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Guide to Using Images in Graphic Design Projects

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Guide to Using Images in Graphic Design Projects

Guide Description

This guide explains the part copyright plays when using images in your educational projects. The information, therefore, will be almost wholly limited to copyright and images, and may not hold true for other types of works.

Please note that although this guide gives general information about finding and reusing images it should not be considered legal advice nor should it be used for guidance outside the US.

Copyright Basics

Copyright is a type of intellectual property that protects original works of authorship as soon as an author fixes the work in a tangible form of expression.¹ So, as soon as you put a loaded paintbrush to canvas, shoot a photograph with a camera, or save your work to a computer, it's automatically copyrighted. That holds true for almost anything you create. You don't have to register it with the U.S. Copyright Office, you don't have to use a copyright symbol, and you don't have to write "copyright" anywhere on the work. There are benefits to adding copyright information to your work and/or registering it with the Copyright Office, but it's not a requirement for copyright protection.

Generally speaking, the copyright holder is the only person who can copy, distribute, make derivatives, or publicly perform or display their work. Because copyright happens automatically, and it lasts for such a long time, you should assume that most images you find online are covered by copyright law, even if there is no copyright notice on the image, page, or website. If you want to use content that's not yours, you usually have to ask permission. If a copyright holder agrees to your intended use, they are then giving you "license" to use their work.

Although copyright holders hold the rights to their works, the law allows for a variety of exceptions to those rights. Exceptions allow other people to use a copyrighted work without requesting permission from the copyright holder. For example, Section 110 of the U.S. Copyright Act allows instructors to read a book out loud, show a movie, play music, or display works of art in the classroom.

Public Domain

Not all works can be copyrighted, though, and copyright does eventually expire. When an item is not (or is no longer) covered by copyright, it falls into the "public domain". You can then copy, adapt, remix or build upon the work in any way you want, without asking permission and without paying a fee.

Examples of works in the public domain include:

- Facts (calendars, rulers, phone books, sports statistics)
- Works created by the US federal government or its employees
- Most content created before 1927

¹ What is copyright?. (n.d.). In *Copyright.gov | U.S. Copyright Office*. Retrieved from <https://www.copyright.gov/what-is-copyright/>



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Creative Commons Licenses are probably the most common and formalized of all open licenses. Just like other open licenses, CC licenses work *alongside* copyright. The licenses allow the copyright holder to retain all rights related to copyright, but they allow others to use the work – for free – in the manner described by the license. The licenses are legal and are irrevocable (can’t be changed).

The following image describes the 6 standard CC licenses. Each license contains two or more two-letter symbols that tell you what you can and cannot do with the work. **Notice that you have to provide attribution (BY) for each license.** You can see a correctly formatted attribution directly below this image.



[CC License Freedom Scale Chart](#) by [Foter](#), is licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#). ←(Correctly formatted attribution)



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Additionally, Creative Commons has created a public domain mark, (CC 0). This mark (not a license) is used when a creator wants to give up their copyright and put the work directly into the public domain.



Royalty-Free Images

The phrase, “royalty-free”, can be misleading and often confuses people. Put simply, “royalty-free” means a user is free from making ongoing payments (royalties) to a copyright holder. **You still have to pay a fee**, but once you make that payment, you’re generally free to use the content over and over again, without making additional payments. Just like openly-licensed works, though, you need to make sure that the license of any royalty-free image you find allows the type of use you want to make. Some sites have images that are royalty-free for personal projects but require additional fees if used commercially.

CAUTION: If you search for “royalty-free images” using a search engine, you will often end up on commercial websites, which sometimes use openly-licensed images as a way to drive traffic to the company’s paying services. If you use a commercial website to find royalty-free images, make sure that you can easily distinguish between paid and free content, and as noted above, you should always check the license to find out exactly what you can or can’t do with the work.

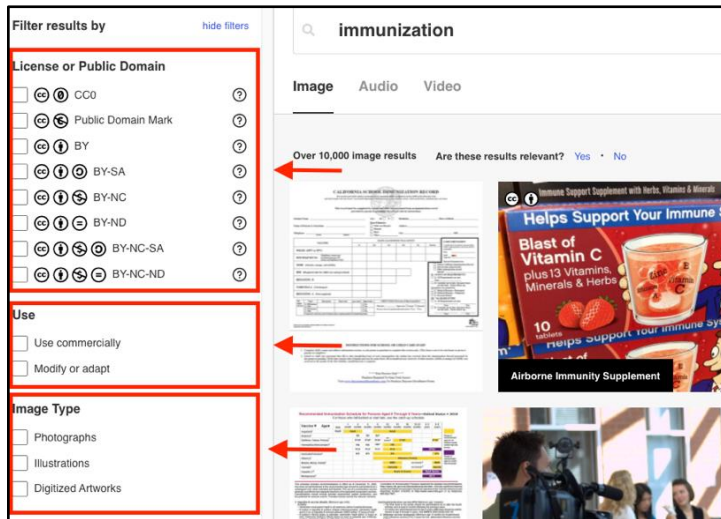


Finding and Using Images

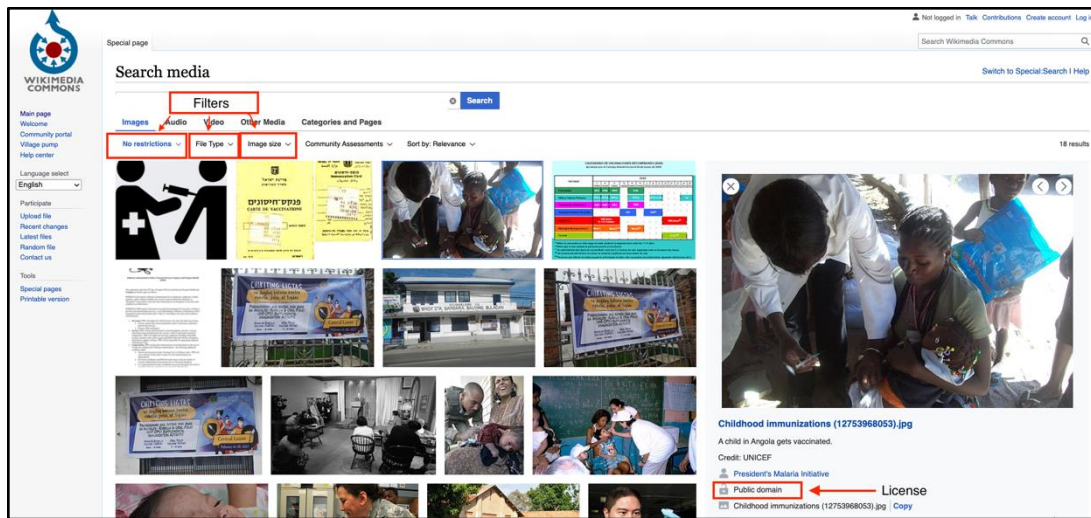
Non-Commercial Websites

The resources below are hosted by nonprofit agencies, universities, and government agencies. The images you'll find on these websites are either in the public domain or are openly licensed.

[CC Search](#) (now called "Openverse") – Searches for public domain and CC-licensed images. You can filter search results by license, use, image type, and more (see below).



[Wikimedia Commons](#) – 90 million freely usable media files uploaded by users. All images use a Creative Commons license or are in the public domain. You can use the filters to select a license, file type or image size.



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[Google](#) – use the Google search box or Google Images to search for images. Using the “Tool” button, you can filter the results by Creative Commons licenses.

The screenshot shows a Google search for 'immunization'. Red arrows and numbered boxes provide a step-by-step guide to filtering results by Creative Commons licenses:

1. Do a search in Google.
2. Click on "Images".
3. Click on the "Tools" button.
4. Select "Creative Commons licenses".

The search results display various images related to immunization, including medical professionals, vaccine bottles, and informational graphics. The 'Creative Commons licenses' filter is visible at the top of the image grid.

[USA.gov image search](#) – Images (hosted on Flickr) created by or for various departments of the US federal government. Most images are in the public domain, but some may be copyrighted. Check the license and restrictions on each item before using it. (see image below).

The screenshot shows a Flickr image of a worker in a warehouse handling large boxes of COVID-19 vaccine doses. The worker is wearing a blue jacket and a white vest with 'USA' on it. The boxes are labeled 'COVID-19 VACCINE' and 'RECEIVING AREA'. The image is hosted on Flickr and has 284 views, 0 likes, and 0 comments. It was taken on December 21, 2021, and is attributed to the U.S. Department of State. A warning icon is present, indicating that the image is U.S. government work, which puts it into the public domain.

[CDC Public Health Image Library](#) – Images from the Centers for Disease Control. Comes with a warning that some of the images may feature disturbing content, presumably medical in nature. Almost all of the images are in the public domain, but some may be copyrighted.



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[NIGMS Image and Video Library](#) – Media from the NIH’s National Institute of General Medical Sciences. These images are licensed under a CC-BY-NC-SA license, meaning you must credit their creator, cannot use them for commercial purposes, and must use a CC-BY-NC-SA license on any work you create with them.

[Images of Empowerment](#) – Free images of women’s lives and work, created by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and Getty Images. Licenses: [CC-BY-NC-4.0](#).

[Smithsonian Open Access](#) – Searches images and other items from the collections of the Smithsonian museums, research centers, libraries, and archives, as well as the National Zoo. The majority of these images are from the early 1900s and older, although there are some newer works as well. Note that if you uncheck the “CC0 images” box when searching, you will need to make sure there are no restrictions on the use and reuse of images you find.

Commercial Websites

[Unsplash](#) – Over 2 million freely usable, high-resolution images are included in Unsplash’s collection. According to the Unsplash license, all images can be downloaded and used – for commercial and non-commercial purposes – without asking permission from the creator.

[Nappy](#) – Free, high-resolution photos of black and brown people released with the Creative Commons CC0 (public domain) mark.

[StockSnap](#) – Images on the StockSnap website are released with the Creative Commons CC0 (public domain) mark, which means means you can copy, modify, distribute and publish the work, all without asking permission.

[Disabled and Here](#) – Free stock photography featuring disabled BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color), varied body sizes/types, sexual orientations, and gender identities in the Pacific Northwest. Images are released with a [CC BY 4.0](#) License.

CAUTION: The following three websites contain openly licensed (free to use) images, but might also host or advertise “royalty-free” (pay a fee) images. As always, check an image’s license to make sure you can use it as you wish.

1. [The Noun Project](#) – Once exclusively a compilation of [iconography](#), the website now spotlights an inclusive, diverse collection of art-quality photographs ([Photos](#)), including [images related to COVID 19](#). Users can download images for free if they abide by the CC-BY-NC-ND license, or they can pay a fee to acquire less restrictive rights. See [Pricing](#) for more information.
2. [Pixabay](#) – Pixabay hosts more than 2.5 million high quality openly-licensed images, videos, and music. Content is released under the Pixabay License, which makes it safe to use without asking for permission – even for commercial purposes. Also advertises and links to fee-based iStock photos.



3. [Life of Pix](#) – Free high-resolution public domain images from the Montreal-based LEEROY Creative Agency. Also advertises and links to fee-based Adobe Stock images

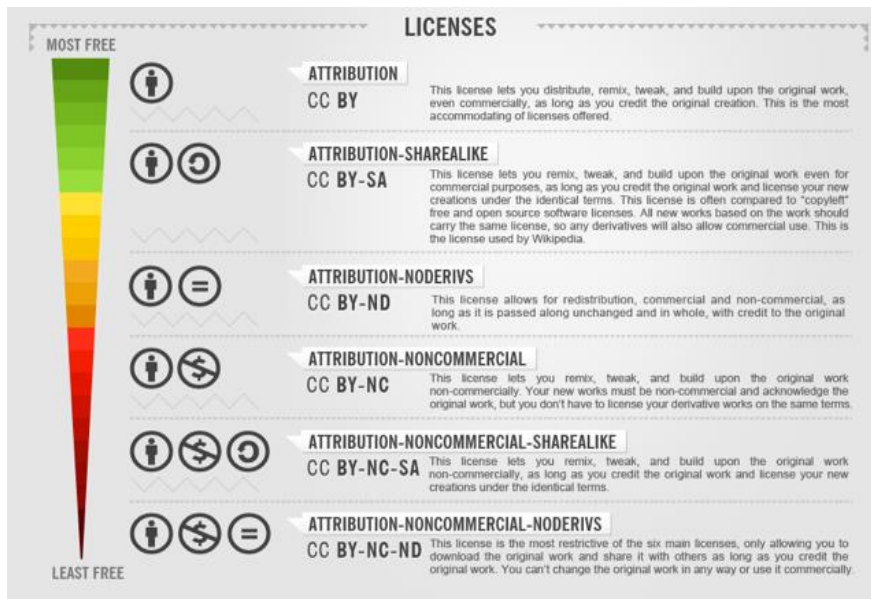
Giving Attribution

Although public domain and some openly-licensed images don't require attribution, scholarly practices do. Unless your instructor states otherwise, you should provide attribution for any images you don't create. And remember, all Creative Commons licenses require attribution; without it, you're in violation of the law.

An ideal attribution includes the following information:

1. Title (provide link to image)
2. Creator (provide link to creator's webpage if available)
3. License (provide link to license)

You can see an example of a good attribution under the image below.



[CC License Freedom Scale Chart](#) by [Foter](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

Title with link to image.

Creator's name with link to webpage.

License with link to license description.

You can find more information at the Creative Commons ["Best Practices for Attribution"](#) wiki page.



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