Lesson Workbook

All twelve modules in full: the idea, the method, the mistake to avoid, and the build task for each.

How to use this workbook

Twelve modules. Each one gives you the idea, the method, the mistake most people make, and a build task that produces a real artefact. Do the tasks in order — later modules assume the earlier artefacts exist. Reading without building will not get you the outcome.

Module 1 — Seeing before making

What you will learn. Naming what is wrong before trying to fix it.

You cannot fix what you cannot name. Most people know a layout feels off but reach for a new font instead of diagnosing. Critique vocabulary — hierarchy, contrast, alignment, spacing, consistency — turns a vague feeling into a specific, fixable defect.

The method

- Look for the entry point: where does your eye land first?
- Ask whether that is where it should land.
- Check alignment against an imaginary vertical line.
- Name the single biggest defect before changing anything.

Most common mistake. Redesigning from scratch when one spacing fix would have solved it.

Build task. Critique three existing assets in writing, naming the biggest defect in each.

Module 2 — Hierarchy

What you will learn. Deciding and enforcing what the eye hits first, second, third.

Hierarchy is the whole job. Every element competing equally means nothing reads. You establish order through size, weight, colour and position — and crucially by making the difference obvious rather than subtle. Timid hierarchy reads as no hierarchy.

The method

- Decide the reading order explicitly — write it as a numbered list.
- Give level one a decisive size jump, not a 10% one.
- Demote everything that is not level one or two.
- Squint at it: the order should survive blurring.

Most common mistake. Making everything slightly different instead of a few things decisively different.

Build task. Rebuild one critiqued asset changing hierarchy and spacing only.

Module 3 — Typography

What you will learn. Pairing, scale, measure and leading that stay readable.

Type carries most of the message, so readability beats personality. A ratio-based scale gives you sizes that relate to each other instead of arbitrary numbers. Line length around 45-75 characters and generous leading do more for readability than any typeface choice.

The method

- Pick one ratio (1.25 or 1.333) and generate your scale from it.
- Set body first, then derive headings from the scale.
- Keep line length in the 45-75 character range.
- Pair a maximum of two families — contrast by weight instead.

Most common mistake. Choosing sizes by eye, which produces a scale with no internal logic.

Build task. Build a type scale and test it at your smallest intended size.

Module 4 — Colour

What you will learn. A restrained palette that passes contrast checks.

Amateur palettes fail by having too many colours doing the same job. You need a neutral, a dominant, an accent, and enough tonal range to build hierarchy. Accessibility is not an add-on: if text does not meet contrast against its background, it is not readable.

The method

- Start from one dominant and one neutral.
- Add a single accent used only for action.
- Build three tonal steps of the dominant for hierarchy.
- Check every text/background pair for contrast before committing.

Most common mistake. Adding a colour to solve a hierarchy problem that spacing should have solved.

Build task. Build a five-colour palette and check every pair for contrast.

Module 5 — Space & alignment

What you will learn. Grids, margins and optical alignment.

Whitespace is structure, not waste. A grid gives you consistent decisions instead of per-element judgement calls. Optical alignment matters where mathematical alignment looks wrong — round shapes and punctuation need nudging past the line to appear aligned.

The method

- Set a margin and never let content breach it.
- Use a simple column grid; align everything to it.
- Group related items tighter than unrelated ones.
- Nudge round shapes and quote marks for optical alignment.

Most common mistake. Filling space because it looks empty. Empty space is doing work.

Build task. Apply a grid to your rebuilt asset and align every element to it.

Module 6 — Composition

What you will learn. Balance, focal points, and directing attention.

Composition decides where attention travels after the entry point. Asymmetric balance usually reads as more designed than centred symmetry. Leading lines, framing and deliberate imbalance all steer the eye — the point is to steer it on purpose.

The method

- Place the focal point off-centre.
- Use one strong directional cue toward the action.
- Balance visual weight across the layout, not just position.
- Remove anything that pulls attention away from the focal point.

Most common mistake. Centring everything by default, which flattens the composition.

Build task. Recompose one asset with an off-centre focal point.

Module 7 — Imagery

What you will learn. Selecting, cropping and treating photography.

Images should support the message, not compete with it. Crop aggressively — most stock images contain far more than the point requires. A consistent treatment (same tone, same crop ratio, same colour cast) is what makes a set of images feel like a brand rather than a collection.

The method

- Crop to the single element that carries the point.
- Apply one consistent treatment across all images.
- Keep text off busy image areas; use a scrim if needed.
- Check licence terms before use, every time.

Most common mistake. Using an image at full frame because it came that way.

Build task. Crop and treat three images to a single consistent look.

Module 8 — Brand systems

What you will learn. Turning one-off choices into a reusable system.

A system is your decisions written down so you stop remaking them. It does not need to be a brand book — one page covering type scale, palette, spacing unit and logo usage removes most of the per-asset decision load.

The method

- Document the type scale with intended use for each size.
- Document the palette with hex values and usage rules.
- Define one spacing unit and multiples of it.
- Write the two or three things nobody may change.

Most common mistake. Documenting aspiration rather than what you actually use.

Build task. Write your one-page system reference.

Module 9 — Layout for formats

What you will learn. What changes between social, slides, print and web.

Principles stay constant; constraints change. Social needs to read at thumbnail size. Slides are seen from distance, so minimum type size is much larger. Print has bleed, trim and safe zones and no undo. Web is variable-width and must reflow.

The method

- Design social to be legible as a thumbnail first.
- Set slide minimum type size by viewing distance.
- Add bleed and respect the safe zone for anything printed.
- Test web layouts at the narrowest width you support.

Most common mistake. Reusing a print layout on social and wondering why nothing is readable.

Build task. Adapt one asset to three formats without redesigning it.

Module 10 — Production workflow

What you will learn. File structure, naming, versioning and export presets.

Most wasted design time is not designing — it is looking for the current file. A naming convention with a date and version, a fixed folder structure, and saved export presets remove nearly all of it.

The method

- Adopt one naming convention with date and version.
- Keep working files and exports in separate folders.
- Save export presets per format and never adjust per file.
- Archive superseded versions rather than overwriting them.

Most common mistake. Naming files final, final2, final-real. You will not remember which won.

Build task. Restructure and rename one real project folder.

Module 11 — Templates

What you will learn. Building templates others can use without breaking them.

A template is a system someone else can operate. That means locked structural layers, obvious editable areas, and instructions inside the file. If it breaks the first time a colleague touches it, it is a file, not a template.

The method

- Lock structural layers and grids.
- Name every editable layer in plain language.
- Put usage instructions inside the file itself.
- Watch someone else use it and fix what they break.

Most common mistake. Building a template only you can operate.

Build task. Build a template set and hand it to someone else.

Module 12 — Working with feedback

What you will learn. Presenting choices and iterating without redesigning.

Vague feedback is usually a symptom of vague presentation. Present with the reasoning attached and ask targeted questions. When you get "make it pop", translate it into a hierarchy or contrast question before touching anything.

The method

- Present the reasoning, not just the artwork.
- Ask targeted questions instead of "what do you think?".
- Translate vague feedback into a specific defect.
- Change one variable at a time so you learn what worked.

Most common mistake. Redesigning wholesale in response to one vague comment.

Build task. Present your campaign with reasoning and collect targeted feedback.