

Starting from Scratch

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Introduction

Hello and welcome to the Divi Stylist Academy lesson on starting a new web design project. In this lesson, I would like to inspire you to think about your process when starting from scratch.

I would like to discuss a few things to consider at the beginning of every project. Of course, you don't need to do everything the way I'm describing it - but I hope this lesson will give you some ideas to use in your own process.

It is always useful to have some sort of outline on how to proceed when working with a new client.

The 5-step process

Below is my checklist of important steps when starting a new project. We'll discuss every step in detail, providing examples.

1. Define website goals.
2. Before anything else, get clarity on the brand personality you are working with.
3. Collect inspiration for this project.
4. Sketch and wireframe the structure of the site without making any low-level decisions and looking into details.
5. Explore a visual style which kind of wraps the previous steps together. You can choose fonts, color palette, images or icons and create a mood board or style tile which you can then present to your client.

Defining website goals

You need to be able to define what the website's goal is. In other words, what does success look like?

They could be monetization goals. If the site needs to make money, defining the goal might be easy. For example, for an e-commerce site, the goal would be to convince users to purchase a product.

But if the site makes money through affiliate links then these affiliate recommendations should be the focus, should be in the front and center.

There are many different goals a website can have - it doesn't need to be purchase-related. The goal could be behavioral: for example, for the users to download a freebie or subscribe to something, to donate. Or user experience goals, such as encouraging users to try a new feature, could be your priority.

Have a look at the Website Goals and Brand Personality Guide that's available in the lesson materials. There, we've provided a list of many possible goals.

But the important thing is simply to think about and write down these goals. This will have two benefits. First of all, if you don't know what the goals are, you are only going to hit them by accident, or miss them altogether, making the site perform badly.

Secondly, if you're working with clients, it is very important that you be able to justify your decisions based on the goal that is behind them. Your clients will be less likely to undermine your every step, ask for countless tweaks and edits, and you'll get to the finish line faster.

Determine your brand personality

Another thing to consider at the start of every project is your brand personality. By brand personality, I simply mean what you want your users to feel about you.

Every website has some sort of personality. A banking site might try to communicate that it is secure and professional, while a trendy new startup might have a design that feels fun and playful.

So it's as simple as coming up with a list of adjectives.

When you're working with a client you can start by asking them questions to really get a handle on what kind of brand they are going for.

These are some of the questions you might be asking: what are similar sites that you look up to or think are doing something right that you also want to do right? And once you get a link, you should dig deeper and ask what specific feeling they get from the site that they also would like to convey.

Another question would be: why does your company exist? Why should people listen to you? Why should your customer trust you over your competitors? What do you believe that all your competitors disagree with? Maybe there's something there. What values do you hold strongly that you'd be willing to lose money over rather than violate them? This should give you some great examples.

Collect and compile inspiration

A lot of the time you will probably just have a gut feeling for the personality you're going for, but if you don't, a great way to simplify the decision is to take a look at other sites used by the people you want to reach, i.e. the target audience.

If they are mostly serious businesses, maybe that's how your site should look too. Or if they are more playful with a bit of humor, maybe that's a better direction to take. Just try not to borrow too much from direct competitors; you don't want to look like a second-rate version of something else, right?

Ideally, you should have your goals and brand personality defined before doing any design work. And once we do have these things in place, it's important that you don't get hung up on making low-level decisions about things like typefaces, shadows, or icons right away. Details come later.

The easiest way to find yourself frustrated and stuck when working on a new design is to start by trying to "design" the website. When most people think about "designing" the website, they're thinking about the shell, right? Should it have a top navigation or a sidebar? Should the navigation items be on the left or on the right? Should the page content be in the container or should it be full width? Where should the logo go and things like that? That stuff will all matter eventually but it doesn't matter right now.

Sketch and wireframe

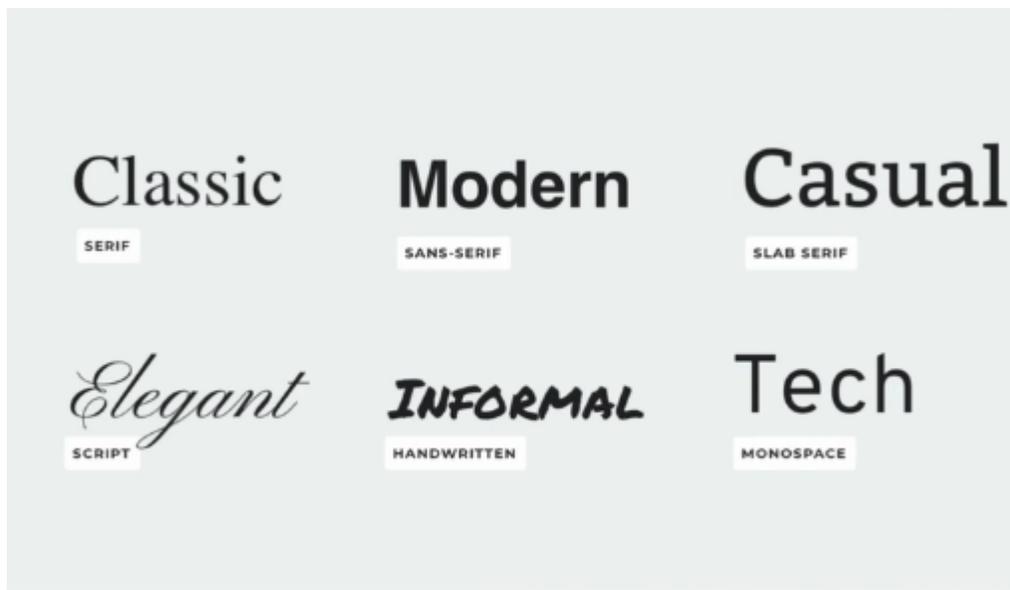
If you have trouble ignoring the details when working in a high fidelity environment like the browser, Divi, or your favorite design tool, there is one thing I like to do. Namely, sketch your design first on paper using just a pen - or better yet, a thick sharpie. It's not possible to obsess over details using a sharpie, so it is the best way to quickly explore different ideas and layouts.

You should keep your goals in mind when doing a wireframe of the site. Think of the flow of the page, the hierarchy of information, but work quickly, use wireframes and sketches to explore your ideas, and leave them behind once you've made a decision.

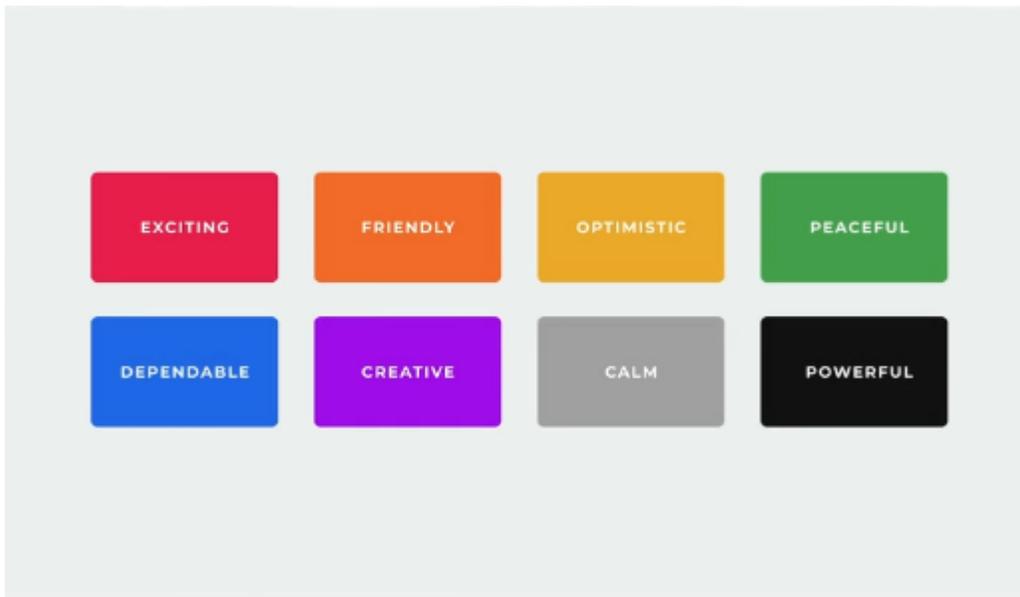
Explore the visual styles

Once you have the idea of the main website structure, you can get back to exploring visual styles. Here are some elements that define the visual style of a website:

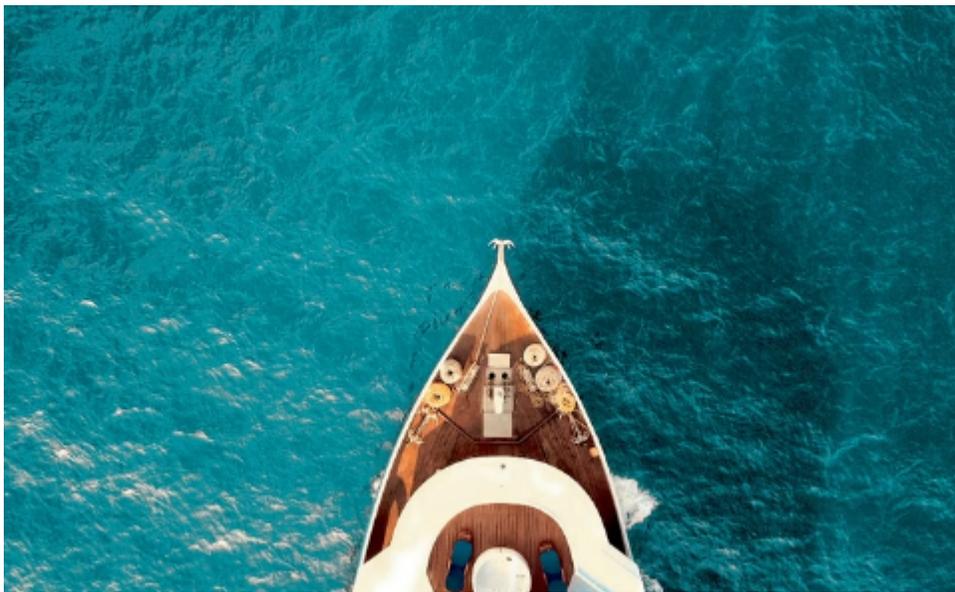
- **Typography:** It plays a huge part in determining how a design feels. If you want an elegant or classic look, you might want to incorporate a serif typeface in your design. For a playful look, you could use a rounded sans serif, and if you're going for a plainer look or want to rely on other elements to provide the personality, a neutral sans serif works great.



- **Color:** there's a lot of science out there on the psychology of color, but in practice, you really just need to pay attention to how different colors feel to you. Blue is safe and familiar, nobody ever complains about blue. Gold might communicate that something is expensive and sophisticated. Pink is a bit more fun and not so serious. All these different colors may have a different meaning, and if you're just starting with some brand colors your client already has it's OK too, but it's important that the color palette connects to the personality you're trying to convey.



- Imagery: beautiful, high quality photography gives a luxury feel, while using fancy cartoons can be perceived as playful or even quirky.

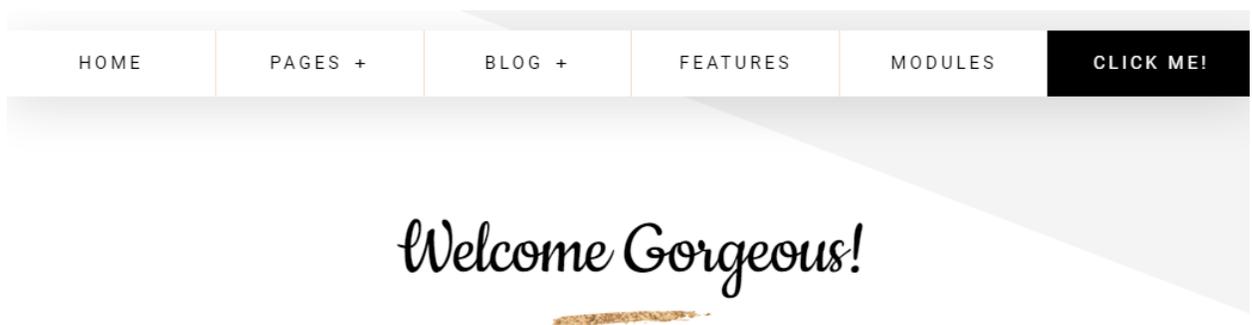


- Border radius, as small of a detail as it sounds, and how much you round your corners in your design, can have a big impact on the overall feel. A small border radius is pretty neutral and doesn't communicate much. A large border radius is more playful, while no border radius at all is serious and formal. Whatever you choose, it's important to stay consistent. Mixing square corners and rounded

corners in the same interface almost always looks worse than sticking with one or the other.



- Language: while it's not a visual design technique per se, the words you use in an interface have a massive influence on the overall personality. Using a less personal tone might feel more official or professional, while using a friendlier, casual language makes a site feel, well, friendlier. Words are everywhere in the user interface and choosing the right ones is just as, if not more, important as choosing the right color or typeface.



Recap: Starting a new web design project

To recap, here's what I suggest you do at the beginning of a new project.

First, write down the goals the website should meet. Next, define some adjectives or short sentences that describe your brand personality. Take some time to get inspired. Next, without focusing on any details, plan the structure of the page keeping the goals in mind. Think about the visual hierarchy of each page layout.

Finally, take the time to prepare a brand board or a style tile that can include the fonts, main colors, sample imagery, just to create the correct feel for the site that correlates with the personality and goals. You can present it to your client for acceptance before you start working on the actual website.

Of course, you don't have to follow this process religiously, but be aware of these steps and why they are important. Chances are, you will want to create a system that incorporates the elements you find most important and most effective for you.

The 5 most popular brand personalities

Now, you might be wondering. If there are so many different brand personalities and adjectives, do you need to learn how to translate each one into fonts or colors?

Thankfully, the answer is no. There are certain brand personalities you'll be working with 80% of the time and that's where you really need to dig in the details.

I really like the approach of a great designer, Eric Kennedy, who came up with these five most common brand personalities. Let me walk you through them.

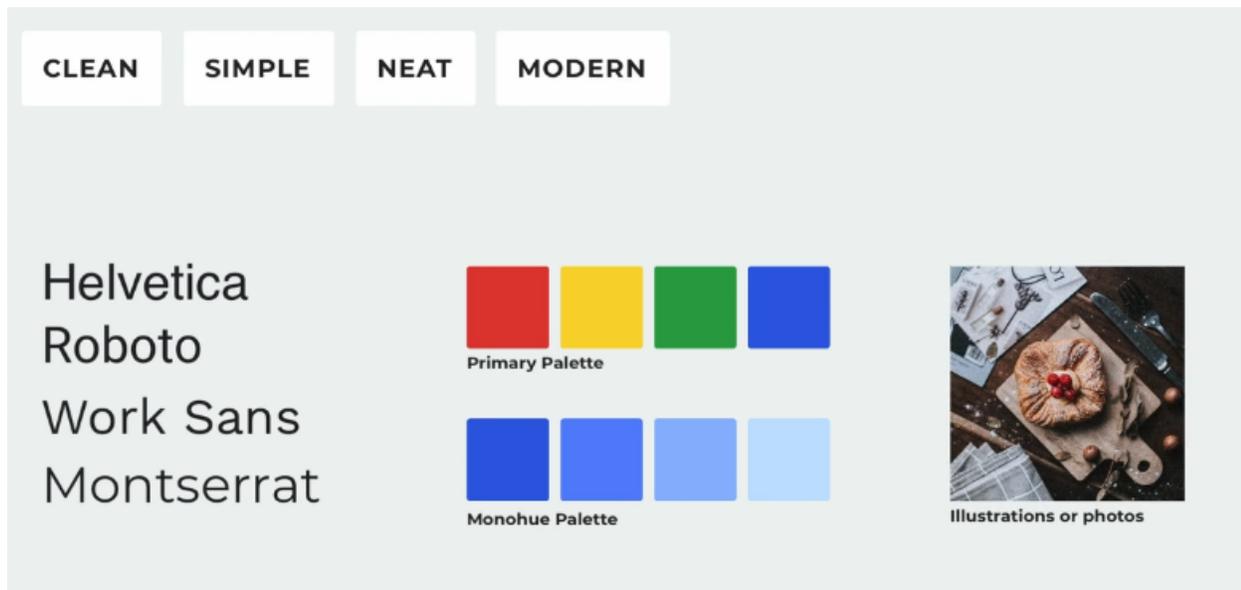
Clean and simple

The first one is the most common thing your clients will request: something clean and simple. Here are the elements you will see on a clean and simple website, otherwise described as neat and modern.

Typography is often going to be sans serif.

Colors used are usually from the primary palette, the bright clean primary hues. Or you'll see monohue schemes where the whole site is just basically one main theme color and variations of that color.

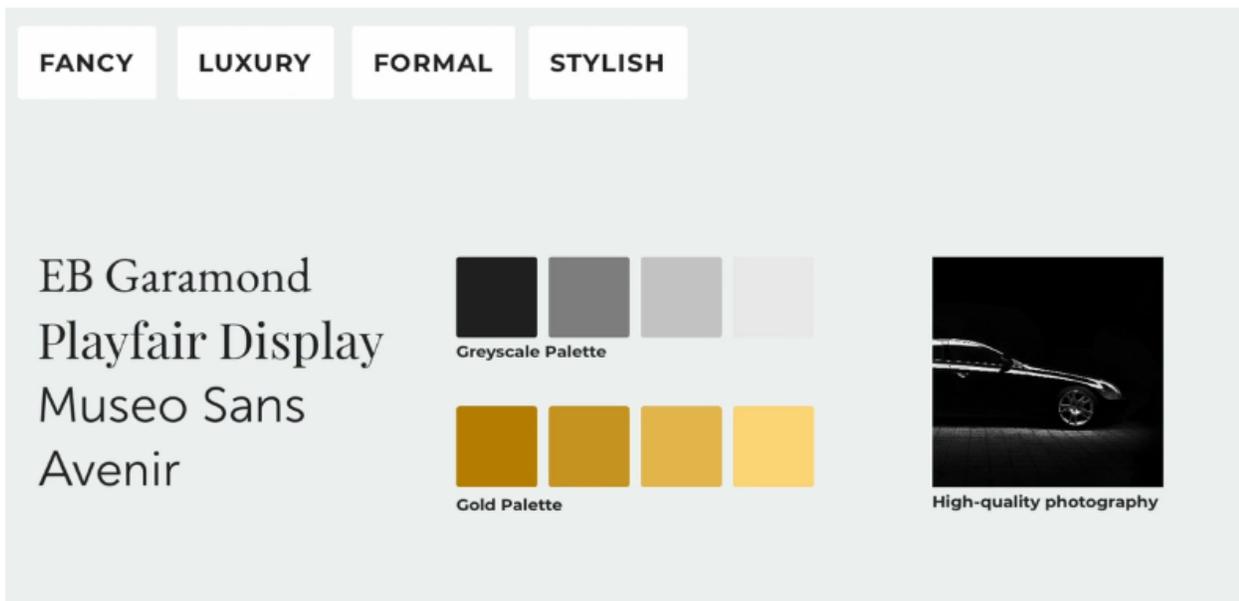
For imagery, they will use either photography or illustrations.



Luxurious and formal

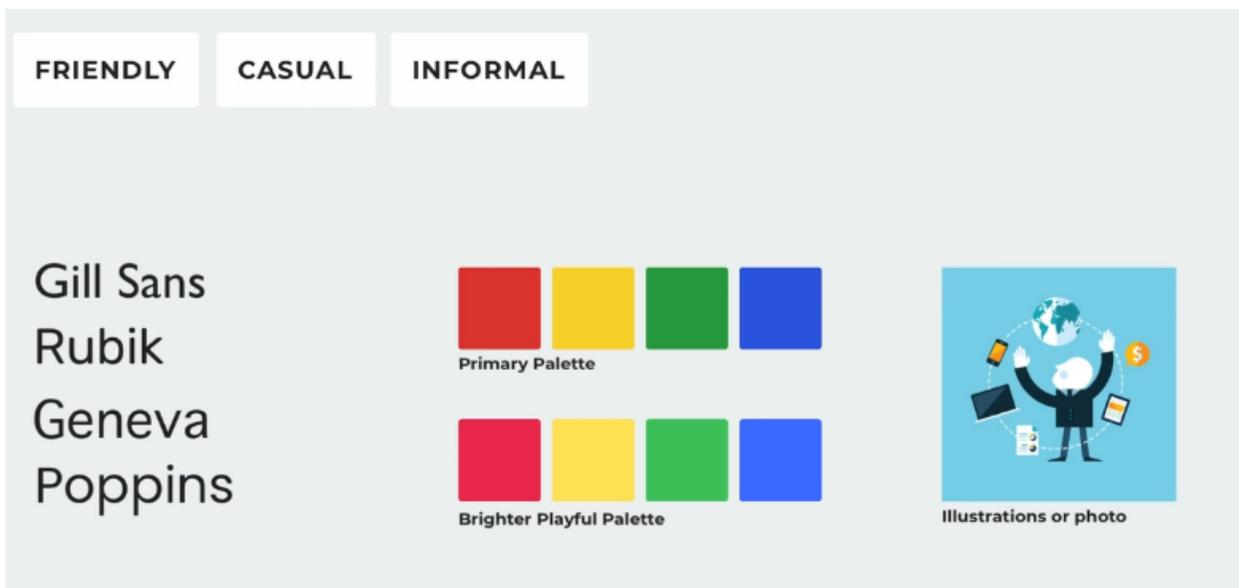
The second type of website is very easy to recognize when you see it. It is fancy, luxurious, stylish, kind of a formal brand. They might use serif fonts or light font weights of sans serif fonts. They are very likely to use the grayscale palette and there might be some gold accents.

If there is any imagery, it is going to be the highest quality photos, extremely beautiful stuff.



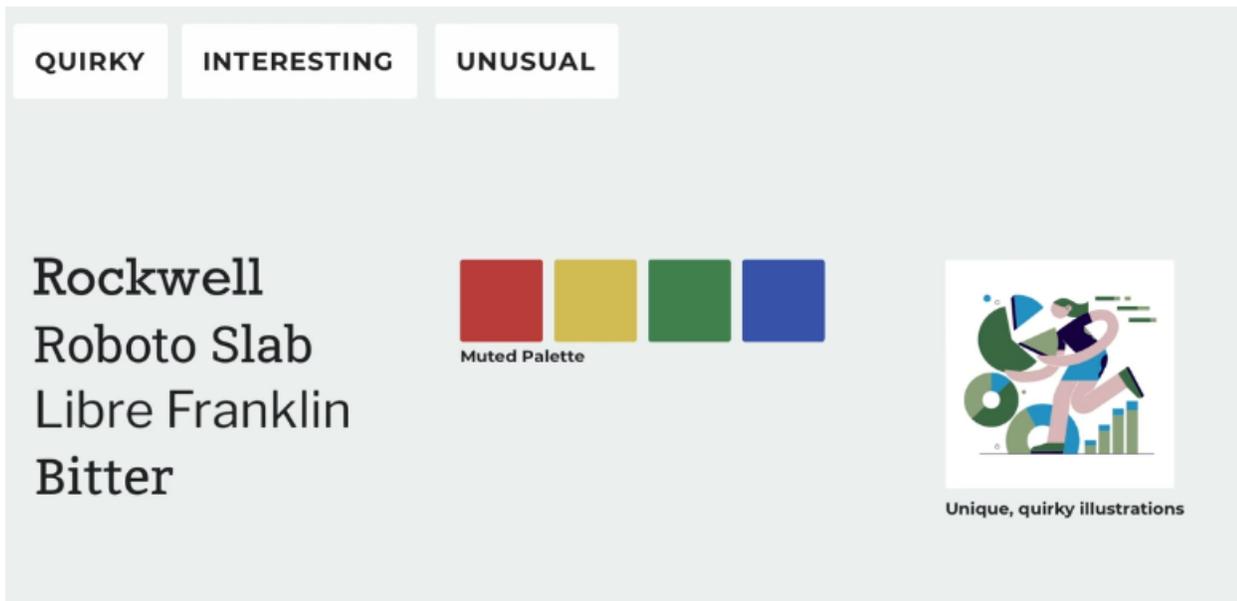
Friendly

Next, we have the friendly sites. You see the site and you immediately think "oh, this is casual, it's friendly, it feels nice". You might see different types of sans serif fonts here, rounded fonts, primary palettes or more playful palettes with a friendly side. You might see cute illustrations or similar elements which you are unlikely to see on a really fancy site.



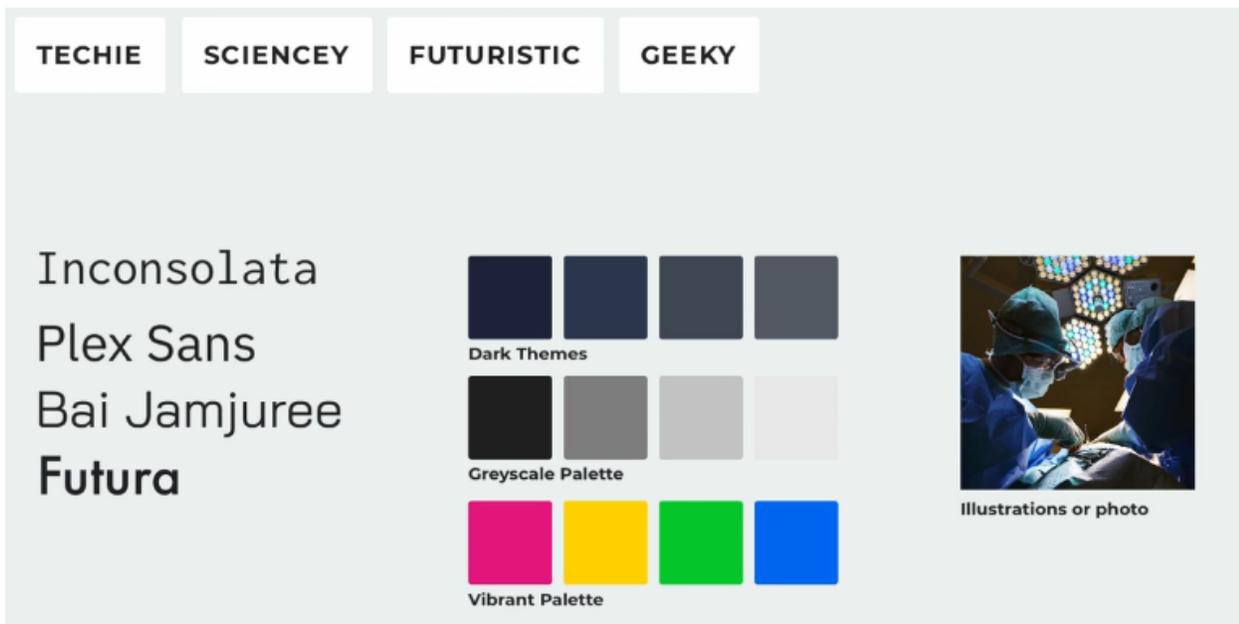
Quirky

Next, we have quirky, interesting, unusual sites. Not a common request from clients but something designers like to explore. They might use photography or illustrations.



Techie

A techie website will have a scientific, futuristic, geeky vibe. They might use geometric sans serif fonts, monospace, uppercase font styles. You will see some dark themes, greyscale palettes or vibrant colors. They might use photography or illustrations.



Aligning visual styles with the brand personality

Once you get comfortable and familiar with different types of design and different brand personalities, it will be easier for you to determine what kind of font, colors, and imagery your project needs. And that relates to the previous lesson where we talked about finding and using design inspiration.

Once you start analyzing great-looking websites, think how the visual styles correlate with their brand personality. It will help you develop your own web-designer 'gut instinct'.

I hope you give these methods a try in your next project, which will help you develop your own system for starting from scratch.

Resources

GET INSPIRED:

Website Goals and Personality Brand Guide (available in the Downloads section of this lesson)

Action Items

- Using your understanding of the brand and how it's conveyed, look at one of the websites you've found for the previous lesson. What is their brand? What signals have you gotten – from typography, color, imagery, tone of voice, etc. – that support this brand? Post your findings inside the Facebook Group.