

Eye for Design: Higher Resolutions: Valuable Design Elements for Free

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According to Marshall McLuhan's famous adage, "the medium is the message," and the proliferation of newer media (high definition television and the internet, to name just a couple) illustrate his point in ways he probably never imagined. While we librarians are inclined also to think that the *message* is the message, our increasingly visual culture compels us to use attention-grabbing details and designs.

Research has shown that people perceive more attractive designs as easier to use than less attractive designs. This phenomenon is referred to as the "aesthetic-usability effect."¹ By enhancing this effect, librarians stand to make their materials more appealing and, by extension, more useful.

In this article, we offer some thoughts about getting the best graphics and images for library-related designs. An extra bit of design effort here can supply the competitive edge over the massive amount of information our colleagues and patrons come in contact with during the day.

Focus on Graphics

For every webpage, flyer, sign, and PowerPoint presentation, you have a number of important design choices to make: text (content), font, color, size, layout, and graphics. A good graphic can make or break a design; it can also inspire and influence all the other design decisions around it. That being said, everyone has constraints. We'd all love to be gifted illustrators and to have a stockpile of high-quality rights-cleared stock photography at our fingertips. In lieu of such bounty, clip art often gets the call. Clip art is easy; it's right there under the "Insert" tab, ready to be clicked. But wait...limited resources and limited artistic training shouldn't mean you're stuck with *this* guy - seen him before?



Clip art isn't always this stale, but librarians and library patrons tend to be busy and distracted. They are inundated with appeals for their time and attention. It sounds simple, but giving these people something interesting to look at gives you the best shot at penetrating their "internal spam filters." Difference grabs attention. Unfortunately, the qualities that make standard clip art attractive to designers (ease of use and zero cost) end up meaning they've been overused or they aren't very good. Many viewers will just ignore "generic" clip art.

In order to make the right impression (i.e., not the guy-

surfing-his-diploma one), we need to dig a little deeper and think more about how we deploy what we find.

Finding Graphics

A virtually endless array of resources exists for finding suitable graphics for print or screen, but searching on the open web can be overwhelming. More targeted searching can get you where you want to be. Plenty of talented artists and photographers are generous with their work, and they make it freely available through reputable websites. Here are just a few of our favorite sites.

Flickr.com is a great place to start since they support Creative Commons licenses and offer a Creative Commons search filter on their advanced search page. By refining your search query to only those photographs and illustrations with Creative Commons licenses, you can ensure that any image you find will allow reuse (as long as you follow the license rules). A recent search for Creative Commons-licensed images of "books" yielded 276,784 results (see below for example). <http://www.flickr.com/search/advanced/>

Personally, we've had amazing experiences sharing our own images on Flickr and working with other people's images found via Flickr. Creators are typically thrilled to see their images used, which inspires further contributions and creations.

Flickr user Lin Pernille

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/linnybinnypix/1189891134/>



deviantart.com is another online community that showcases user-generated content but with a broader scope than Flickr. deviantART content includes not only photographs, but also Photoshop add-ons (brushes, textures, borders, graphics, etc.), animations, arts, crafts, and more. Most of the contributors make their resources free but request that you leave them a comment about how you used their work.

OpenClipart.org is an archive of public domain clip art. This site offers a wide variety of clip art including vintage and retro illustrations and modern graphics. But beware: many generic and overused images also crop up on this site!



deviantART user, extrasist0le
<http://fav.me/d2kt1se>



Open Clip Art user, johnny_automatic
<http://www.openclipart.org/detail/7361>

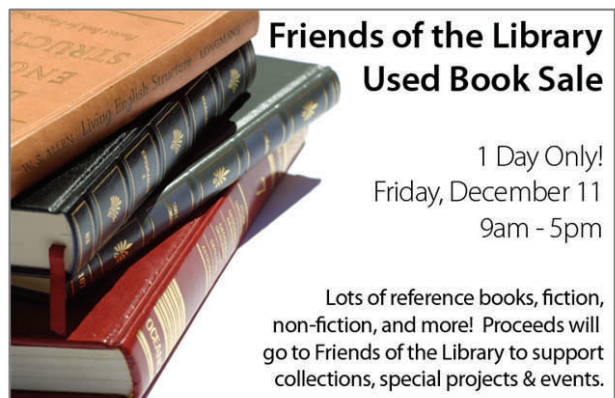
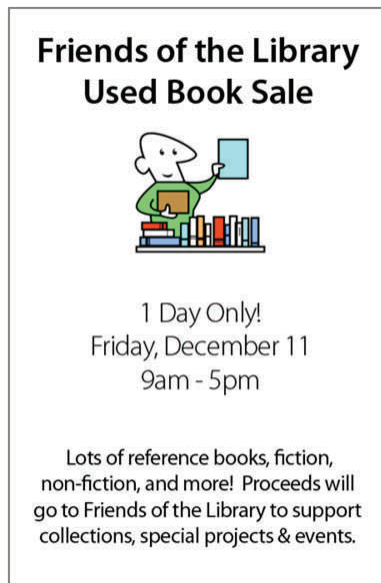
This should be enough to get you started, but if you're interested in additional resources for finding graphics, visit <http://userslib.com/2010/05/02/finding-images-for-print-web/>

You found some great images. Now what?

Here are some **basic design principles** to keep in mind:

- Be bold, go big, and fill the space. Don't be afraid of the edges of the paper or screen.
- Keep it simple. You don't need elaborate images with overlays, gradients, or special filters (though, when used well, these can be great techniques).
- Balance image and text. Text doesn't have to be center aligned and you don't have to use the same weight and size for all the text (but be careful about using different types of font – one or two is usually plenty).
- Group the content into similar chunks so you can use size and weight to draw attention to the more important parts.

Here's an example to demonstrate a few of the principles above, using the exact same text, colors, and fonts. The image on the left was found in the Microsoft Clip Gallery and the second image came from deviantART ([gisu-stock, http://fav.me/d36i3a](http://fav.me/d36i3a)).



See what a difference changing out the graphic can make?
 Crisp, interesting design isn't complicated, but it will make your materials shine!

Some Final Tips and Techniques

1. Get inspired. Look around you. Look in magazines, web design, stores, etc. Ideas can be found anywhere.
 2. Sketch out your ideas. It doesn't matter if you can't draw, they don't have to look pretty or even readable, it's just to get some ideas down and to force yourself to try a few things. And even if you like your first idea, make yourself do a few. You'll be surprised by how many other designs you can come up with.
 3. After you're done, get some feedback. Show it to some coworkers or student staff. In our experience, there are no shortages of opinion!
 4. Don't be afraid to start over. We've rarely gone with our first version of anything... more often than not, we will completely scrap our first design and start over.
- 1 Lidwell, W., Holden, K., & Butler, J. (2010). *Universal principles of design, revised and updated*. Beverly, MA: Rockport Publishers