

# Skills Testing Guidelines

Best practices for administering ethically sound skills tests for designers during the hiring process



**RGD**

DESIGNERS  
**SUPPORTING**  
DESIGNERS

# Introduction

A thorough interview, a robust portfolio, good references and captivating personality should be enough to assess whether or not a candidate would be a good fit within your team. Despite this, skills testing is on the rise as more companies are incorporating them into their hiring process when assessing designers. If you're considering incorporating a skills test as part of your hiring process, we hope you will consider following the best practices outlined in this guide to ensure you create a fair, ethically sound skills test that everyone can feel good about. This guide is meant to help both employers and candidates:

## Employers

- ✓ These guidelines will help determine when and how skills testing should be incorporated into the hiring process, if at all
- ✓ Use these guidelines as a frame of reference for what is considered reasonable to ask of candidates
- ✓ Ensure mutual respect and avoid deterring top talent from applying

## Candidates

- ✓ These guidelines will help candidates determine what is a reasonable ask from employers
- ✓ If candidates are applying for jobs where employers are asking for skills tests that would be deemed unreasonable by these guidelines, we encourage candidates to share this guide with the employer directly or bring it to the RGD's attention



# Why This Guide Exists

Since most employers are not designers themselves, they may lack the know-how to adequately assess designers, often falling back on skills tests as an assessment tool. Unfortunately, these skills tests often ask candidates for requests that are seen as unreasonable or unethical, sometimes veering into the area of spec (free) work and deterring top talent from applying.

We surveyed design professionals and found the following insights:



**95%**  
**of designers**

are not compensated for completing a skills test\*

**55%**  
**of designers**

felt that their portfolio already demonstrated the skills they were being tested on\*

**31%**  
**of designers**

felt that the skills test was asking for spec (free) work\*

Furthermore, skills tests are often misused as tools for testing creativity or conceptual ability, which are skills that can't fully be gauged within the confines of a short test. These guidelines will help determine whether a skills tests is the right tool to use to uncover the skill sets you might be seeking in candidates.

\*Refer to page 12 for details about how we gathered our data

# Are you conducting skills tests ethically?

Take the quiz.

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Are you hiring for a junior position or interviewing candidates that don't have a lot of real world experience? <a href="#">Guideline #1</a> | Yes | No |
| 2. Are you looking for skills that you can't gauge from the candidate's portfolio or an interview? <a href="#">Guideline #2</a>                 | Yes | No |
| 3. Have you informed the candidate that there is a skills test component involved in the hiring process? <a href="#">Guideline #3</a>           | Yes | No |
| 4. Have you narrowed down the candidate pool to 2-3 people? <a href="#">Guideline #4</a>  | Yes | No |
| 5. Have you ensured that the test won't take more than a couple of hours to complete? <a href="#">Guideline #4, 5</a>                           | Yes | No |
| 6. Are you using hypothetical scenarios or projects in your skills test rather than real client work? <a href="#">Guideline #6</a>              | Yes | No |

## How did you do?

If you answered **NO** to any of the above questions, you should consider adjusting your skills test based on the guidelines provided in this document or compensating your candidate for their time as you would with a freelancer.

1

# Know when to test

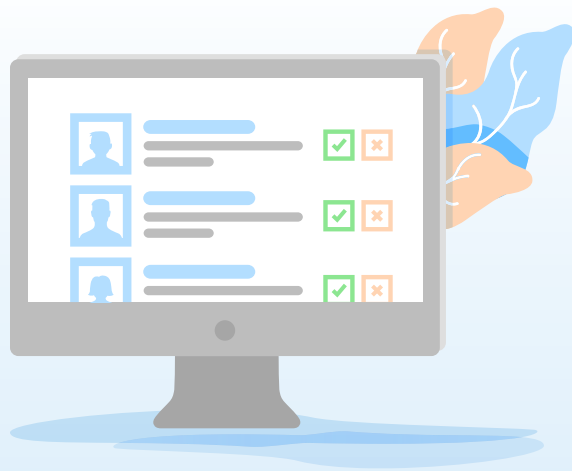
Determine if a skills test is necessary. You should get a good sense of a candidate’s creative skills, process and culture fit by asking the right questions during their portfolio interview. However, if you still feel that a skills test is necessary, you should reserve them for testing technical capabilities that are more difficult to gauge in a portfolio (e.g. proficiency with specific software, file preparation, etc).

## DO

- ✓ Consider limiting skills tests for assessing candidates’ technical abilities, rather than conceptual or creative abilities—a portfolio should communicate this already
- ✓ Consider limiting skills tests primarily for roles where candidates may have less experience or may be lacking things in their portfolio that’s required for the role you’re hiring for (e.g. junior or intermediate positions)
- ✓ During a portfolio interview, ask candidates to describe their process on one or more of their portfolio pieces to get a sense of how they work rather than asking them to create new work through a skills test

## DON’T

- ✗ Replace a full portfolio assessment with a skills test
- ✗ Administer a test before fully vetting a candidate’s work experience, portfolio, references and culture fit



## 2

# Know what you are testing for

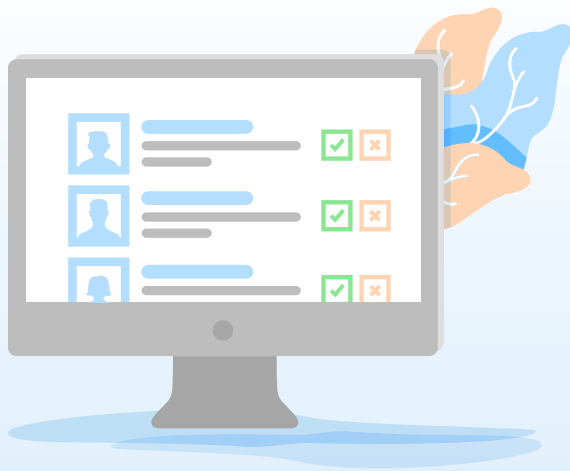
Before you administer a skills test, ensure that you have a clear idea of what insights you hope to gain from it. Skills tests should be short, focused and only administered for things you can't gauge from a portfolio, interview or reference checks. Be clear on what skills and qualities you're looking for in a candidate, prioritize them and pick one or two to focus on. Ensure the skills test can help you uncover these desired skills and qualities. Have a standardized assessment system in place that will help you assess candidates in a fair way. Don't forget to involve others who can help provide industry expertise and fill any gaps in knowledge.

## DO

- ✓ Consult your internal design team (if you have one) for industry-specific requirements when putting together a skills test
- ✓ Establish clear objectives about what you hope to uncover through this skills test and communicate them to your hiring team
- ✓ Test for things that are a good reflection of the type of work or standard level that the candidate will be expected to meet and produce in the hired role
- ✓ Ensure the ask is manageable and reasonable within the allocated time frame
- ✓ Have a clear and consistent rubric for assessing skills test results fairly

## DON'T

- ✗ Exclude your existing design team from the process
- ✗ Administer a skills test without a clear idea of what insights you're hoping to gain from the results
- ✗ Ask for too many deliverables or a long time commitment from candidates
- ✗ Provide vague instructions and ask for open-ended deliverables
- ✗ Use skills tests as a replacement for other aspects of the hiring process



## 3

# Set your candidates' expectations

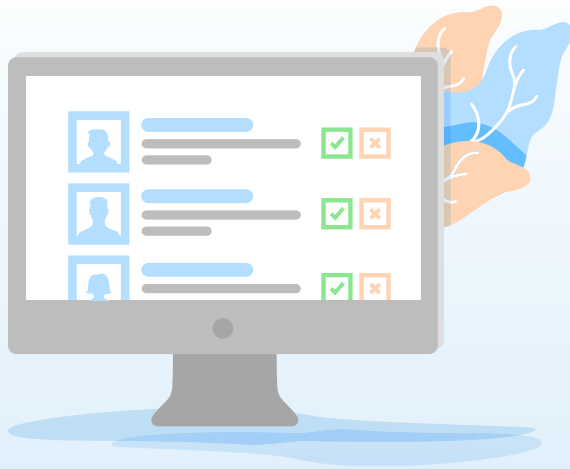
The interview process can be a stressful time for both candidates and employers. Setting clear intentions and being transparent about your hiring process with candidates will foster trust and integrity. Nobody likes a pop quiz. If you plan to incorporate a skills test into your vetting process, make sure you let candidates know ahead of time and set expectations around what will be asked of them. Letting candidates know this will help them focus on the task at hand rather than on the stress of being put on the spot.

## DO

- ✓ Inform candidates that the skills test will be part of the hiring process as early as you can (in the job ad or before a face-to-face interview)
- ✓ Clearly communicate what the test will entail, where it will take place and how much time will be allocated
- ✓ Clearly define what types of qualities or outcomes you're looking for from the skills test
- ✓ If the test will be performed on-site, provide candidates with all necessary equipment, software and assets for completing the test
- ✓ Be available for questions from the candidate while they complete the test

## DON'T

- ✗ Surprise candidates with a skills test on the day of their interview
- ✗ Expect candidates to provide their own equipment and software (unless that is part of the job requirement)



## 4

# Value everyone's time

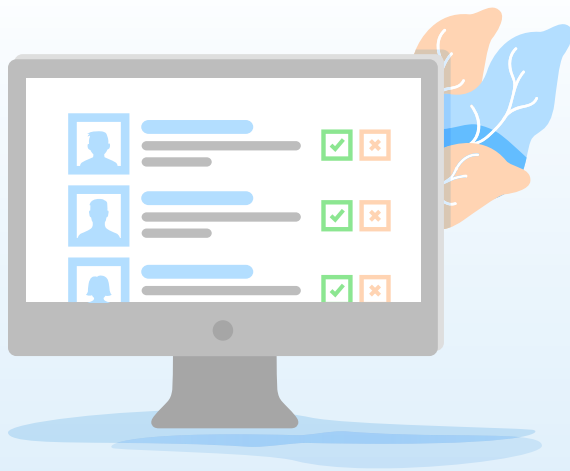
The time it takes to find the right hire, coupled with the hours spent administering and assessing candidates, makes hiring a time consuming process for employers. Similarly, the job hunting process for candidates is also time consuming. It's in both parties' interest to keep skills tests short, to the point and administered only when deemed necessary. Try to provide candidates with options and incorporate fun challenges that will make the skills test less of a chore to complete.

## DO

- ✓ Put a time limit on the test, ideally no more than 1-2 hours
- ✓ Incorporate a skills test towards the end of your hiring process, ideally after a face-to-face interview
- ✓ Narrow down your candidate pool and limit the number of people you administer the test to, ideally no more than 2-3 candidates
- ✓ If appropriate, try to incorporate fun challenges or scenarios into your skills test
- ✓ Provide multiple options for challenges for the candidate to choose from to provide autonomy
- ✓ If you want the candidate to complete something that will take longer than a few hours, treat the candidate like a freelancer and provide compensation for their time

## DON'T

- ✗ Ask candidates to submit an assignment with their resume submission
- ✗ Ask candidates to do a skills test before having an interview with them
- ✗ Give candidates vague and open-ended turnaround times
- ✗ Enforce really rigid skills tests with zero flexibility





## 5

# Don't give homework

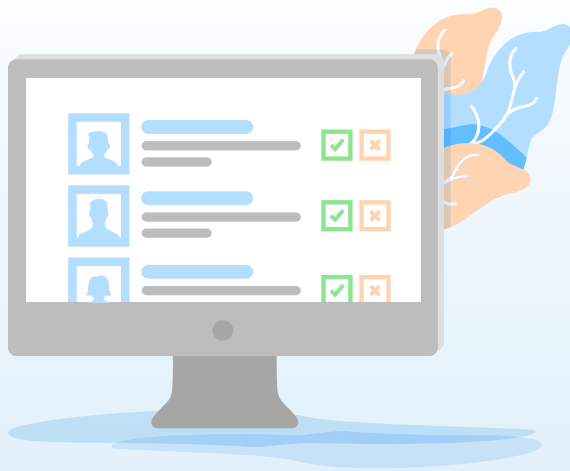
Nobody likes homework—and designers are no different. Regardless of whether the skills test is done on-site or remotely, it's best to schedule a time block for each candidate to complete a skills test and only release the instructions and assets at the start of their skills test. This will ensure that the candidate doesn't spend more time on it than necessary and will also allow employers to assess candidates based on equal levels of effort contributed.

## DO

- ✓ Ensure you schedule a dedicated start and end time with the candidate to complete the skills test
- ✓ Only provide the skills test instructions and necessary assets at the beginning of the candidate's skills test session
- ✓ Ensure you account for extra time to allow the candidate to review the instructions and clarify any questions before beginning the skills test
- ✓ Be available to answer any questions the candidate may have while they complete the skills test
- ✓ Have a hard cut-off time to submit the skills test, even if the candidate has not completed it to their satisfaction

## DON'T

- ✗ Ask candidates to create work that will take them days to produce on their own time, unless you offer to compensate them
- ✗ Force candidates to come on-site for skills tests if they prefer not to



## 6

# Don't ask for spec work

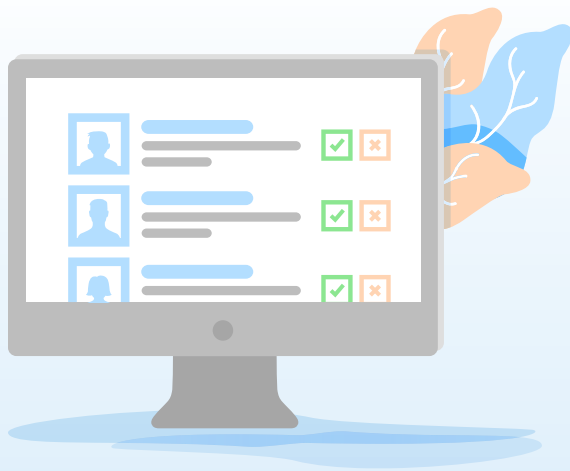
While it might be easy to ask candidates to tackle a real client project as a way to assess their skill set, this practice is considered unethical and falls under the umbrella of spec (free) work. Asking candidates to do such assignments may cause uneasiness in candidates and could deter top talent from applying. To ensure that skills tests remain focused on assessing candidates' abilities, it's best to use hypothetical clients or projects. Furthermore, candidates should be reassured that any work they complete will not be used commercially or for means of profit and will solely be used for the purposes of assessing their skills. If you prefer to assess candidates using real client work, then you should treat the candidate like a freelancer and compensate them for their time.

## DO

- ✓ Create hypothetical scenarios or assignments for skills tests
- ✓ Assure candidates that their work will not be used commercially (you can also provide a legal document to verify this if you want to show more integrity)
- ✓ Compensate candidates if you're asking them to work on real client projects

## DON'T

- ✗ Ask for consultation, opinions or feedback on real client projects, unless compensating for it
- ✗ Have candidates work on real client projects, unless compensating for it
- ✗ Have candidates work on your own company's internal projects or efforts (e.g. branding, marketing), unless compensating for it



# Sample Skills Tests

<p><b>Creative/conceptual thinking:</b> “Create a logo concept for a time travel company. Provide a brief rationale for your design choices.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Hypothetical client</li> <li>✓ Manageable scope</li> </ul>
<p><b>Software proficiency:</b> “Here is an image of an existing poster design. Using the assets provided, recreate it using Adobe’s creative suite software.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Focused on process not outcome</li> <li>✓ Manageable scope</li> </ul>
<p><b>Print production proficiency:</b> “Here’s an existing artwork file for a 6-panel brochure. Use the file to set up style sheets and prepare the artwork file for offset spot-colour printing with Pantone colours.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Focused on process not outcome</li> <li>✓ Manageable scope</li> </ul>
<p><b>Brand application:</b> “Here is a generic 5-page PowerPoint presentation along with some brand guidelines for a hypothetical client. Create a branded PowerPoint presentation using the supplied content and guidelines.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Hypothetical client</li> <li>✓ Manageable scope</li> </ul>
<p><b>Brainstorming skills:</b> “Here’s a brief summary of a hypothetical app and its target user group. Walk us through how you’d go about brainstorming ideas for this app’s features on a whiteboard.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Hypothetical product</li> <li>✓ Focused on process not outcome</li> </ul>
<p><b>Critical thinking:</b> “Pick one website from the five websites listed and write out some high-level recommendations for what improvements you’d make to the chosen website’s homepage.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Provides options to candidate</li> <li>✓ Doesn’t use existing clients’ or own company’s website</li> </ul>
<p><b>Project autonomy:</b> “Show us how you’d go about creating three homepage design concepts for client XYZ. Include any necessary research, sketches or wireframes that are a part of your process in creating high-fidelity designs. The project is due in a week’s time and we’ll compensate you at a rate of \$X/hr.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Compensation for large scope</li> <li>✓ Compensation for real client work</li> </ul>



# Disclaimer

## About the Guidelines

These guidelines have been compiled as a volunteer-led initiative led by Evelyn Csiszar RGD with contributions from Ian Chalmers RGD, Amy Eaton RGD, Kevin Moran RGD, and Mel Sutjiadi RGD.

These guidelines were established based on consensus from RGD's Ethics Committee and from insights that were gathered from RGD Members and other designers in the community directly. These are not meant to be hard rules, but rather they function as best practices for conducting skills tests in a way that we feel is fair to both candidates and employers.

## The Data

The numbers on page 3 were gathered from a survey that was sent out to the RGD community who have had experience with either participating in or administering skills tests. In total, we had 62 design professionals complete our survey. We also gathered additional insights from informal interviews and discussions with designers in the community – approximately 15 designers.

## Contact

If you have any questions, comments or suggestions about these guidelines, please contact:

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