The Pod Press Open Resource Beginners Guide to Graphic Design, and how to do it yourself without spending lots of money.

This guide was originally created for the members of WHALE Arts, a community arts centre serving the people of Wester Hailes, Edinburgh, Scotland.

Intended mainly for folk from Wester Hailes who are starting their own business and don't know where to begin when it comes to designing marketing materials, this guide aims to make graphic design as friendly, accessible and simple as possible.

It has been shared as an open resource to all who may find it useful, whether you are creating something for yourself, or something you're involved in, please feel free to use it as and when you need - and share it with others.

whalearts.co.uk

Pod Press is a community risograph press within WHALE Arts.

Contents

Learning Resources

Using any software for the first time can be challenging, but many people find the seemingly endless buttons and settings within image editing and design software too much. The secret is you will never need to use all of them. Different people use different settings, and often don't explore past the buttons they need for the kind of work they make.

Software's own tutorials
Quite often, the people who create the software also have basic tutorials on how to use it - either built within the software as prompted hints and tips, or on the makers' own website or Youtube channel.

These are often based on frequently asked questions, and they may even have their own users discussion board or FAQ's on their site.

YouTube
Youtube is always a good shout when it comes to 'how-to' learning. Software often has more capabilities than you need, so this is a handy tool for seeing what bits you need to use!

There are playlists on our Pod Press YouTube channel of the basics across designing and image-making for your interest. Look out for the youtube icon throughout this guide for pop-out links to useful videos by other people. Feel free to do your own search if you need something more specific - there's plenty out there to learn from.

A good way of searching online for the exact thing you're looking for help in is by typing in the name of the software you're using, then the problem you have or the thing you want to know.
e.g. 'photopea how to remove background'

Websites about creative design
There are so many different websites out there where people share their knowledge on various subjects. Some good advice websites:

- Shillington
- Canva Learn

Others are great for inspiration on new and interesting designers:

- It's Nice That
- Inspo Finds

- Creative Boom
- Fonts in Use

The Vignelli Canon

Vignelli was a designer who wrote down his ideas on graphic design, and they are a fantastic resource for anyone who's ready. It is at a more advanced level than in this guide, but holds valuable information for anyone interested in making their designs look professional.

Some graphic designers have said this, and Butterick's (below) taught them more about graphic design than studying their degree.

Recommended for those who have played around with the software and made a few things already. Learning should be at your own pace, so don't be put off by something advanced – you'll get there eventually if you want to!

Butterick's Practical Typography

This is a fabulous resource for anyone who wants to learn about typography, a bit beyond absolute beginners level, but this kind of knowledge really, really makes a difference to your design projects.

Recommended for those who have played around with the software and made a few things already. Learning should be at your own pace, so don't be put off by something advanced – you'll get there eventually if you want to!

Cold, hard, in-your-hands books

There are tons of books on design out there, and it's hard to know which ones will suit you the best. Check out the reviews online if you aren't sure, many people leave helpful reviews on how difficult it was to understand, or how useful it was.

Whether you can afford to buy or not, your local library is a wonderful place for learning things, and bringing books home with you. Graphic design books will likely be next to the arts and crafts section.

The library is also a great place to look at books, and all the different ways they have been designed! A really good place to look for inspiration, and it's not just the new books that mean good design. People love vintage and classic for good reason.

Digital Essentials

First things first - before beginning anything digital, it's worth going through some things you just need to know when working with any sort of digital design or image:

Raster vs Vector Images ▶

There are two main types of image files: raster and vector. Raster images work in pixels (tiny coloured squares which make up a picture, seen if zoomed in), and vector images work in smooth mathematical curves. The main differences between them are:

Raster Images	Vector Images
▪ Made of pixels	▪ Made of points and curves
▪ Works on most things	▪ Don't work on much
▪ Great for photos and complex imagery	▪ Great for clean work like logos and text
▪ Can't make them bigger without looking fuzzy	▪ Can make as big as you like and won't lose quality
▪ File sizes can get big	▪ The files are much smaller

Using the right software

There are different kinds of software around, each existing to do different things. Using the right programmes at the right stages of your design will lead to fewer mistakes, and an easier time finishing.

Word Processors - (Microsoft Word, Pages, Google Docs, LibreOffice)

These are great for typing text documents, making sure your spelling is correct. For making designs including text, it is good to sort out your words here, before copy and pasting them into your design in a different programme which might not have it's own spell-checker.

Raster Image Editors - (Adobe Photoshop, GIMP, Photopea)

Covered on page 10, these image editors deal with raster images (you're most likely to use these ones). They're for erasing, changing colours, painting, and adding all sorts, including text layout.

Vector Image Editors - (Adobe Illustrator, Figma)

Best for graphic work, logos and huge smooth images, they work very differently to the raster image editors. As with any software, look to online advice and tutorials to learn what you need.

Publishing Software - (Adobe InDesign, Scribus)

You use these for when there is a lot of text, such as this guide! Text was written on Google Docs, images made in Photoshop and Figma, then they were all inserted into an InDesign document and published as this online PDF so it can be read on almost all devices.

Setting up your files ▶

When creating a design, it is usually for a specific purpose. It is smart to keep this purpose in mind from the very beginning, so you don't forget things, and need to make big changes later on (like finding out the measurements the printer needs is totally different to what you made your file in). This will save you so much time in the long run. Things you need to know when you create your design file:

Dimensions and Bleed

These are the outer measurements of your design. Whether you are making images for social media, print products such as t-shirts or business cards, or something else - find out what dimensions they need before starting. This makes sure your work takes less time and looks its best. Bleed is for printing only, and is normally 3-5mm extra around the whole design to avoid unintentional white borders after trimming. Printing places will specify and usually have templates available with dimensions and bleed built in, which you can use.

Resolution

This decides the quality of your image, and only counts for raster images because it is all about how many pixels your image has. Pixels are little dots made of colour, and an image is made up of many different coloured pixels - so when zoomed out, it looks smooth and you don't notice the pixels any more - think of a mosaic. This painting to the right (by Georges Seurat, 1884) is made using lots of tiny little paint dots and is the same idea. Printers use lots of little dots of ink to make up an image too - use a magnifying glass on anything printed around you and have a see!
The measurement for resolution is called DPI (dots per inch) mostly for files to be printed or PPI (pixels per inch) for files which stay on screens - the more pixels or dots available in an inch by inch square, the more detail you can fit in it.
Screen resolution is 72ppi, and for files for print should be at least 300dpi - any less and you'll notice it'll be poorer quality.
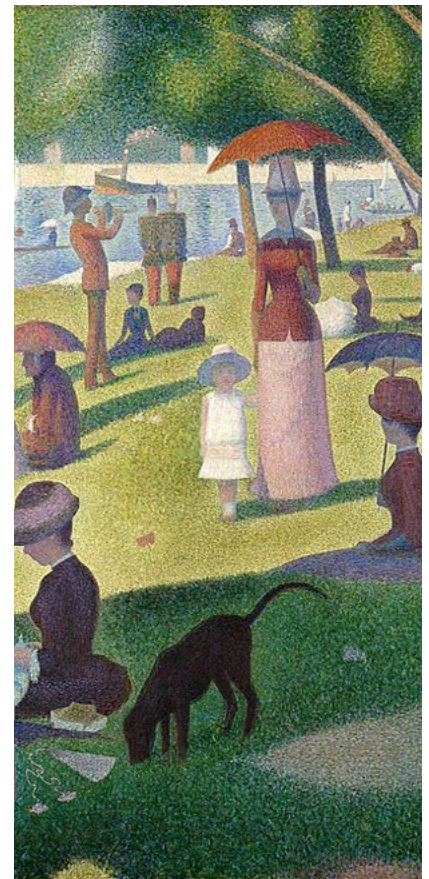
Colour Profiles ▶

These can get quite complicated, but in the most simple way, a colour profile is how colours are understood by computers. There are a few different colour profiles out there, but the most common ones are CMYK (which is mainly for commercial printers), RGB (for screens and some printers), and Greyscale (just black, white and greys which is useful for some processes like risograph). It's important to make sure your file has the correct colour profile because if it is wrong, the colours can turn out looking very different.

Brief

A designer is usually given a 'brief' by a client, which is a set of instructions or things they want in the design. You can give yourself a brief to help plan what your design needs, based around what your platform or printer requires from you - such as dimensions, bleed, resolution, colour profile, copy (designers word for text), and feeling!

How to save your files ▶️

Each button for saving your files has a different purpose:

Save
This simply saves your file in its current form, and can be opened again by the same software and edits can continue when you return.

Save As...
This is similar to 'save', but it gives you different options for what kind of file you want it to be saved in. The formats it shows as options will usually still be editable later, and may work on other software too! If you want to open a file in a different kind of software, look up what file types it can read first - it'll save you time figuring it out yourself.

Export...
Export will show some different options. Most of the time when 'exporting', you can't edit it in the same way as you did before. It removes editing functions and presents what you want. E.g. Editing this PDF will be so much more difficult than the original design file.

File types and when to use them ▶️

You may have noticed at the end of file names there are letters such as .jpg .pdf or .docx. These are different kinds of file which hold different sorts of information, like text, pixel, paths, equations, and so on. The letters at the end of the file name tell you what kind of file they are, so computer programmes know if they can understand them or not. Let's have a look at some popular image file types:

PNG - Portable Network Graphics (best for logos on social media and web images)
Popular choice for web images and logos, great for transparency.

JPG/JPEG - Joint Photographic Experts Group (best for online photos)
A favourite for its smaller file size, but loses quality with every edit.

GIF - Graphics Interchange Format (best for small, silent quick animations)
Small image files with limited colour, good for logos - and can move!

TIFF - Tagged Image File (best for working on original images)
Massive files having lots of detail for photos, but too big for web use.

PDF - Portable Document Format (best for documents and sending files for print)
Great for mixing text and image, great for printing or downloadable digital documents, but not for being visible on websites.

SVG - Scalable Vector Graphics (best for logos on websites)
Vector files best for web use and small scale print work like t-shirts.
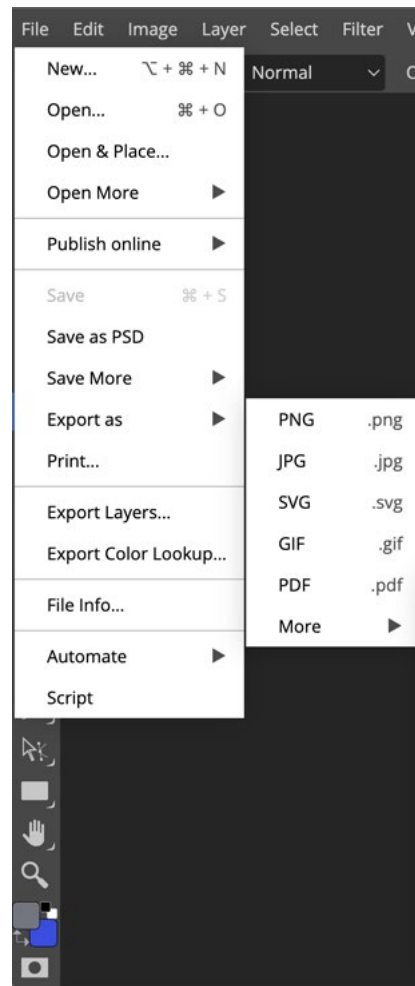
File storage and organisation

This page may seem boring and unrelated to making designs, but proper file storage will help in the long run - especially in a panic, having loads of folders called names like 'awsfwEF' on a dodgy USB drive is not helpful for you in any way. Here are some things which should help make storing your files much easier for your future self:

Cloud storage solutions ▶

'Cloud storage' is a way of keeping your digital files safe and accessible online. There are many different companies which offer it, and most places offer a certain amount of space for free, with an option to increase your storage for a small monthly fee - as little as a couple of pounds a month.

A great resource used by many individuals and small businesses is the Google offering. Not only does it have Drive for cloud storage, but it has so many other useful free applications which will help you organise yourself and your business, if you have one. Everything will be under one account and each application can speak with each other in a way which makes things a lot easier.

With a Google account, you have access to a decent email provider, YouTube (for saving useful tutorials), a calendar and cloud storage (for organisation), and useful browser-friendly software such as Docs (word processor), Sheets (spreadsheets), and Forms.

Back-up drives ▶

These are more old-school, physical kinds of file storage. Similar to how you'll have folders in your computer, you can copy them onto a back-up drive with lots and lots of space. Although they seem similar to the smaller USB drives or CDs in this way, a back-up drive is meant for a 'just in case' scenario, where your computer breaks or something similar. Cloud storage is a great thing to have as well as a physical back-up.

Name your files properly! ▶

Thinking of easy to remember file names will help you be able to search for them quickly, and also be able to tell the difference between similar files like 'May Flyer' and 'May Flyer for web'. One is for printing, and one is made for sharing online.

Sensible folder organisation ▶

Everyone will have their own system that suits them best, but it's good to have folders for things such as 'branding' where you keep things like fonts, logos, and images you use often. Each project would benefit from having its own folder, with sub-folders for final files for printing/publishing. This will help locate the right files later!

Software Options

There are many programmes out there for editing images, and creating designs, all having a range of price points and complexity. Here is a small list of what is available out there, split in two kinds:

Image Editing Software:

These are for creating and editing pictures or photographs.
You can chop them up, change the colours or brightness, and move things around - as well as countless other things.

Adobe Photoshop

Photoshop is the most famous kind of image editing software out there. It is known as the 'industry standard', so most designers, illustrators, visual artists, and photographers use it in their work. Being so popular, there are thousands of free tutorials online on how to use it. YouTube is a popular go-to video sharing site for learning about all kinds of software.

It has a huge capability but it is expensive, and charges monthly.

GIMP

GIMP is a favourite of those who want most of the things that Adobe Photoshop has to offer, but is totally free to download and use. The compromise is that the software itself is not as nice to look at, and for some, more complicated.

Photopea

Photopea still has a lot of very useful features, though not as advanced as GIMP or Photoshop. That being said, it has all of the basic things you need to make something good and professional looking.
The compromise is that the software itself is not as nice to look at, and for some, more complicated.

It is similar to Photoshop, but FREE, and most importantly for people who do not have access to a computer where they can install software, it can be used on almost any internet browser, such as at your local library!

Canva

Canva is the most basic and beginner friendly option on our list. It is user friendly and very accessible for those find other software confusing - they also have tutorials on their own website.

It has a good free option and also can be used on a web browser!

Figma ▶️

Figma is a different kind of image editing software, it deals with vector files (which we cover on page ❻). It's particularly good for creating or editing smooth shapes like for logos and icons. Like any software, it might take a little getting used to, but it's very good.

The closest big paid-for equivalent is Adobe Illustrator, if you've heard of it before. Figma has a great free tier and also can be used on a web browser! The only thing you need to use it is a free account.

Publishing Software:

These are for creating designs using text, or image and text. Great for things like flyers, posters, business cards, etc. They are better than photo imaging programmes when it comes to using text.

Adobe InDesign ▶️

InDesign is the most famous kind of graphic design software out there. It is known as the 'industry standard', so most graphic designers use it in their work. Being so popular, there are thousands of free tutorials online on how to use it. YouTube is a popular go-to video sharing site for learning about all kinds of software.

It has a huge capability but it is expensive, and charges monthly.

Scribus ▶️

Scribus is the closest FREE alternative to Adobe InDesign. Unlike other free software, it has a larger capability and you can make designs from scratch instead of relying on templates.

Great if you want more control and for multi-page documents.

Canva ▶️

Canva can be frustrating for people who are used to making their own designs because of the limited functions, but is a firm favourite for those who don't really know where to start. It is user friendly and very accessible for those new to design due to the large number of templates, they also have tutorials on their own website.

Mainly useful for social media images and banners.

It is the most basic and beginner friendly option on our list, and has a decent free-tier option. Like some others it doesn't require installation and is used on a web browser, meaning it can be accessed at your local library!

The Basic Principles

When it comes to making good graphic design, you don't need the expensive software, paid fonts, or even a qualification – you just need to grow your learning from the basic principles of graphic design. Keep these in mind when creating your designs.

Design in general is all about serving a purpose.
Graphic design is for making sure visuals do what they need to do by effectively communicating what it needs people to know – and to do that, it has to make your eyes happy.
This section is the first step to doing just that!

The main basic principles of graphic design cover:
- Alignment
- Repetition
- Contrast
- Hierarchy
- Balance

Alignment – get things lining up!

Alignment is basically how things are arranged. For example, most of the text in this document is arranged (aligned) to begin 1.27cm from the left hand side of the page.

Alignment helps the readers' eyes know where to go, just like you know where to look next when you reach the end of a line in a book. Images can also be aligned, and they don't need to be close to each other to still work – nor do they have to be on the left hand side. As long as it fits the same rule throughout the design, it should be easy for the readers' eyes.

Graphic designers love something called 'grids', a series of lines on top of a document they're working on, so they can align the different elements in their design (such as text or image) along these lines. When their design is printed or published online, these grids are taken away, but their design is still strong because everything is placed in a way that makes sense for the brain.

If you're interested in using grids in your designs, search online for how to use them in your chosen software, or visit our YouTube playlist for helpful videos on the subject.

Where do you think the grids were placed in the rest of this guide? Or on any piece of design around you? As with all of these basic principles, you will be able to start noticing them out in the wild – when you start recognising how other people make things, it really helps you when it comes to making your own designs!

Repetition – make things familiar.

Repetition helps the reader know that things are connected and similar to something they've seen before. It helps them understand that different things can be related.

For example in this document, each chapter has the same fonts, the same colours, the same alignment points as each other. If they didn't look similar, it would be hard to know if they were from the same document or talked about the same thing from a glance.

You'll notice similar, repeated elements on book covers from the same series for example - or different flavours of the same brand of juice.

Keep an eye out for this, if you have your own business and are making the marketing materials for it. It would be quite important for you to have some familiarity between everything you make.
It helps people see the repetition and recognise that they've seen something by you before - and maybe take better notice!

Contrast – direct readers' eyes.

Contrast is when something is next to another and they are very different. There are so many examples of this, such as dark vs. light, busy vs. empty, big vs. little, thick vs. thin and grainy vs. smooth.

If something has low contrast, i.e. they're not different enough, it could make it hard for the reader to take notice - or if they do see a difference and it's too subtle, it could look like a mistake.

Contrast shouts for the eyes attention, and it can make a design very effective if it's done well. Remember, it's about there being at least two things that are different, so it won't work as well if everything is big, or everything is red, or everything has an arrow pointing to it.

Play around with your design and decide where you want people's eyes to go the most - then make people look there.

Hierarchy - what's important?

When people look at your design, what information do you need them to notice first? Using eye catching elements such as contrast from the previous section, it should be clear to the reader what they are looking at. Of course, all of the information is important, but if you decided every piece was as important as the next, - everything would look the same, and people might not pay it any attention.

The hierarchy of importance in a design is up to the designer, but remember not to forget crucial information! It might be easy to focus on making a flyer etc. look nice from the beginning, but make sure to write a checklist of everything that needs included. It could be:

- Who you are
- Who else is involved
- Who your audience is
- What you are selling
- What the event is
- What you want the reader to do

- When it is happening
- Where is it happening
- Why it is happening
- How it is happening - a brief itinerary of an event.

This is called a 'call to action'. ▶
It can be helpful in prompting your audience to interact with your business in a positive way:

Use promo code! Book an appointment now! Visit us!

Just like the other points in this guide, look around at how other organisations prioritise information and make 'calls to action'.

Balance - making it nice for eyes.

In art and design, there is often chat about the 'weight' of an image in terms other than the weight or seriousness of the topic, there is the idea of an image (or parts of an image) having an almost physical weight. Balance is about using differently weighted image components to create some sort of harmony (or tension) in your design. There are two main kinds of balancing here:

Symmetry - is when both sides (top v bottom, but usually left v right) are balanced evenly. Imagine an invisible line down the middle.

Tension (or asymmetry) - is when there is a 'pull' from one part of the image and another. Often, there is an open area between elements (aka 'white space') - this white space may seem like it's taking up valuable information area, but it is so useful in making successful designs. It can physically separate elements so they are both important, and they can allow a design to 'breathe'.
This idea of making an image 'breathe' is like giving your eyes a bit of peace - imagine reading a book and there are no margins, just text from the edge of the paper to the gutter in the middle, that would be horrible to look at and difficult for your eyes to know where to go.

Using Text

In the previous section, we looked at alignment, repetition, contrast, hierarchy, and balance. These basic principles should be applied when you do any part of your design, including using text.

There are, however, other things to keep in mind when dealing with text too, mainly to do with readability and feel:

- Line length
- Text over images
- Picking the right typeface
- Creating a feeling

Line length

You'll probably have noticed that the text in this document doesn't generally go more than about two thirds across the page. This is for a couple of reasons. The first is covered in the basic principles - for contrast and balance (re-read that section if you need a wee refresh). The second is because it's quicker and easier to read than if it went the full width of the page. Newspapers are designed to be read quickly, which is why they have their narrow columns.

If your line length is too long, it can slow down the reader and may make them lose interest - which is why novels have a long line length (the reader is already invested in continuing) - and why posters, flyers etc. have shorter line lengths. These marketing materials need to work harder to earn readers' attention, so they need to be short and easy to read. Longer line lengths are especially difficult to read for people with dyslexia and similar reading difficulties, so do consider this when creating your designs. Accessible design can still be attractive design! Prospect has a quick guide here.

Though, beware - you can end up with too short a line length, which can make the message feel off and disjointed. Try to keep short line lengths for notes.

Text over images

Placing text over an image - even quite a simple image - is something to be advised against unless it's done very well. The main issues are that it will look too busy, which won't look nice - and it will be too hard to read. If your text can't be read, or is difficult to read, then your design has failed its purpose at effectively getting information to your reader.

Again, first advice would be to avoid text on top of images, but if it is something you really, really want, then a good place to go for ideas is a stock photo website. Most of these sites have options which have a large open area, where text can sit and still be easy to read.

For more about using images and finding them, see pages 24-25.

If you must, then put it here.
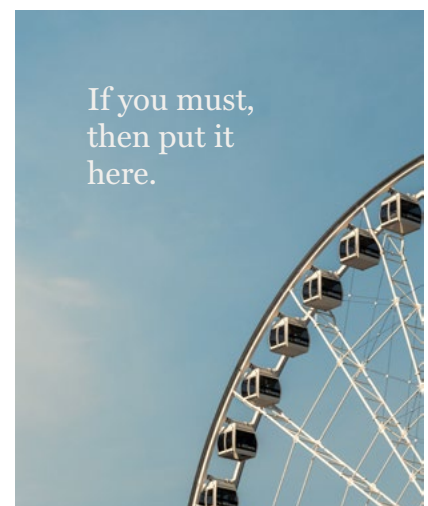
Picking the right Typeface

This decision is sometimes the most difficult because there is so much choice out there. Typeface (the designed letters) and font (the different versions within that design family, like **bold** or *italic*) make such a big difference to the overall look and feel of your work – mainly because text is a huge part of graphic design, but also because our brains are trained to read any words in sight. Think about how annoying it is to have subtitles on a film when they're already talking in a language you know – it's hard to ignore text when you recognise what it says.

Choosing is hard, but easier once you know more about it all first. For a deeper explanation, see Butterick's Practical Typography, recommended for further reading earlier, on page 5.

Serif, and sans serif ▶️

These are the two main kinds of typefaces out there. A 'serif' is a purely decorative little part on a letter which you'll have seen countless times before. If you know a little bit of French, 'sans' means 'without', so 'sans serif' means it's a typeface without these little added bits. Here, you can see the serifs are coloured red.

Sans serif typefaces weren't really used until the 1900s – so are much newer compared to serif letters. There was actually backlash over this new removal of serifs at the time, which is why you might see some typefaces called something-'grotesque'. The 1920s was a big time for industry and efficiency, and this affected everything in modern life - if it wasn't needed, then it wasn't made. If you look back at any sort of design from this time period; fashion and furniture for example, there is a similar thing happening. Fewer frills, less time and resources wasted.
Does a letter need the little decorative serifs? No, get rid of them!

But why does serif and sans serif matter now? Because both these typefaces have some sort of association for the reader.

Serif Typefaces	Sans Serif Typefaces
• Traditional	▪ Modern or fresh
• Trusted	▪ Sleek or clean
• Old or established	▪ Youthful
• Classic or refined	▪ Friendly or informal

Whichever one you decide to go with, keep these connection people have with these typefaces in mind. Which one fits your design the best?

When it comes to choosing for reading on a screen, it is advised to stick with a sans serif typeface for your 'body text' as it's been found much easier to read because of the clean lines which pixels prefer. 'Body text' is the main part of the text in a document - the body, not titles or headings which tend to be larger so easier read anyway.

16
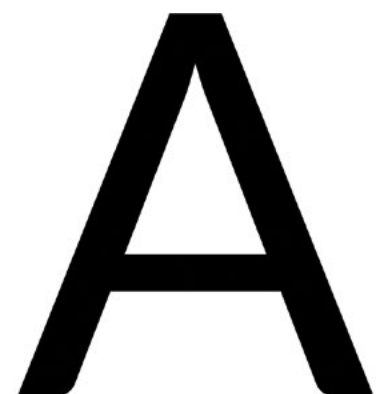
Keep it simple

When it comes to design, especially when using text - less is definitely more. It can be easy to use all the typefaces you like in your work, but it can look messy, confusing, and ugly. Stick to the rule of using no more than three fonts. Ideally two typefaces, and one of those you can use in bold or italic if you like. You might have noticed this document only uses one typeface! It is easy to create hierarchy and contrast using font size alone.

If searching for a second typeface, it is recommend to search for one having a similar trait without looking *too* similar that it looks unintentional.

Something to always keep in mind when making anything with text is to check that it is clear and readable. If you choose a fancy typeface because it looks cool, be sure that it also is easily read and understood by the reader - this goes for script (handwritten) too. Generally, it's best to stay clear of script type for your designs.

You can get away with fancier choices for title or heading text, as there's not a lot of it to read, and they're usually larger in size - they'll be easier to read that way. Don't be using fancy fonts for body text!

System fonts ▶

These are the typefaces which come pre-installed in your computer, and they come in a real range of quality (and goofiness) - so beware!

System fonts include some great ones for body and title text:

Garamond	Avenir
Hoefler Text	Gill Sans
Iowan Old Style	Helvetica

These ones are good for titles, headings but *not* body text:

Bodoni 72	Geneva
Big Calson	Rockwell

… and these ones you should always avoid avoid avoid:

|	
Papyrus	Copperplate
Brush Script MT	Bradley Hand
Marker Felt	American Typewriter

Using downloaded typefaces ▶

When finding fonts online, there are many beautiful but expensive fonts - and rightly so, someone spent a long time creating them! If a large corporation came and made your creation the main part of their brand, you'd be due a large payment for your copyright.

Copyright, often shown in symbol form ©, is an automatic and legal right which protects the use of someone's recorded creation.

When a designer or artist sells their design (or recorded creation), they are selling the usage of it - they'll still hold the original copyright. Usage comes in many forms: sharing on an article, personal use (e.g. desktop background), and commercial use (e.g. using it for your business in any way). As usage increases, as does the asking price. If you use something without having the right to, that's in breach of someone's copyright law - so always check if you're downloading something, especially anything you hope to make money off of.

Luckily, there are very kind designers out there making open-source typefaces for all to use! Open-source means you can use it anywhere for any purpose. Part of the agreement is sometimes that you need to credit designers by name somewhere, but it will still be free in terms of money. Make sure you read the 'usage text' at point of download.
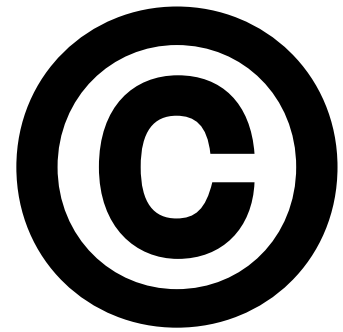
Finding free fonts online ▶

Now copyright's covered, how do you find them? Beware of searching 'free fonts online', as they are almost all goofy and not advised. Below are some wonderful and trusted places to get decent fonts:

Velvetyne Type Foundry -
This is a relatively small collection, all being very 'contemporary', and some of them make lovely friendly typefaces. 'Karrik' is what this guide has been set in, and was designed by Jean-Baptiste Morizot and Lucas Le Bihan.

Open Foundry -
This is similar to the VTF above, but is a bit 'friendlier' for most people when it comes to what's available.

Google Fonts -
This is a huge library of open source fonts, to the point where you're almost spoilt for choice. Not all of them are good to use in your work, so do remember to be a bit critical of the choices out there.
What Google Fonts is great for is it has a big resource for learning, and a great section for free icons to use in your designs, too!

Fonts In Use -
This is more of a look-book for seeing what fonts work well together by showing real examples. A great feature is you can filter designs by what they're for, e.g. food, fitness or music. Most shown will cost money, but similar free fonts can be found in the links above!

Working with Colour

When used well, a colourful design can be beautifully done - but when it's poor, it can be pretty off-putting. As with text, when using colour in your designs - keep in mind the principles of alignment, repetition, hierarchy, contrast, and balance in pages 12-14.

Just the basics ▶

This guide won't go into much depth in colour theory - if you're interested in learning more, do visit our Youtube playlist for all sorts.

All you need to know for now is that all colours are made up of the three primary colours (red, blue, yellow), black and white. Imagine a paint palette with these, and every new colour is just a combination of these five parts. Just primary colours mixing gives your 'hue'.
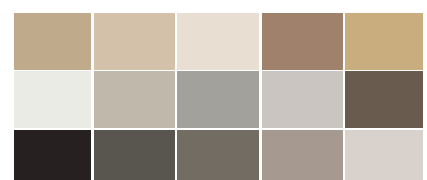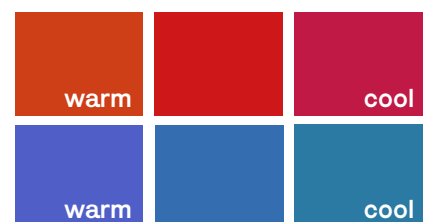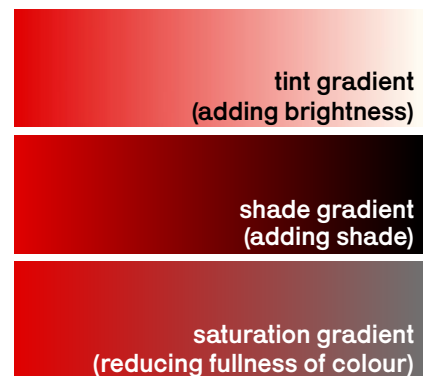
red + blue make purple

blue + yellow make green

yellow + red make orange

and all three make a muddy brown

The 'hue' of your colour is just pure colour - no black or white is in the mix at this point. The 'tint' of a colour is how much white is in it, and the 'shade' of a colour is how much black has been added.

The final basic thing to know in colour theory is called 'saturation'. If something is saturated, it's full - it can't soak up any more. If a colour is saturated, its full and bright - much like what we can see in the hue, tint, and shade gradient so far (left). If you take away this fullness of colour, you are reducing the saturation - all the way to a totally colourless grey.

A way of grouping some colours, which will become relevant on the next page when we look into colour meanings, is the 'temperature'. Some colours are described as 'warm', others 'cool'.

No matter what colour you have, it'll be 'warm' if it has a hint of red in it, or 'cool' if it has a hint of blue in it. You can have a warm blue and a cool red. These small differences can make a big difference to the feeling of your finished design.

There are, however, some colours which don't shout 'warm' or 'cool', these are called 'neutral'. Using a neutral colour rests the eyes, making the 'warm' colours warmer, and the 'cool' colours cooler! This is using contrast well, as talked about on page 13. You could even have a bit of 'cool 'colour in an overall 'warm' design to make things more interesting.

red | blue | yellow

white
black

hue gradient
(mixing red, blue, or yellow)

tint gradient
(adding brightness)

shade gradient
(adding shade)

saturation gradient
(reducing fullness of colour)

warm | | cool
warm | | cool

What colours mean

It can be tempting to just go with your favourite colours, but they might not be what's best! There's a reason you don't see many beauty places with bright red logos, nor security companies with pastel websites. According to marketers, here are some main colour associations below - and remember - as you mix colours, you can blend their meanings:

Red is an intense colour for
- Grabbing attention
- Love and passion
- Anger and violence
- Heat and danger

Blue is an clean colour for
- Calmness and relaxation
- Purity and hygiene
- Strength and trust
- Wisdom and knowledge

Yellow is a lively colour for
- Happiness and sunshine
- Energy and cheerfulness
- Youth and learning
- Warning and attention

Orange is a radiant colour for
- Vibrancy and energy
- Joy and enthusiasm
- Flavour and juicy richness
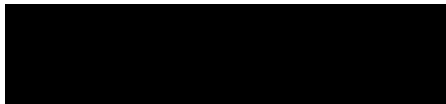- Warmth and indulgence

Purple is a special colour for
- Dreaminess and whimsy
- Magic and mystery
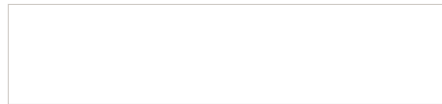- Wisdom and creativity
- Wealth and luxury

Green is a fresh colour for
- Health and fertility
- Nature and goodness
- Luck and fortune
- Jealousy and greed

Black is a formal colour for
- Elegance and status
- Strength and authority
- Fear and mystery
- Death and heaviness

White is a pure colour for
- Lightness and coolness
- Truth and cleanliness
- Peace and healing
- Divinity and spirituality

Earthy colours for
- Nature and organic
- Richness and warmth
- Fullness and bounty

Dark colours for
- Depth and weight
- Seriousness and authority
- Establishment and esteem

Pastel colours for
- Calmness and gentleness
- Softness and romanticism
- Invitation and openness
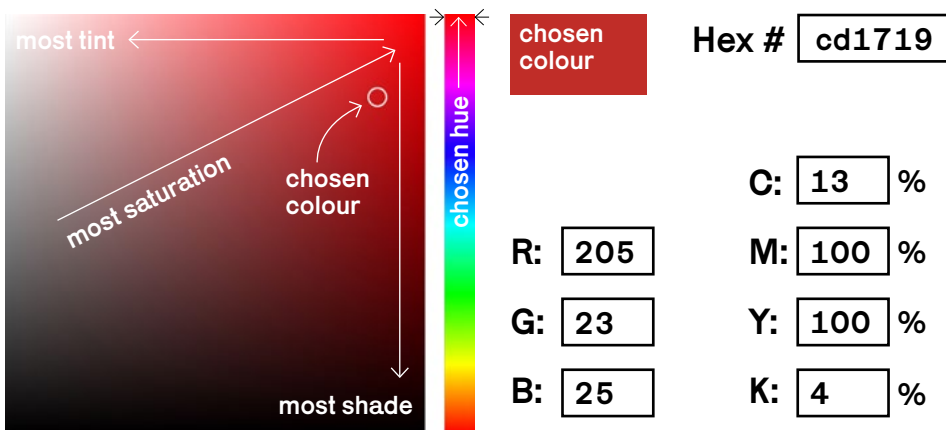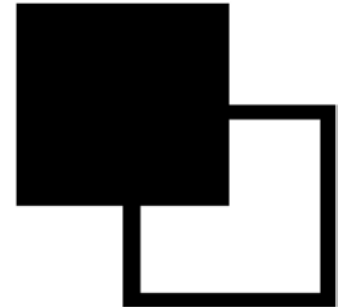
Fluorescent colours for
- Energy and attention
- Youth and excitement
- Noise and thrill

Picking a colour digitally ▶

Okay, so you now know how colours mix and what they mean - but how do you get those colours on a screen? Every device and programme will be a bit different to the next, but generally the same things pop up in each. First, let's go over what you might see when using your digital colour pickers.

Whatever image-editing or publishing software you're using to make your designs (covered from pages 10-11), there will be an icon which looks like two overlapping squares. The top one is the one that is currently selected. Clicking on this will show you the colour picker with a range of selection options as shown below.
(Each software type will vary, so if unsure, Google and YouTube will be your best friends!)

most tint ←
most saturation
chosen colour
chosen hue
most shade

chosen colour

Hex # cd1719

R: 205
G: 23
B: 25

C: 13 %
M: 100 %
Y: 100 %
K: 4 %

The words in white above help explain what is going on in the colourful sections - do refer to the terms we learned on page 19 for extra guidance! Have a play around on your own, too.

What may be new are the numbers. Without going into exactly what they mean, these are the three most popular digital codes for describing this exact colour of red: Hex Code, CMYK, and RGB. As the codes change even slightly, the colour will change too. This is mostly used when keeping a record of specific colours you use often, or when trying to use a colour found on a different piece of software or colour palette website. You can type in the code directly and the 'chosen colour' box will change to what you want.

To pick an existing colour on the image or document you are working on, use the 'Eyedropper Tool' and click on the colour you want. This is a good way of keeping the number of colours you use in your document small - excellent for repetition, one of the basic elements of design covered on page 13.

Choosing a colour palette

A colour palette, or swatch, is a group of chosen colours to be used on an image or document. Imagine a painter's palette, the colours on there have been decided ahead of time and the artwork looks so nice because the colours work well together. Choosing what these colours are can be intimidating at first, but there are a few ways of working it out if it's something that doesn't come naturally.

The first thing to think about is what you are trying to communicate to the viewer. Do you want your design to be fun or serious, relaxed or exciting, fancy or casual? Have another look at page 20 to decide on your main colour - we don't have to decide right away exactly what Hex code, just if it's a red or blue etc.

So for example, say you have a house cleaning business and you want to make a flyer. You want people to know you are trust-worthy and to make the potential client think 'clean'. According to the colour associations on page 20, blue is a good colour to pick.
Have a think about what other colours might fit the feelings you want to convey - perhaps white for purity and cleanliness, and maybe orange to show energy and enthusiasm.
From here there are a few directions you could go in to make your own colour palette:

1. Using colour theory

This guide won't go so much into colour theory, but there are reasons why some colours go well with each other, and others don't. For example, blue and orange are a good pairing: they are 'complimentary colours'. This means they're opposites, that there is no blue found in orange, and the colours that make up orange (red + yellow) are not found in blue. Complimentary colours often get used together because they stand out and provide a good contrast, as talked about on page 13.
To find out more about complimentary colours and other types of colour matching theory, visit our YouTube playlists.

Adobe colour

Adobe colour is a good way of playing with colour theory without getting bogged down, and getting palette ideas based on it. It also has a section to explore other designers' swatches and borrow them for your own work.

2. Using a colour palette generator

Coolors

Coolors generator is so easy to use and fun to sit and generate new palettes over and over again. Making a free account allows you to save your favourite palettes easily along the way as you go and it allows you to play with and adjust your chosen palette too. It is mostly free, with some functions under a paid tier.
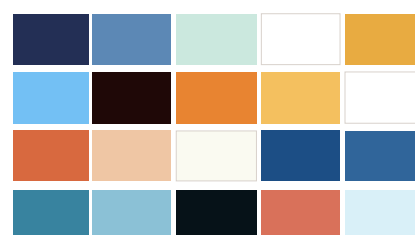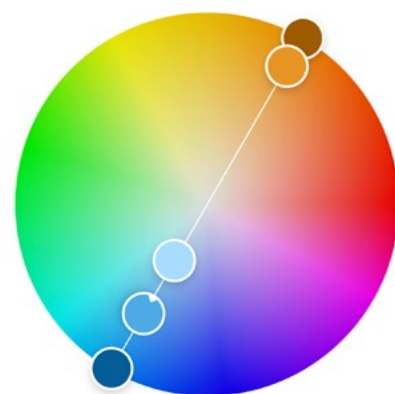
3. Using other images for inspiration

With exception of mega corporations, colour palettes are not under copyright - meaning you can pick what you like from (mostly) whatever you like! That being said, if you borrow another similar artists/designers/businesses palettes a lot it may get annoying for them, and may show you up as someone uncreative. Think taking inspiration over straight up taking.

On your chosen software or on the above websites Adobe colour and Coolors, upload an image you like the colours in. Now, using the 'Eyedropper Tool', pick out 3-6 colours you think work well - each time taking a note of what they were.

When doing this part, try and make sure there is a decent level of contrast - this will mean that none of the colours are too close to each other. A handy way to check for good contrast is to convert your colours into greys using the saturation toggle on your chosen image software.

As you can see here, the light blue and the orange are very similar in tone (scale of light to dark) meaning it might look odd or clash when these colours are touching. This closeness in tone may not be so good when it comes to someone with colour blindness.

Adobe colour has a good tool for accessibility which lets you know if your palette has any issues in terms of text contrast or various kinds of colour blindness - three main examples are shown here to the right. Luckily, these colours get the sites green tick of approval!

Keep this closeness of tone between the light blue and orange in mind when putting together designs later. For example, do not put any blue text on an orange background, or vice versa - contrast should be especially high for text - most of all when placing body text which is already small and crowded. Below is what different colours from the same palette look like in terms of choices for text.
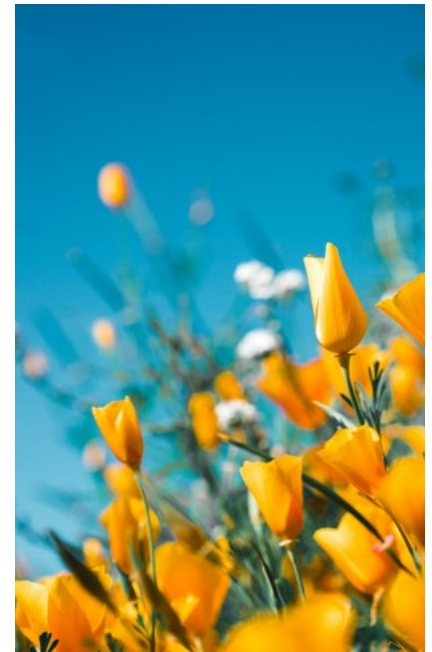
Deuteranopia

Protanopia

Tritanopia

Large Text

How are you finding this combination? Easy enough for you to keep reading a flyer you found?

Large Text

How are you finding this combination? Easy enough for you to keep reading a flyer you found?

Large Text

How are you finding this combination? Easy enough for you to keep reading a flyer you found?

Using Images

Using illustrations, graphics, or photographs in your designs can be so helpful at bringing across a feeling or extra information in your designs. "A picture is worth a thousand words" is an old saying you may be have heard of before, images also does this by breaking up text and making a design more simple by giving visual information without overwhelming the reader with even more words to read.

For example, a mail-out for a beauty business won't want a whole paragraph describing how relaxing or peaceful it is. You can tell the reader about the experience much more quickly by using the right picture, rather than having unnecessary words in a big block - which wouldn't look very relaxing!

So, how do you get the 'right' picture? Unless your business is in making pictures, such as being an illustrator, artist or photographer, it might be something you're worried about getting done correctly. The best and most authentic thing to do would be to hire someone who makes images you can use - that goes for design work too - there are so many talented folk out there who can get your business looking the most professional it can be. Many people simply don't have the budget for paying other people for such work, so until you can afford it (or really want to have a go yourself), here are some ways of sourcing images for your designs. ▶

Finding stock photos ▶

Stock photo websites are home to thousands of photographs taken by professionals for customers to use in their marketing materials, articles, etc. Because the customer isn't asking the photographer for a tailored photo shoot, it means the images available are quite generic in order to be useful to more people. Most stock photo sites require payment, either subscription or one-off, and some are free but require you to credit to the photographer under the copyright agreement. (Copyright is very important to know about, read up about it on page 18.) Sometimes folk would rather not 'clutter' their work with credits, so here are some free-to-use no accreditation required sites for stock photos:

Unsplash -
This is a great site full of beautiful pictures, diverse models, and a decent search function. You can create an account to keep track of images you have downloaded in the past, but it isn't required for use.

Pexels -
Perhaps has even more photos than Unsplash - but does have ads.

Adobe Stock -
This link's to a free section, and can filter for images with copy (text) space, which can be very useful when making your designs!

Getting free illustrations

If your designs are all for the same thing, a small business perhaps, you want that business to have a specific 'voice' carried throughout your marketing materials - see 'repetition' within design basics on page 14. For this voice to continue being the same, it means the kinds of images you use should be similar in some way throughout. Generally, this is easier to achieve for free through stock photos than with stock illustration, as the work of individual illustrators are generally more distinctive from one another. If you use different styles of illustration, especially within the same design, it can appear disjointed.

That being said, here are some free-to-use no accreditation needed stock illustration websites:

Blush -
This shows collections by many different designers, and like unDraw below, you can have an element of customisation in some designs. The free tier is pretty good, but the 'pro' tier offers better customisation, more images, as well as larger download sizes.

unDraw -
These are totally free illustrations by Katerina Limpitsouni, covering a range of subjects although are mostly corporate. What is particularly good about these is you can make the colour match your design.

Other sites are out there, but most have a large range of quality and do not lend themselves well to being incorporated into other people's designs like the examples above.

What about icons?

An icon is a little graphic picture which represents something. Often used as a click-through button on websites. Like logos, the more simple they are, the more effective they are - you need to be able to see what they are on a small scale, which is why most of them are black and white.

Because they are mostly used by designers who might need to change the size of them easily, they're normally downloadable in SVG format which cannot be opened by a lot of software types.

IconScout -
They have a huge range, but require an account to use it and the largest available .png size is still quite small. Accreditation seems to be required for some, but not all icons - so be careful!

Reshot -
These icons are totally free and don't require a credit to the designer. This does mean though, that there are fewer icons to choose from.

Forming a Critical Eye

Think you're finished? Congratulations, you're nearly done! Whether or not you're happy with what you've created, it is always helpful to look at your work with a 'critical eye'.

Criticism is not always a bad thing – it's actually a really effective way to learn and improve, which is why 'crit sessions' happen all the time at art college. The most important thing is that you go in open to learning and handling other people's interpretation of your work – criticism is not personal despite it sometimes feeling like it.

Accepting and learning from criticism is a whole skill in itself and incredibly valuable to your work improving over time. Here are some tips on reflecting on your own work:

Take some time
Once you have done your design, have a break! This could be for five minutes, or five days – however long it takes for you to examine it with fresh eyes. Then, look at it and apply everything you have learned in this guide so far: the basic principles, type design, colour theory etc. It might help to make notes on where you can improve. Go through this cycle as many times as necessary – your design is guaranteed to have improved by the end.

Pretend it's not your own ▶
It is much easier to make truthful comments about a stranger's work than it is your own. If you take the personal feelings out of a crit (even if you're doing it to yourself), it will be much more helpful and honest.

Witness criticism elsewhere ▶
Not everyone has experience of a crit session, so might not know what to expect! There are places online to watch design work get looked at by professionals, and they'll share their thoughts on how they would improve it. The Pod Press YouTube channel has made a handy playlist of helpful videos on just that topic.

Ask someone to have a look ▶
If you know somebody who has an interest in design, preferably someone with more experience, ask them for some constructive advice on how to improve your work. Go into this knowing it is not personal and you asked for their help! There is a good quote by Norman Vincent Peale, "The trouble with most of us is that we would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism."

Cheat Sheet

After reading our The Pod Press Open Resource Beginners Guide to Graphic Design, and visiting our YouTube channel for useful playlists, use our cheat sheet for quick reminders on the essentials!

Setting up Files
Check with your printer or sharing site for:
- Resolution (print 300dpi, screen 72ppi)
- Dimensions, and if you need a bleed
- Colour profile, it's usually RGB, but check!
- For yourself: write a short brief on what you want from your work
- Use appropriate software, this will always help

Saving your Files
Think about what you need them for:
- Editing again in the future? 'Save'/'Save As', and keep just in case
- 'Flattened' PDFs are best for files you want to print
- For sharing images online, 'Save/Export for web' is best

Design Principles
The five key things:
- Alignment - make sure things are lined up and not jumbled
- Repetition - needed throughout to make it feel 'together'
- Hierarchy - show what's most important for easy reading
- Contrast – if things are different but too similar, they will look bad
- Balance – play with your design to see how it 'breathes' best
- Think of all of these for placement, colour, typefaces, and images!

Copyright
Anything you use but didn't make:
- Belongs under copyright law to the creator
- To use them (e.g. typefaces, images, etc), you need an agreement
- Some have an automatic agreement for free personal or commercial use, but you need to check when you download them as some places let you download things, but not use them

Useful Websites
For typefaces, stock images, tutorials, etc:
- Image editing software: Photopea / Figma
- Tutorials: YouTube - check out the Pod Press channel
- Typefaces: Open Foundry / Fonts in Use
- Stock images: UnSplash / Blush / Reshot
- Colour thoughts: Adobe Colour / Coolors