

HOW TO; - WORK TO COMMISSION

Working to commission is creating work to order - to a particular design agreed between you and the client - specifically created to fulfil their needs...

Also referred to as custom or bespoke jewellery pieces / design.

It is a luxury, bespoke service that a designer, or designer-maker can provide for clients that want something that is completely special and personal to themselves, rather than choosing a more general piece.

It might involve re-working an old piece of jewellery to give it a different or more contemporary feel, creating a variation on one of your regular designs with alterations to suit the client (maybe changing the length, colours, incorporating or removing some of the elements), or creating a completely new design based on a clients idea.

AGREEING THE BRIEF

The first thing to do is to meet with the client - either in person, or on Zoom or similar, and to work out what the client actually wants - they may have a very exact idea of what they would like, or they may be quite vague, or just really like your style and would like a unique piece of their own from you...

It really helps to do this live rather than by e-mail to save having e-mails back and forth for days or weeks to try and get all the information you need clarified...

Get as many details as possible from the client - ask as many questions as you can think of at this point, make a list in advance - any specific ideas they already have, who is it for, what is that person's lifestyle like / what are their interests and their fashion style, what made them decide to come to you - have they seen a piece of yours they like, what jewellery styles in general do they like.

If the client can show you pictures of pieces that they like, or details in other pieces that they like, or images of the person that the piece will be for, that can help a lot.

A STARTER CHECKLIST; -

- The clients approximate budget
 - no need to go into actual prices yet, but there's no point talking about a complex piece that will take a time to make or use a lot of gold if they have only a minimal budget, but if they have a larger budget, you know can spend more time on the project
 - it can help to give the client an idea of prices from previous jobs, or to say that commission pieces start from £xxx, or pieces in gold start from £xxx.
- Any deadline or time line the customer has in mind
- What materials or colours they want to incorporate
- What size, or type of fittings - i.e. if it is earrings, are they looking for studs, or drops
- The general style/s of fashion and jewellery they (or the person it is for) like
- Any design elements they would like to include
- Any specific functionality
 - e.g. if it will be something worn daily, it'll need specific considerations in terms of design and materials for durability
 - what outfit/s will it most likely be worn with - e.g. necklines and collars are important for necklaces, type of fabric can be important for brooches...

After the meeting - send a written summary of the points discussed, to make sure you really are both on the same page and then give a time line or details of the next steps, so that you both understand what will happen next and to manage expectations.

PROVIDING DESIGN OPTIONS

Once the brief is agreed, the next stage is to work up some design ideas...

For most jewellery, this will involve developing ideas in your sketchbook or with models.

Work on several different approaches to the brief or different variations of your design...

Choose your favourite 3 from these options and work them up into presentation drawings of some sort - this might be using CAD, or hand drawing, or for quicker pieces, a mock up in cheaper materials (for a gold ring, you might make a silver or brass sample to test for size and ensure the client likes the feel, or if it is beads, annotated photos of layout and/or bead selections. Give the client the clearest possible idea of what each design will look like.

One option should be as close as possible to what you understood the client was hoping for, another might be a version that you would actually prefer to make / you think might work better than what the client specified, and the third might be either a more involved (more expensive), or a cheaper variation of the idea (depending on the client).

Work out prices for each of these options. Work out the approximate materials costs and estimate the time to do the work based on anything similar you may have made in the past, and apply this to your usual retail pricing calculations. Add a premium for the fact that this is a one off piece, and cover yourself for the extra communications time you spend to-and fro-ing with the client that commissions require.

Have your prices ready for each option and be clear about whether these are fixed prices or whether they will change depending on stone choices and the metals market for example. Have an idea how much the price would need to change if the client changes their mind on some common details such as the metal they want to use or necklace length.

Present these ideas and discuss them with the client. They may agree to one design straight away, or they may ask for further tweaks to one of your proposed designs, that you can work on and come back to them again.

Some designers charge a consultation, or a design fee, that can later be deducted from the final payment, especially if spending a lot of time on this stage.

If you can; - meet with the client - take their measurements yourself (and send written confirmation). If this is not possible - you'll need to ensure you have detailed measuring / sizing info - maybe send a ring sizer for them to use, along with instructions to use it, for example.

GOING AHEAD

Before you agree to start making a piece - again **put the agreed design and details in writing** - attach the agreed design drawing - with annotations regarding size, and materials in an e-mail, with the agreed full price and expected timescale (give yourself more time than you need as a backup - you still have your other work, and might have jobs queued up).

Make sure the client replies to this e-mail to agree to go ahead with the project and take a 50% deposit payment up front - this is not usually refundable and is to cover your materials costs and to go towards your time, in case the client changes their mind later.

You might agree to send the client progress images at certain stages, to make sure you have their agreement and they are happy with the piece, especially if you provided fairly basic design drawings to start with, but this is not always needed. The key is, particularly for pieces with a higher price and a longer time scale, to keep the client updated as the timeline progresses.

You might then meet with the client for a fitting, with then allow further time to adjust or make any final changes, before the item is packaged and delivered. I would suggest sending images of the completed piece with the final invoice, and then ship or hand over once paid.

TIMESCALES

For a relatively quick/simple piece, a two week minimum timeline is standard - **from the date the design is agreed and deposit paid**, but this will increase due to how much other work you have/prior jobs to complete, as well as for more complex items, and if you need to use outside services like casting, stone setting, plating and hallmarking.

TIP - Communication with your client is key - to understand their needs, and to keep them updated and informed at each stage to best ensure they will be happy with the final piece...