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Design basics for builders

Layout, type, colour, spacing and consistency: the few design rules that make an AI-built app look trustworthy and easy to use.

Pass the check (4 of 5) online to earn the “Design Sense” badge:
https://digitalbuilders757.com/university/study/design-basics-for-builders

Design is how it works, not just how it looks

People decide in seconds whether an app feels trustworthy. Good design is mostly clarity: one main thing per screen, an obvious next step, and nothing that makes people guess. You don't need to be an artist. A handful of rules gets you most of the way, and AI builders follow them well when you ask clearly.

Five rules that do most of the work

- Hierarchy: make the most important thing biggest or boldest. Each screen gets one main action (primary button); the rest are quieter.
- Spacing (whitespace): give things room. Use a small set of spacing steps (for example 4, 8, 16, 24, 32 pixels) and stick to them.
- Typography: one or two fonts, a few sizes, body text at least 16px, and short lines that are easy to read.
- Colour: one brand colour for actions, neutrals for everything else, and red/green only for errors and success. Check contrast so text is readable.
- Consistency: the same button looks and behaves the same everywhere. A design system (your colours, type, spacing and components written down) keeps it that way.

Steal like a designer

Collect screenshots of apps you like that do the same job as yours, and notice patterns: where the sign-in lives, how lists look, what empty screens say. Sketch your screens on paper or in a tool like Figma before you prompt. Then describe the layout in words, or show your builder a screenshot or sketch, rather than asking it to 'make it look nice'.

Prompting for good design

Give the builder your design system up front: 'Use Inter, 16px body, our brand colour for primary buttons only, 8px spacing steps, rounded cards, lots of whitespace.' Ask for every state of a screen, not just the happy one: loading, empty, error and success. Check it on a phone, since most visitors will arrive on one (responsive design). Then ask a person to use it while you watch quietly; where they hesitate is your next fix.

Key terms

Visual hierarchy
Making the most important thing on a screen stand out most, through size, weight, colour and position.

Whitespace
Empty space around and between things on a screen. It makes designs easier to read.

Typography
How text looks: font, size, weight, line length and spacing.

Design system
Your written-down colours, type, spacing and reusable components, used the same way everywhere.

Figma
A popular online tool for sketching and designing app screens, often before building them.

Responsive design
Layouts that adapt to any screen size, from phone to desktop.

Colour contrast
How different text is from its background; enough contrast keeps text readable.

Call to action (CTA)
The one thing you want a visitor to do next, like 'Join the waitlist'.

Try it: Give your app a design system

1. Screenshot three apps you like that do a similar job and note what they share.
2. Write a five-line design system: font, sizes, brand colour, spacing steps, button style.
3. Paste it into your builder and ask it to apply it across every screen.
4. Ask for the empty, loading and error states of your main screen, and check them on your phone.

KNOWLEDGE CHECK

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5 questions. Circle one answer for each; 4 or more correct passes. Answers are at the back.

1. What is visual hierarchy?

A. A list of the app's pages, arranged from most to least visited
B. Making the most important thing on a screen stand out most
C. A database structure
D. Your team's org chart

2. Best way to use colour in a simple app?

A. A different colour for every button, so each action is easy to tell apart
B. Red text everywhere so it stands out
C. One brand colour for actions, neutrals elsewhere
D. Avoid colour completely; black and white always looks most professional

3. What is a design system?

A. A paid design app
B. An AI image generator
C. A type of database
D. Your written-down colours, type, spacing and components, used consistently

4. Which prompt gets better design from an AI builder?

A. Use Inter, 16px body text, brand colour for primary buttons only, 8px spacing steps, and show empty and error states
B. Make it look nice
C. Make it look amazing, modern, clean, beautiful and professional, like the best apps in the world, with lots of wow factor
D. Copy Apple

5. The quickest way to find your app's biggest design problem?

A. Ask the AI to review screenshots and score the design out of ten
B. Watch someone use it, without helping
C. Compare it with your favourite app and copy what looks different
D. Ask friends whether they like the colours

Official sites

Apple Human Interface Guidelines: https://developer.apple.com/design/human-interface-guidelines
Material Design: https://m3.material.io/
WebAIM contrast checker: https://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/

Last reviewed 2026-11-25. AI tools change fast; check each tool's own site for current features, plans and prices.

ANSWER KEY

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1. B: Making the most important thing on a screen stand out most
Size, weight, colour and position tell people what to look at and do first.

2. C: One brand colour for actions, neutrals elsewhere
Restraint makes the important actions obvious and the app feel calm and trustworthy.

3. D: Your written-down colours, type, spacing and components, used consistently
Giving your builder a design system keeps every screen consistent.

4. A: Use Inter, 16px body text, brand colour for primary buttons only, 8px spacing steps, and show empty and error states
Specific rules and states beat vague taste words every time.

5. B: Watch someone use it, without helping
Where people hesitate or get lost shows you exactly what to fix next.