

The Design Brief

A design brief is a written explanation given by the client to the designer at the outset of a project. As the client, you are spelling out your objectives and expectations and defining a scope of work when you issue one. You're also committing to a concrete expression that can be revisited as a project moves forward. It's an honest way to keep everyone honest. If the brief raises questions, all the better. Questions early are better than questions late.

Why Provide a Design Brief?

The purpose of the brief is to get everyone started with a common understanding of what's to be accomplished. It gives direction and serves as a benchmark against which to test concepts and execution as you move through a project. Some designers provide clients with their own set of questions. Even so, the ultimate responsibility for defining goals and objectives and identifying audience and context lies with the client.

Another benefit of the design brief is the clarity it provides you as the client about why you're embarking on a project. If you don't know why, you can't possibly hope to achieve anything worthwhile. Nor are you likely to get your company behind your project. A brief can be as valuable internally as it is externally. If you present it to the people within the company most directly affected by whatever is being produced, you not only elicit valuable input, but also pave the way for their buy-in.

When you think about it, the last thing you want is for your project to be a test of the designer's skills. Your responsibility is to help the design firm do the best work it can. That's why you hired the firm. And why you give it a brief.

How to Write One

A brief is not a blueprint. It shouldn't tell the designer how to do the work. It's a statement of purpose, a concise declaration of a client's expectations of what the design should accomplish. And while briefs will differ depending upon the project, there are some general guidelines to direct the process. Among them:

- Provide a clear statement of objectives, with priorities
- Relate the objectives to overall company positioning
- Indicate if and how you'll measure achievement of your goals
- Define, characterize and prioritize your audiences
- Define budgets and time frames
- Explain the internal approval process
- Be clear about procedural requirements (e.g., if more than one bid is needed from fabricators, or if there's a minimum acceptable level of detail for design presentations).

In the final analysis, design briefs are about paving the way for a successful design effort that reflects well on everyone involved.