

ICON DESIGN GUIDE

Everything you need to know about icon design
to get started!

www.iconutopia.com • Justas Galaburda

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Want to create your first icon set, but have no idea where to start?

Or maybe you just want to earn some money on the side by selling stock icons? Or do you shoot for the stars and plan to kickstart your career as an icon designer specializing in custom icons?

None of this is possible if you don't know the basics. To help you out, I created this icon design guide that will answer all the questions you might have along the way.

The guide consists of three chapters, each covering a separate important topic that you need to soak up before moving on to creating icons.

- 1. The history of icon design and its purpose.**
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Keep in mind that this guide isn't a step-by-step Adobe Illustrator or Sketch tutorial. It's for everyone who wants to create icons regardless of the software they're using. The idea behind it is to fix you up with the information and skills required before jumping into the world of iconography all by yourself.

The ultimate goal is to make sure you will be able to create your very own killer icon set the moment you finish reading this guide, no matter what your skill level is or what software you work with.



So let's get started!

Chapter 1

The history of **Icon Design** and its **purpose**.

First things first — before you start working with icons, you need to clearly understand what iconography is and where it comes from.

Below you will be introduced to the brief history of icon design, find out about the importance of it in the modern world, and see how it can become even more so in the future!

Part 1

What are Icons?

If we look up the word 'icon' in a dictionary, we will come across a lot of different meanings from 'the representation of some sacred personage' to 'an idolized person' to 'a computer symbol commonly used to represent a command'.

If you ask me, I think the most accurate and simple definition is that an icon is a sign or a representation that stands for its object by virtue of a resemblance or analogy to it.

It originates from a Latin word '*eikōn*' meaning 'likeness, image', and tracks back to the year 1565.

Icons are the most universal language in the world. It is one language that everybody can understand, regardless of the nationality, race, age or gender. It's actually unbelievable how one small icon can contain so much information and deliver it immediately. It's really powerful! People have been using icons to express themselves and communicate with others from the very beginning of the human kind. Cave paintings, Egyptian hieroglyphs are nothing else but icons. Some of which you can understand even today.



**Icons are the 21st century
cave paintings.**

TWEET THIS

Part 2

Icon Design History

As I have mentioned in the previous part, you can track the origins of icon design all the way back to the prehistoric times. Nevertheless, in this particular part I would like to focus on the more recent icon design history and look deeper into what has influenced it since the times the GUI (Graphic User Interface) was born.

Originally, it was supposed to be a huge chapter that would cover all the milestones in the icon design history, but while doing my research on the topic, I came across a website that illustrates the icon design history better than I could ever do in an ebook.



So let me invite you to go back in time to see how icons have changed.

ICON HISTORY

Part 3

Why Icons Matter

As the world is getting busier, icons are becoming a fundamental part of our lives. They help us orientate, make quick decisions and find what we are looking for.

Let's have a closer look at why icon design has become so crucial these days, and what impact it will have in the future.

Icons unite the entire world. It doesn't matter what language you speak – the one visual language of icons speaks louder than any words can.


Icons are essential when you navigate in an airport, are on the lookout for a bathroom in a busy shopping mall, or simply trying to perform a specific action in the software you're using.

Icons also convey information really quickly.

Why does all of it matter? Because, averagely, our attention span is now shorter than of a goldfish. Yeah, you heard me right. According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information, the average attention span of a human being has dropped from 12 seconds in 2000 to 8 seconds in 2013. This is a second less than the attention span of a goldfish. Can you imagine that a goldfish has a one-second longer attention span than humans have? Me neither, and yet that's what it is.

Icons are lifesavers in this world of noise and worthless information. You only need a quick look at an icon to get the complex message it carries. This way you can use the remaining 7 seconds for the information you really need.

Whether you need to find the right app or a particular feature on the product page or when you are searching for metro in a foreign city, icons save you a lot of time, speeding up everything.



And it will be even more important in the future, as the world is getting busier, noisier and more globalized.

Chapter 2

Basic knowledge base on icon design.

You can't move any further if you haven't mastered the icon design fundamentals. This chapter will guide you through every technical detail you need to process before you get to create your own icons.

Learn about the types of icons, the variety of styles, differences in sizes, and find out about the usage of grids and the cohesiveness of icon sets.

Types of Icons

Pictograms

The most popular type of icons. A pictogram is a symbol that conveys the meaning through its resemblance or reference to a physical object. For example, an airplane pictogram means airport.

Ideograms

This type of icons is a little bit more complex. Instead of showing an object, ideograms illustrate the whole idea. Typically, ideograms are of basic shapes and their meaning has to be learned. For instance, a circle with a line across it means “NO”. Another good example is the plus/minus/equal sign ideograms.

Quick tip:

Often pictograms and ideograms are joined together to communicate the right message. Such as the “document” pictogram combined with the “plus” ideogram means “add a document”.

Part 1

Styles of the Icons

Icons can be segmented into plenty of different styles and style variations. The most common among them are these:



Outline Icons

As you can say from their name, these icons are created out of outlines. From my experience, this is the easiest style for beginners to start with.



Filled Icons

The next logical step you can take after the outline icons is filled icons that basically mean incorporating colors into plain outline ones. This style is quite new, but it is becoming more and more popular these days.



Glyph Icons

Most commonly, solid icons are called glyphs.



Flat Icons

Similar to the filled icons, this style is a variation of the outline icons. It is the next step from the glyphs that implies different color combinations – usually “flat” colors.



Hand-Drawn Icons

As you might guess, this style is an imitation of icons drawn by hand.



Skeuomorphic Icons

Skeuomorphism is the design concept that concentrates on creating items resembling their real-world analogues.

This awesome skeuomorphic icon is created by [Michael Flarup](#) from [applypixels.com](#)



Feel free to follow me on Pinterest to see all these styles and differences between them. I'm posting coolest icons, greatest freebies and plenty of inspiration!

DISCOVER ICONS

Icon Size and Proportion

One of the main rules to obey when creating icons is that all of the icons in your set **have to fit into the same square art board**. It doesn't matter if the real-life objects you are transforming into icons are of completely different sizes, like, for example, a paperclip and photo camera. Their icons need to fit into an art board of one particular size and visually look as if they were the same.

However, this doesn't mean that your icons must touch all four sides of the art board. Some icons can be a little bit smaller if that makes the entire set look the same size. We will talk more about this in the upcoming chapters.

Not sure, what size your icons should be?

Go with the size that is best for your particular project. Say, if you're creating icons for iOS or Android, you should check their icon design guidelines first before deciding on the icon size.

If you're making icons for a web project or want to practice, use any of the default sizes:

16x16, 24x24, 32x32, 48x48, 64x64, 96x96, 128x128, 256x256, 512x512;

Quick tip: If you're at the beginning of your path as an icon designer, I'd recommend avoiding the smallest icon sizes because they are way more difficult to work with. 64 - 96 px grids should be the sweet spot!



**Always make your icons the same size
that they will be used in.**

TWEET THIS

**This way you can make it pixel-perfect and it will look stunning
where it will be used.**

Part 4

Usage of Grids

A lot of advanced icon sets use icon grids. You might have already seen iOS or Material Design icon grids.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, grids are overrated. Yep, I said this. Don't get me wrong, sometimes a great grid is an essential part of a wonderful icon set, but it's definitely not a necessity.

I see plenty of people struggling to start their first icon set simply because they have no idea how to set up a grid! Oh, come on!

Let me tell you a secret:

You don't need a grid for your first icon set.

TWEET THIS

It's a great practice, sure, but before even thinking about creating your own grid you should make thousands of icons to understand what to take into consideration while making the grid.

So what exactly is an icon grid?

Icon grid is most commonly created using the guidelines placed precisely on the art board. But it is not just about the guidelines, of course.

Think of an icon grid as a set of rules made to keep consistency throughout the icon set.

It is a well laid-out structure where your icon set is going to be constructed.

When to use a grid?

As I said earlier, I think grids are overrated. But there are a few occasions when it is crucial to use one.

First of all, I believe that an icon grid must be used if you're creating a huge set of icons (50+). The more icons you need to create within the same style, the more solid the guidelines should be. Stick to them to make a cohesive set.

When creating a big icon set, you should decide on the icon grid and all the spacing/aligning rules beforehand. I would say that in this case the grid is the most important part of the process that all the further success of the set depends on.

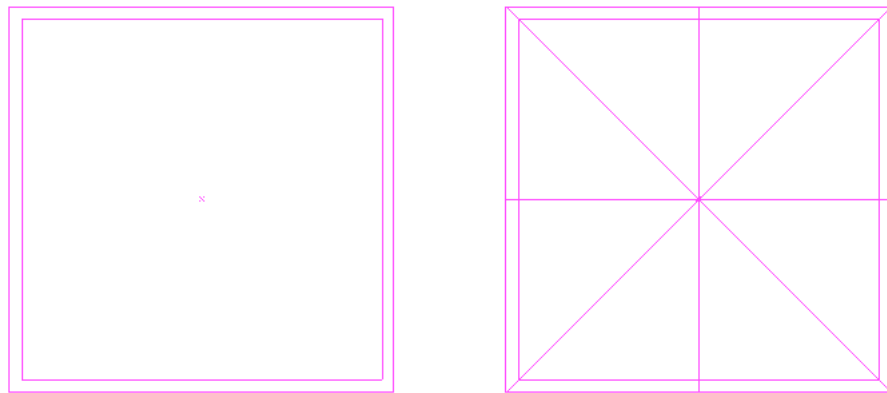
Another scenario where you need to use a grid is when you're creating icons for the already existing platforms that have an icon grid. For example, if your icons are intended for iOS or Android, you'd better use their own icon grids. As the grid helps to make sure all the icons in the platform stay cohesive, you should follow it to keep consistency with the rest of the platform.

Grids can also come in handy if you know that somebody else will be working on these icons in the future. Like, when you're creating just the general icon style, and somebody else will take up from there to continue building the rest of the set. Grid is a lot like a set of rules you need to follow in order to make consistent icons, so that other designer knows from the very start the elements of what size he should use and how they should be placed on the art board.

How to use a grid?

What if you're working on a specific grid that the icon doesn't fit into? It loses its meaning, doesn't deliver the message clearly or simply looks bad? Screw it! I always like to say that all great icon sets have a grid, but all the worst sets stick strictly to the grid. Never compromise the clearness of the message of your icon to fit it into the grid. Icon grids are just a little help for you to make a coherent set, and it will not be suitable for every icon.

And as I mentioned before, in most cases icon grid is not that important. Most often, I'm using the simplest grid possible:



The idea behind this grid is that you put your icon into the inner square. And it's only if you see that the icon needs to be bigger when you can scale it up to the size of the outer square. For example, a square looks visually bigger than a circle of the same size because it takes up more space. So to make them look equal, I would make my circle the size of the outer square, and the square like the inner one.

Creating icons on existing grids

Now, I suggest you try and create some icons on the existing grid for practice. I bundled together a few great icon grids for you, including the Google material design icon grid and two simpler grids I talked about earlier + one a little bit more advanced.

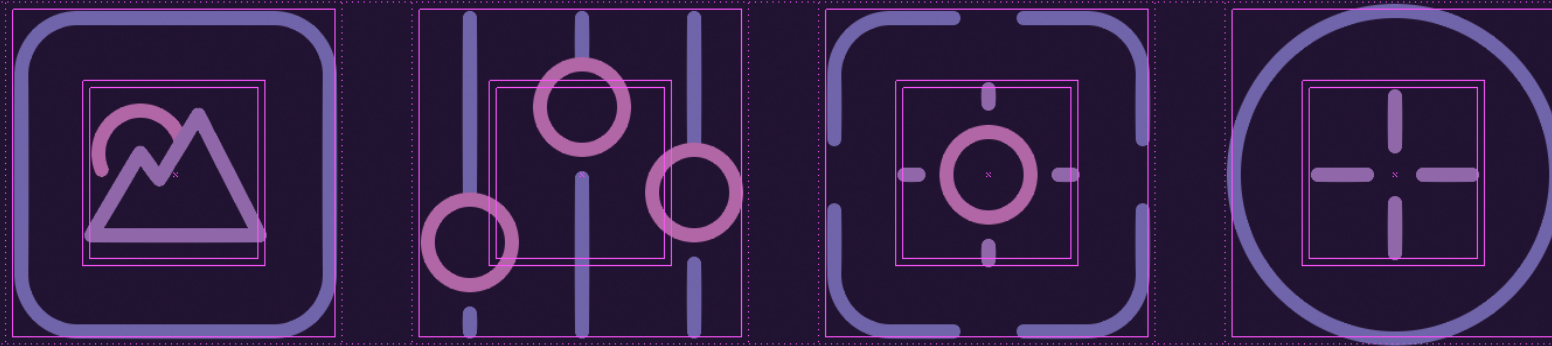
You can download them and see how it feels to create icons on a grid. It sure puts some pressure and additional constraints into your icon design process, but it helps to master your skills.

DOWNLOAD GRIDS

Note: all the grids are designed for Adobe Illustrator.

Make sure the guides are visible. View > Guides > Show Guides

Cohesive Icons



Creating one beautiful icon is easy. Creating a few good looking icons isn't that hard either. It's making them cohesive that can knock you down.

TWEET THIS

Completing a set of coherent icons is a hell of a challenge. In fact, one of the biggest challenges out there in the icon-making world. But that's why I'm here – to help you overcome them and make your way to the top.

But why icons should be cohesive?

Well, icon design is so much more than just graphic symbols representing real objects. It is a unique language where each icon is a word that has its own meaning. But it's not until they are combined together when a proper conversation starts. That's right, you use icons to communicate with people of the digital world just as you do talking to your mates in a real world.

Using differently styled icons in one set is like mixing different languages in one sentence – even if you are lucky enough to be understood, people won't take you seriously anyway.

Make your icon set cohesive, and it will speak.

TWEET THIS

1. Stick To One Style

Sounds obvious, doesn't it? However, this is the key point if you want your icons pretty and consistent. Don't start making any icons until you decide what style they are going to be. You can choose from many different icon styles, take a look at the ones we talked about in the first chapter.

Once you have decided on the style of your future icons, stick to it with each and every icon in the set. An icon in a different style stands out, but not in a good way. It ruins the cohesiveness, beauty, and value of the whole set.

From the moment you make up your mind about which style to use, all your set icons should be made in this one style. Don't let differently styled icons kill the set and demolish the hard work behind it.

2. Keep The Same Stylistics

This is slightly different than maintaining the same style.

Every style has its personality. For example, you can make thousands of different outline icon variations. But picking the right stylistics is just as important. Will your icons be detailed or minimalistic? Is it better to have thick or thin lines? Or maybe mixed line weight? And what about the corners: should they be round or sharp? Are you going to use rounded or butt caps?

Essential: Know exactly why you did each element the way you did it. Think of all possible details of your future icon set and stick to them till the very end. You can create another set in different stylistics if you want to, but now follow the one you are working in.

3. Size Matters!

Maintain the same size of each icon in the set. Not only should they be in the square frames of the same size, they should look equal too!

Imagine two same-sized shapes – a circle and a square. A square will always look bigger, because it fills up more space. Some changes should be applied to make them visually the same. For instance, scale down the square a little.

Quick trick: A great way to check if your icons look equal size-wise is to print them out and compare to each other. Write down your comments and do some sketches on the same paper to then fix the size issues in Illustrator. Somehow, it's easier to compare the icons when you have them on paper.

4. Try Using Grids

Just don't overuse them. If you see that your icon looks off when you are trying to fit it into the grid – screw it!

Remember:

Good icon sets have a grid, but the worst sets hold strictly onto that grid.

TWEET THIS

5. Use The Same Elements Throughout The Set

It's simple: If you used a 16px circle in one icon and need a similar circle for another icon, just copy it. No doubts that having the equal-sized objects throughout the set makes it look more cohesive! And copying elements from other icons will save you a ton of time! Trust me on that one.

6. Use The Same Color Palette

Needless to say (but I'll say it anyway) that identical color combination should maintain in all icons of the set. Select the colors, add them to the swatches and try to use only them. Sure, sometimes you'll need to make exceptions and add more colors, but boy, will you be amazed how few colors you actually need to color the whole set!

**And don't you ever forget to choose icon recognizability over cohesion!
Icon clarity and recognizability are what makes a brilliant icon brilliant! Never give up on clarity in favor of cohesion!**

First and foremost, an icon should deliver the correct message and only then – look good.

TWEET THIS

Chapter 3

Every bit of information you'll need to make your first icon set.

I will be covering everything from choosing the right theme to finishing your very first icon set. The topics in this chapter include but are not limited to: selecting the best icon ideas, finding proper metaphors and deciding what style to use, sketching, choosing the right grid size, discovering the simplest form of the icon, picking colors, and many more!

Part 1

How to choose the right theme

If it's one of your first icon sets - **do it for you and have fun with it.** This is really important. Don't make it for your friend's company, for your own brand, for sale or worst of all — for a client. All these things put additional constraints to your work and your process. Certain style you have to follow, meet the deadline or think about selling your work. However, once you seriously get into the icon design, you will soon notice that it is all about constraints and working within them. But in the beginning you have to stay away from them as much as you can, so they don't stop you from explorations and discovering the true beauty of icon design.

Your first icon set should reflect something you're passionate about. Otherwise, how are you going to enjoy the whole process of creating it? Forget about the boring basic topics like 'household items' (unless they are your passion, of course)! Think outside the box and go for something that brings you joy in real life. Do you like skateboarding? Or is it painting that makes your heart skip a beat? Maybe reading? Riding a bicycle? Is singing your thing? Choosing the theme that excites you is the first step towards success. First, you will have fun making it. Second, you won't get stuck with the lack of ideas to cover the topic.

Part 2

Which icons to draw

When you're making an icon set about one of your passions, it should be easy for you to know what represents it the most.

Simply sit down at the table with a pen and paper and write down everything that pops up in your head regarding the topic. Don't think too much, just write everything that comes to your mind. At this point, your aim is to come up with as many icon ideas as possible.

When you won't be able to think of anything new, try googling the topic. Do a google image search with related keywords, and I can guarantee that you will discover something that you haven't thought about before. Moreover, you can always check icon marketplaces like [Iconfinder](#), [Creative Market](#) or [NounProject](#) for more ideas.

Even if you already have a perfect vision in your head, I still suggest that you play a little game first. Next time you are hanging out with your friends, give them the topic of your upcoming set and ask to brainstorm everything that comes to their minds related to that topic. You'll be amazed how far a human's mind can go and how fascinating this game becomes, when everybody starts shouting out their associations interrupting one another! The greatest thing is that you'll get a ton of ideas for your set you've never considered, even for a second. But don't just write them down – sketch them! Take a second or two to sketch every word, draw the first symbol that comes to you mind. I promise you'll get plenty of amazing concepts out of this game!

Part 3

How to find the best metaphor for an icon

So here you are – knowing what you need to accomplish, but totally lost with finding the best symbols for your icons. Yes, it gets hard sometimes. For example, a simple magnifier could mean a lot of different things: search, find, locate, discover, zoom, investigate, view, etc.

You won't run into this problem if you're creating simple pictograms that represent the item itself. For example, you're making an icon of the rocket to illustrate...well, "a rocket". But a rocket icon could also have a more complex message like "launch".

Icons could be nouns, verbs and adjectives. While nouns are quite simple, verbs and adjectives could get really tricky. If you're having a problem with thinking of a proper metaphor for the message you want to deliver, I, once again, recommend to google it. You can come up with an idea simply by looking at the related images. It's also good to check if there isn't an established icon for your term already. Google the icons, or use [Iconfinder](#) or [NounProject](#) search to find the related icons. If you're really stuck, check [Thesaurus](#) for related synonyms and start your research all over again with a different synonym.

Part 4

The importance of sketching

Let me tell you without a shadow of a doubt – sketching is an essential part of icon design!

Now when you have the ideas, it's high time to select the icons that suit your set the best, and start working on them. Don't go straight to software. Pen and paper are your best friends! Do at least a few drafts for each icon. Don't overthink or overdo them – sketch quickly and roughly. What you want here is to find the best representation of the selected object in a small icon.

At times I even think I love sketching more than the actual vectorizing of my icons. It wasn't always like that though. People tend to dislike things they don't know or are not used to. When you first start sketching, it may feel unnatural and uncomfortable. But I promise, once you get

through that first phase, you'll fall in love with it! Trust me, you'll see the benefits of sketching, and it will eventually become an inseparable part of your design process. You know, the hardest thing is always to start, right?

Sketching Brings Out The Best Idea

If you head straight to the Illustrator with your first idea, you put yourself at a huge risk of getting stuck with it. As sad as it may sound, the first idea is not always the best one. Brainstorming icon ideas in your sketchbook is a great way to find the best suitable icon! Next refining and exploring different variations will make the icons perfect in the end.

Your Sketchbook Is Your Inspiration

Rule number One: Always carry your sketchbook with you! You never know when or where an inspiration will find you. After a while your sketchbook will become your biggest source of inspiration. Occasional going through its pages will bring the memories of all the great projects you have been working on. You will also notice the mistakes you have made earlier, and will come up with the perfect solutions to improve your icons. Also, nothing motivates you more than seeing how far you've come and how much better you've become! Seriously, your sketchbook is your best motivation and inspiration.

Sketching Is A Timesaver!

It's a common mistake to think that sketching doubles the time spent on the project. Well, guess what? It doesn't! Believe it or not, but sketching actually saves plenty of time. Think of all those hours you spent refining and re-drawing icons in Illustrator. It wouldn't be such a time-consuming torture if you sketched first.

Since sketching doesn't take a lot of time, you can try out different variations and symbols. If you do all that directly in Illustrator, it will take twice the time, I'm telling you.

Sketching Is For Everyone

That's the best part: you don't have to be good at drawing to sketch! Lots of you keep saying you can't draw. You know what, me neither! Surprise! You don't need to know how to draw to make simple sketches. Sketching is about finding and refining the best ideas, not about making perfect drawings. Eventually, you'll get better at sketching if you start doing it consistently. The more you sketch, the better you get. Simple as that. Calm down, sit and relax, turn your favorite music on, take your sketchbook and do some sketches. Enjoy it. You don't need to be in your office or studio. Go to your favorite coffee shop or sketch while sitting under a tree somewhere in the park.

My sketching process

My sketching process is divided into two parts. First is more like brainstorming. I take all the ideas and the list of icons I've written before (*Part2 - Which icons to draw*) and try to do really basic, rough, and fast sketches. Point of this is to check out few different approaches for the same icon and find out which one works the best. Usually I do these sketches in my sketchbook, but it can be done on plain paper or even a napkin if you're on the go.

After I've decided which sketches work the best it's time for the second part — making more detailed sketches. This time I'm using my [Baron Fig Confidant dot grid book](#). Grid is necessary so you can easily make your icon square and see the proportions of different elements in the icon. I prefer dot grid books because you can still easily see proportions, and lines are not distracting you like in the regular grid notebooks.

First, I draw a barely visible square to clearly see my bounds. Next, I select the winning sketches from stage one and try to refine it. At this stage I try to use basic shapes to draw my icons. It's the easiest way to find the best construction of your icon because you can quickly sketch and modify your icons. You will read more about creating icons from basic shapes in the part 8 of this chapter: How to come up with the simplest icon form.

After I'm done with the sketches I usually photograph or scan them, so I can use them as a reference while creating vectors.

Part 5

How to know what style to use

It's usually the best idea to choose your icon style based on the exciting branding or a logo-type. Usually I research the brand I'm creating icons for and try to find the elements that represent it the best way. You must take a better look at shapes, colors, typography, etc. What is their tone? Is it corporate and serious, or colorful and cheerful? Does their logo have round or sharp shapes? All of these things will dictate what style you should be choosing and will add a lot of constraints to your workflow and stylistics.

But none of this matters if you're creating an icon set about your passion (like I encouraged you to at the beginning of this guide) — pick whichever style you like the most. You will have way more motivation to work on the icons of your favorite topic in your favorite style.

If you happen not to have one preferred style yet, I recommend choosing outline icons.

From my own experience, outline icons are the easiest to draw. So I recommend that all beginners start with the outline iconography. Moreover, if needed, the outline icons can be easily redone into glyphs. And it's not as easy the other way around. By the way, I also wrote an article that should be really helpful if you decide to make outline icons:

The proper way of creating outline icons

[READ ARTICLE](#)

Part 6

The ideal grid size

The grid size depends strongly on where your icons are going to be used and how detailed they will be. You can't create icons full of details on a small grid. And as I mentioned before, you must always design your icons in the size they will be used in.

When I'm making outline icons just for fun, my preferred grid size is 96x96px. But keep in mind that my icons are quite detailed. If you want to create really simple icons, 32px or 48px grids should be perfect for you. If you're just starting out with the icons, I suggest that you avoid grids that are smaller than 32px, because the smaller your grid is, the harder it is to deliver the right message via an icon.

Quick tip: remember that outline icons usually require bigger grids than glyphs. In smaller sizes, the outlines can look squished and messed up.

Which software you should use

Photoshop, Illustrator, Sketch? Which one to choose? Which one is better for icon design? Truth is — it doesn't matter. Choose the one you know best and are comfortable with, and create killer icon sets.

My personal choice is Adobe Illustrator, and as far as I know most of icon designers use it as the main tool for creating icons. It's really powerful software, and it's almost perfect for icon design. You get to work in vectors, but can always preview the icons to see how they will look on a computer screen, because it shows the pixel preview too. It also has the art board feature that is great for creating multiple icons in one file and exporting them afterwards.

But if you know nothing about the Illustrator workflow, you won't be able to create icons with it from the start, right? Don't let this stop you! You can craft great looking vector icons in Photoshop and Sketch App too! Don't know how to use any of these programs? Not a problem! Grab your sketchbook, a sharp pen and start sketching your icons. Create your first icon set on paper. You can learn a lot from that. Heck it, I've even seen a few people creating icons in Google Slides. Everything is possible if you really want it.

Part 8

How to come up with the simplest icon form

Not that long ago, I came across a very fascinating urban legend about Ernest Hemingway. While spending time in a bar, he bet his friends 10 bucks that he could write a six-word poem that would make readers cry. Hemingway came up with this: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” No need to say he won the bet.

There is another great story written by Frederic Brown in 1948: “The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door...” This genre is called Flash Fiction. It really strikes me how much meaning can be put into just a couple of words. It is breathtaking that the whole story with climax and epilogue fits into a sentence or two. Everything is cut to essentials and

thought through — there is no room for anything excessive.

This looks a lot like creating icons. Little pictograms that hold an enormous message. This is one of the main differences between an illustration and an icon. Illustrations are like 500 word poems, while icons remind the forenamed six-word flash fiction.

Emphasizing what truly matters and removing everything unnecessary to pass along the message may be a difficult task. Some icons should look super simple, and simple isn't easy. So, how do you know what's the right amount of details you can use in one icon?



**Perfection is achieved not when there is nothing
more to add, but when there is
nothing left to take away**

TWEET THIS

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

The smaller the icon, the fewer details it needs. Icons that are made on the 64px or smaller grid should have way fewer details compared to the bigger ones. But you have to be very careful with cutting components from the icon, as if you let yourself get carried away, you will oversimplify the icon.

Google material design icons are a great example of the right minimal icons. Each icon is reduced to its minimal form, with every idea edited to the essence. Such design ensures readability and clarity even in small sizes.

The key point is to find that sweet spot between making the icon simple yet chic and clear, and totally ruining it by cutting down the important bits. You should always know the context the icon will be used in. If you take everything away, it might get boring and dry. Have in mind that icons should also be eye-catching and have some kind of charm in them. If a more detailed icon tells a story better than its simpler version without sacrificing the recognizability in the medium it's going to be used in, then don't be afraid to add more components. If little details don't affect the icon's clarity, or the opposite — make it look more charming, go for it!

Use Basic Shapes

Complex icons can be created with simple shapes. You just need to look at them from a different angle. What you should be paying attention to are the main creating blocks of each icon.

Icons are not the redrawn pictures, they carry a specific message, so your job is to help to transfer this message and make the meaning of the icon bright and clear. You can't just shrink an image and call it a day. As icons are to transmit a complex idea via a small pictogram, they should be "stripped down" to their essentials. This is why working with basic shapes is a great idea. It doesn't let the icon look more complex than it should.

I know for a fact that as a beginner in icon design, sometimes you struggle when it comes to turning a complex image into a small pictogram using only basic shapes. So how do you begin to notice which parts can be simplified and drawn using only some basic shapes? Practice, of course!

First of all, focus on all main features of your object. Highlighting the key elements in your icons is crucial! Which elements make it what it is? Also, always keep in mind that less is more! Icons should never be over-designed. They must be as simple as possible to deliver the message properly. If there is anything you can remove to make it simpler, yet still delivering a clear meaning and looking great, then remove it.

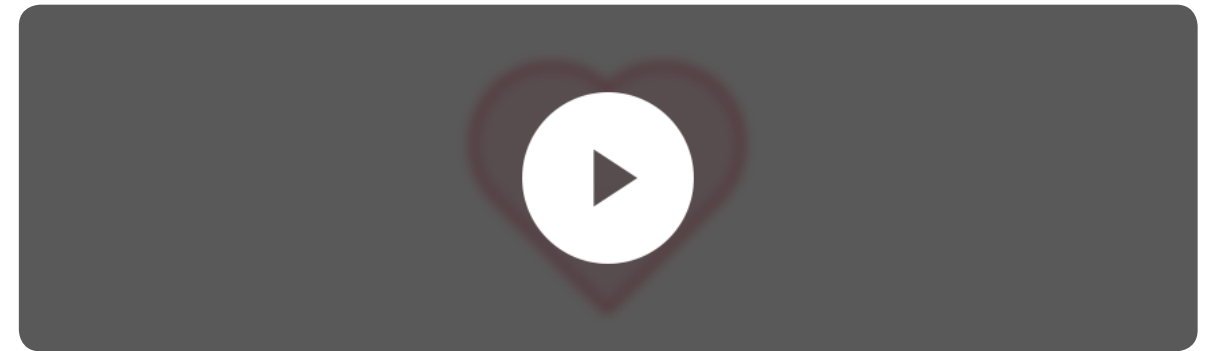
Another trick that will help is sketching. Sketch your icons in a grid book using only the basic shapes. Your work process will be fast, you will be able to make changes quickly and understanding the working process with basic shapes will be much easier. Instead of doodling your icon by hand — construct it using geometric shapes. See how they interact with each other and what could be done to increase the identifiability of the icon.

So each time you create a new icon, try to imagine how it would look like if constructed using only basic shapes. Deliberately practice creating icons from simple shapes and examine other people's works to understand how it's done.

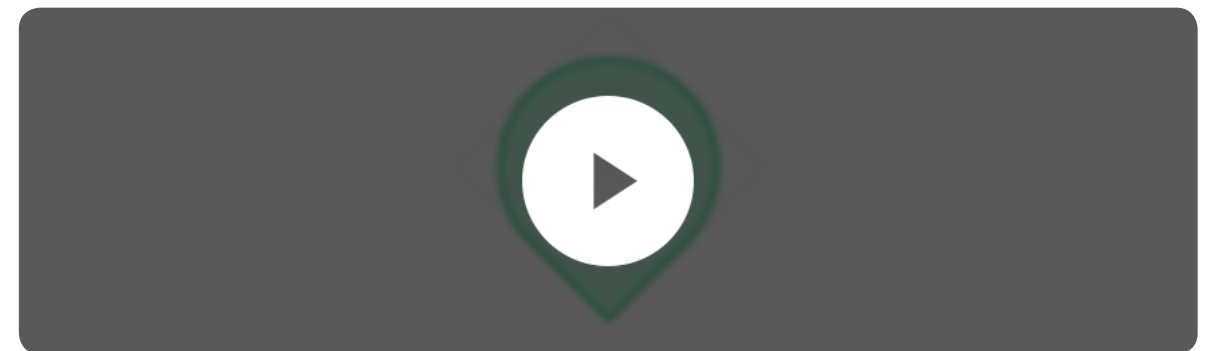
Examples

Look at these amazing animations by [Paulius Kairevičius](#) — they are one of the best examples illustrating icons created with basic shapes.

I was completely blown away by how awesome these little presentations are. They are short, simple, and you can learn something just in a few seconds of looking at them. Truth be told, they made me understand that I had been drawing the eye icon wrong my whole life! And it is as simple as overlapping two circles together. These little gifs show how much you can do by simply using basic shapes. I suggest you go and hit that Follow button on [Paulius profile](#). He is one amazing branding designer, and you can learn a lot from his works, take my word.



Heart constructions video



Pin constructions video



Eye constructions video

Summary

To quickly sum up everything, reducing your icon to its bare essence is crucial, but sometimes it only makes it more complicated and useless. Always remember that you're working in some specific context that is the purpose of the icon. Every icon is different, and all icons will be used differently. You should choose right direction for every set. Don't oversimplify your works. Simple may be the new black, but icons are supposed to deliver the message clearly, so keep an eye on it at all steps.

Another great thing you could do right now to improve your icon design skills is to read this article by [Scott Lewis](#) – Better Icon Design in 6 Easy Steps. It also mentions the importance of geometric shapes.



Better Icon Design in 6 Easy Steps.

[READ ARTICLE](#)

The perfect aligning of all the elements in your icons

One of the things that distinguishes great icons from poor ones is aligning and spacing between objects. Correct alignment of the object and its precise spacing is what takes your icons to the whole other level. And I'm not even talking about using any fancy grids. It is as simple as maintaining the same size gaps around the objects throughout both the icon and the overall set.

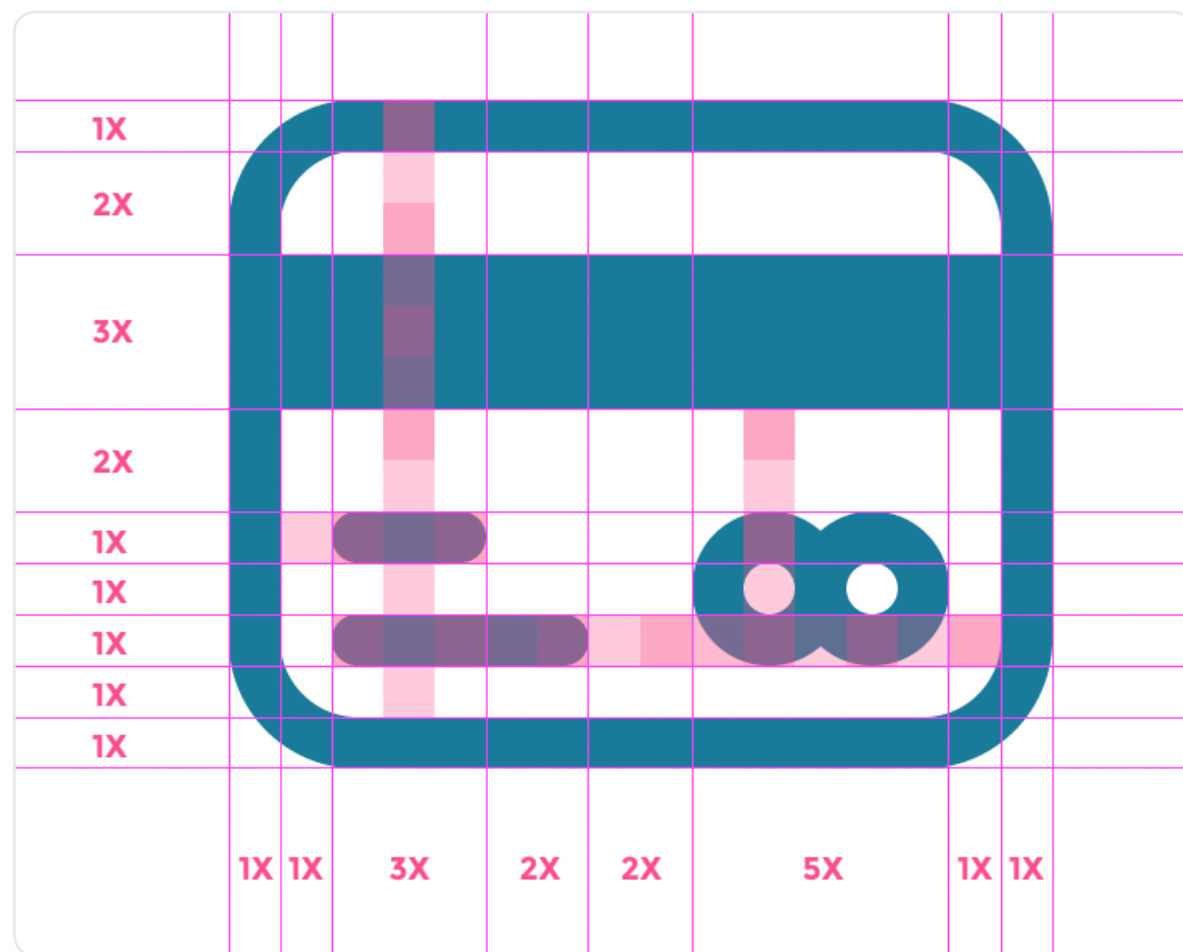
I already mentioned it quite a lot that you should use the same elements throughout the set to maintain consistency.

But sticking to the same aligning and even spacing is just as important because:

- It ensures consistency of the set;
- Your icons look more professional;
- Balanced icons are visually more appealing.

When using one spacing system you create visual connection between related elements and the other way around — separate elements that don't go together. It helps isolate main elements from the secondary ones, too.

Let's take a look at this credit card icon:



This icon is created on a 64px grid, and I'm using a 4px stroke weight. I decided that this would also be the size of the smallest object used in my icon. (This size is marked as 1X)

If possible, always try to choose the size of the objects that you are going to use in your icon based on the smallest measurement you're using for spacing. For example, the magnetic line on

my icon is three times the smallest size, so is the length of the upper line of the information block (3X). Whereas Mastercard logo and the bottom line are five times bigger.

While working on your first icon of the set, start preparing guidelines for the rest of the icons. For example, decide upon the 4px gaps between inner elements and 8px gaps to separate different element groups. Once again, these are not some strict standards written somewhere. It's up to you, but you need to have it in your mind.

So, our rough guidelines for the rest of the set are:

Spaces Between Objects:

- 1X – 4px;
- 2X – 8px;

Object Sizes:

- 1X – 4px;
- 3X – 12px;
- 5X – 20px;

Chances are you will have to use more different-sized objects throughout the set, so make sure you stick to the increments of the smallest size.

Another thing to keep in mind is that you shouldn't use too many different spacing sizes, in most cases 2-3 different sizes is enough, don't overuse them. If you create too many variations, they will ruin the overall sizing system and simply create chaos.

And as always, don't sacrifice the clarity of the icon just to make it look nice and cohesive with the rest of your set. All these rules I have been talking about are absolutely pointless if the most important aspect of the icon — which is to be easily identifiable — is missing.

Useful Tip:

Most likely, you won't be able to set the exact spacing guidelines while creating the very first icon in the set. You can have a couple of raw ideas from your sketches in your mind, but they probably won't be accurate anyway. Usually you should start noticing the repeating spacing patterns after the third or so icon. Sometimes I fix the spacings only after the whole set is finished.

Choosing perfect colors and coloring techniques

Colors are really powerful. They can make the icon or break it in the blink of an eye. That is why choosing the right colors for your icons is so important – using proper palettes, you can transfer the message on a subconscious level. As everything in the icon design, choosing the perfect colors for each set has its own secrets. And I'm about to reveal some of them to you right now.

Know The Context

It all comes down to where your icons are going to be used. There are two main things to consider before you start:

- Where the icons will be used;
- Who they are aimed for.

Here's how it works: you're creating icons for a mountain biking website. If it's not the internet rookies who entered the website by mistake, all the content will be viewed by mountain bikers. Obviously. Google is a treasury of the images on mountain biking. Take a look at some of them, and you'll start noticing certain coloring patterns. Use them for your own color palette.

Choose The Right Color Palette

Depending on the style of your icons you can decide to make them monochromatic, use the shades of the same color, or choose the color palette with different matching colors – this one is often used to create flat icons.

Matching color palettes that look really cool are pretty hard to make, though. My advice is to use two to five colors throughout the whole set. If you are struggling with creating a matching color set, try pre-made sets. Check the [Colourlovers](#) and [Adobe Color](#) for some inspiration. Don't be afraid to experiment with different color schemes, modify them and use in your sets.

Understand The Meaning Of Colors

Even basic knowledge in color theory could make a huge difference. When you need to squeeze a huge message into a small icon, every small detail matters.

Use the power of colors to strengthen and convey the message of the icon. You can easily find tons of articles on color theory on the internet. I have collected just a tiny bit of them for the lazy ones out there.

Blue is a calming color. It also stands for security, professionalism, and trust.

Green means eco. It is often paired with the shades of brown to give that additional earth vibes. It is also associated with freshness, success and money.

Yellow is all about good emotions. It is an optimistic and sunny color.

Red represents everything associated with our most physical needs, and our will to survive – danger, passion, love, heat.

Never ever underestimate the power of colors. The correctly chosen colors make your set look more cohesive and stylish, and they also deliver the message way better! So choose wisely. Know exactly why you have chosen one particular color over the others, and this will take your icons to the next level, trust me!



Interested in my icon coloring process and technique?
Check it out on my blog:

Easy way to color outline icons

[READ ON ICON UTOPIA](#)

Being unique

So how important is it to have your own unique and recognizable style? How to discover it? And what benefits could it bring?

First thing to remember is that icon design in general shouldn't be unique. It doesn't mean that the style shouldn't be either, though. You can recreate the same icon in a million different styles to find the one that would fit the project perfectly. However, your icon metaphors shouldn't be unique. Unlike the logo design, where you need to come up with a smart, catchy and interesting mark.

In iconography, it's important that a person can recognize the icon in a split second. And this can only be done by using the time-tested and well-known metaphors. So don't be afraid to use the good old magnifying glass to indicate "search" just because it's not unique.

Your main purpose as a designer is not to be unique, but to solve problems.

TWEET THIS

If you manage to solve a problem by creating something unique – kudos to you! This is how the world is moving forward. But it sure is not easy. A lot of people tend to worry about discovering their own unique style too much. To the extent where this fear stops them from creating anything at all, because they think it's not unique enough. They look up to people that have already developed their own style and, therefore, want to have their own style too, at the very beginning of their career. But the most important thing they usually don't take into consideration is that those who have already found their style usually had been working in this design field for thousands of hours before they mastered that recognizable style. You can take a dribbble profile of almost any amazing designer whose works you adore and scroll to the beginning where they started just to see that they weren't born with the style or skills they have today.

Truth is, a unique icon design style is the result of hard work. You won't have it right away, and you shouldn't worry about it or let it stop you from creating icons.

Anyways, having your own recognizable style could be really rewarding. I'm a strong believer that it's better to do one thing extremely well, rather than be mediocre at many. Your unique style could be a thing that brings a lot of clients to you. Think about the best tattoo artists, they usually specialize in one particular style. And people who want a tattoo in this style go straight to them, because they know that that artist is the best at it. Same rule applies to clients looking for an icon designer. Usually an art director at some large design studio gets a project that needs icons in particular style. They look online for icon designers to find the one who does this kind of work better than the rest. And if your portfolio is filled with a bunch of great work in this style, it's a no-brainer they will pick you.

Moreover, having a unique and recognizable style might help you build a really passionate following base. Only people who love your style would follow you, making an army of raving fans!

So how do you find your own unique style?

In my opinion, the best way to discover your own icon design style is working on it every single day without actually thinking what your unique style should be or how you should stand out from the rest of the designers. Try out a bunch of different styles, grid sizes, color combinations, stroke weights, etc. Mimic the work of others, try changing something a little bit. Don't be afraid to experiment and fail. As clichéd as it may sound, you can learn from your mistakes. If you tried a new style and it didn't turn out the way you wanted — don't be upset. I'm sure you can spot something positive and use it in your next icon set. Hey, at least you've found something that doesn't work and you will avoid it in the future!

Even the great minds make mistakes, but as Thomas A. Edison once said,

“I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work”.

TWEET THIS

So stop thinking about how you could make your first icon set in the style that the world hasn't seen yet. Instead, focus on working on iconography as much as you can, without worrying about the style. You will see how little by little your unique style will emerge without you even noticing.

Final touches to complete your icon set

So you won't manage to pull off your first icon set without iterations and tweaks.

Now, when all icons from the set are done, it is high time to refine and tweak them. This part is really important, because it is not until you have the complete set, that you can work on separate icons to make sure they all look cohesive. Pay attention to the style and size – make sure all the icons are even and evenly beautiful. Believe me, this takes a lot of time, but you should never give up on this step.

Often it's difficult to see all the little flaws and things that could be improved just by looking into the screen. As you already know, one thing I like to do is print out all icons on a sheet of paper. Somehow this way it's way easier to notice all the inconsistencies, visual size differences and things that could be improved. Just take a pencil, go through all the icons and leave notes. I often even sketch on top of it. After doing this go back to your computer and fix the things you have noticed. Then print the icons out once again and repeat the process as long as you need, until you don't notice any inconsistencies.

But be careful!

Don't let perfectionism stop you from finishing your first icon set. Perfectionism is the enemy of fast learning and improving. Don't get me wrong, there are times to be a perfectionist. But in the beginning when you're just starting your career, perfectionism simply slows you down, because you're trying to improve something over and over again without having any knowledge of how to do it. Instead, you can create 10 great icon sets, gradually improving every one of them and making it better using the knowledge and feedback you get after publishing the set.



Done is better than perfect!



**There will always be a possible better version of
what you are making. Ship it.**

TWEET THIS

Afterword

Thanks for reading! What I first thought would be just a couple pages of a brief guide to what icon design is, turned into a massive 50+ pages book on iconography. Hopefully, this guide have helped you to create your first icon set, improve your existing skills or simply opened your eyes into the wonderful world of icon design.

I've put so much work and passion into this guide to make it THE source for anyone who wants to learn icon design. And I would love to hear what you think about it! Was it helpful? What chapter did you like the most? What are you missing in this guide? How could I improve it?

**Please, drop me an email with your testimonials.
It would mean the world to me!**

LETS CHAT!

Think that this guide might be useful to your crew - why not share it with them?

I put all my heart and soul into it to help people learn iconography without hassle. And I would love for it to reach as many people as possible!
Would you help me?

SHARE ON FACEBOOK

SHARE ON TWITTER



Also feel free to add me on any of the following social networks. I'm sharing useful information about icon design on all of them.



Stay Awesome!