



## Graphic Design Tools

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### Overview and Definition

Graphic design has been defined as “the art and practice of planning and projecting ideas and experiences with visual and textual content” (Cezzar 2014). Although librarians do not generally think of themselves as graphic designers, their work frequently involves graphic design. Even in the age of desktop publishing, many graphic design tools are expensive and present a steep learning curve. However, in recent years free or low-cost online tools and resources have emerged that promise to enable anyone to create attractive, professional-quality graphic materials.

### Basis for Current Interest

An ongoing trend in libraries of all kinds has been a shift from library-centered thinking to user-centered thinking. Instead of merely providing access or offering services and waiting for people to take advantage of them, libraries have increasingly adopted a proactive approach to understand the needs and goals of their users, develop services that meet those needs, and then assess the impact of those services. One part of this emphasis on usability is an understanding of the importance of good communication, including visual communication, and the necessity of communicating the value of libraries to stakeholders.

Whether librarians are making flyers to promote an event, creating signage for wayfinding in the library, or putting together a PowerPoint presentation for a class, they are engaged in some manner of graphic design, whether or not they think of it as such. However, when what Aaron Schmidt (2010) has called “design by neglect” or “unintentional design” is the rule of the day, it can result in visual communication that is unattractive, misleading, or effectively invisible to the user.

Wakimoto (2015) surveyed librarians who had some responsibility for graphic design and found that 64% of respondents (primarily academic librarians) described themselves as self-taught. Even among those who received some kind of formal training, most mentioned some type of stand-alone class, school project, or continuing education, and only 7% could claim a degree in art or design as a basis of expertise. Unsurprisingly, only 23% said that they had volunteered for a graphic design role because they already had skills in graphic design, and fewer than 5% reported that they felt they had adequate education and support for their roles.

At the same time, ACRL has recognized the importance of visual literacy as a counterpart to information literacy, as outlined in the [Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education](#), which includes the ability to interpret images and design effective visual media. Presumably if librarians are to take a role in teaching visual literacy, they must be visually literate themselves (Ruiz 2014).

### Current Applications in Academic Libraries and Higher Education

A variety of tools support the graphic design process and best practices. Some are all-purpose and others provide supplementary design elements such as charts, fonts, images and icons. These tools differ in the amount of freely available templates and design elements, price and learning curve.

Starting with software that is generally available in the higher education environment, Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Publisher provide layouts for a variety of visual materials including newsletters, presentations, brochures, posters and even infographics. The user also has the option of starting from scratch and using features such as text boxes, images, symbols, shapes, clip art, tables, and charts to create an effective handout, presentation, or promotional poster. If a user is looking to create a more intricate design layout, Microsoft Publisher may be the best option in the

Microsoft suite of products due to its selection of typography and templates.

While [Adobe Creative Cloud](#) applications are less common in higher education environments on individual workstations, many universities provide a digital media lab or specific workstations where it can be used. These applications are considered the industry standard for graphic designers, but the learning curve can be overwhelming for a new user. Adobe Creative Cloud combines Photoshop, Lightroom, InDesign, and Illustrator with a streamlined approach to creating, editing, and organizing images; creating print and digital publications; creating logos and visual elements using shapes, color, effects and typography; creating slideshows and videos; and designing posters, infographics, user interfaces, and more.

More recently, web-based products like [Canva](#) have developed design programs for those looking to create a wide range of visual materials. Since its launch in August 2013, Canva has been “empowering the world to design” by offering a space that promotes graphic design best practices and provides templates for novice designers. There are free templates for infographics, posters, marketing materials, email headers, presentations, social media posts, and more. In addition, they offer free layouts, charts, and design elements such as photos, grids, frames, shapes, lines, illustrations, and icons. Some design elements are available for a small fee. The software is simple and intuitive to use and is paired with [Canva Design School](#), which provides design tutorials, articles, and inspiration.

With increased interest in data visualization, web-based infographic tools provide visually interesting templates to translate statistics, show value, and make connections. [Piktochart](#) offers free accounts and includes a limited number of free templates not only for infographics but also for presentation slides, posters and reports. There are also limited free shapes, lines, icons, photos and photo frames. There is education pricing available, which provides access to a vast library of templates and design elements not available with the free account.

In addition to Canva, there are a number of other infographic tools that offer free accounts with limited access to templates and design elements. [Easel.ly](#) is easy to use and allows users to

download free templates as a PDF or image without a watermark. [Infogr.am](#) specializes in chart and graphic creation. The free account allows access to a limited number infographics or charts and limited image uploads. Finally, [Venngage](#) also offers free infographics with limited themes, templates, charts and icons.

Apart from design templates, several online resources make it easy to get started with free, high-quality fonts, color schemes, and images. Two especially useful sites for fonts are [Dafont](#) and [Font Squirrel](#), which feature hundreds of free, downloadable fonts for any purpose, from legible fonts for body text to fanciful headings. [Flat UI Color Picker](#) provides color inspiration for those looking to go beyond basic reds and blues, and Adobe’s [Color Wheel](#) shows which other colors go well with one another depending on which “color rule” (e.g., monochromatic, triad, complementary) is selected. The number of variables that can be adjusted provide plenty of flexibility for the expert without overwhelming the novice.

Although photo-sharing sites like [Flickr](#) are already well known and allow users to filter by Creative Commons license, several other photo sites take a more curated approach and specialize in sharing photos that can be reused in new designs. [Pexels](#) and [Unsplash](#) both offer Creative Commons Zero licensed photos that are easy to browse, search, and download. [Albumarium](#) is another good option, but the emphasis is on user-curated “albums,” often composed of photos already shared on Flickr with a variety of Creative Commons licenses. Finally, websites like [Death to Stock](#) contain high-quality images, but are difficult to search and are aimed more at inspiring users than providing on-demand images on particular subjects.

## Applications in Academic Library Instruction

Effective design, both instructional and visual, plays a significant role in learning. People use their senses to quickly judge whether or not an object is aesthetically pleasing. Well-designed materials can enhance learning by increasing positive emotions, motivation, and perceived ease of use (Malamed, 2015). Academic librarians who provide instruction either in person or online should consider effective visual design to increase the likelihood of a positive or successful learning experience.

Learning about graphic design best practices is a good place to start. [Hack Design](#), [Teach Yourself Graphic Design: A Self-Study Course Outline](#) and [Lynda.com](#) provide general guidelines, tutorials, and activities. [Librarian Design Share](#) is a blog that encourages librarians to upload their own instructional and promotional materials in an effort to share inspiration. The blog makes items easy to find by tagging materials created in certain programs such as [Adobe Illustrator](#), [Adobe InDesign](#), [Google Slides](#), [Microsoft Publisher](#) and [Canva](#) as well as by type, including [infographics](#) and [instructional materials](#). This collection of materials created for specific purposes and with a variety of tools allows librarians to explore content that they could replicate or use as inspiration for their own projects.

## Potential Value

Tools such as Canva, Piktochart, and Easel.ly offer intuitive, drag-and-drop interfaces with a variety of attractive and contemporary templates. For librarians who do not have time to become experts in software such as the Adobe Creative Suite, these tools are particularly convenient and useful (Douglas and Becker 2015, 464). These web-based tools also allow librarians to easily continue their work whether they are in their office or at a service point.

Using graphic design best practices can help librarians present designs that effectively highlight services and resources, which in turn supports the library's goals (Wakimoto 2016, 72). In addition, research shows that students prefer instructional materials that are more visually interesting and that well-designed materials can aid in knowledge retention (Lankow, Ritchie, and Crooks 2012, 50).

## Potential Hurdles

The chief hurdles for improving graphic design in the library are time, training, and expertise. New web-based tools could remove some of these difficulties, but they present some drawbacks of their own. Although the free versions of these tools offer many benefits, they limit the number of templates and the ability to reuse content, and may include a branded watermark. Because the premium versions are made available on a monthly basis, users must continue to subscribe in order to

maintain access to editable versions of the content they have created, and of course all users must rely on the continuing existence of the companies that develop and maintain these sites. Because the designs are downloaded as image files, librarians should make sure that textual content is available in another format to ensure accessibility.

## Conclusion

There are a number of tools that librarians can use to increase the visual impact of the materials they create and disseminate. Librarians may prefer the flexibility and reliability of traditional desktop publishing tools or choose to embrace the convenience of new web-based tools. Whatever their preference, any librarian who creates graphic materials is engaged in design work and can benefit from a basic familiarity with graphic design principles and best practices, whether that knowledge is gained through traditional or online courses, independent study, or engagement in a community of practice.

## Selected Tools

- Adobe Color Wheel: <https://color.adobe.com/create/color-wheel/>
- Adobe Creative Cloud: <http://www.adobe.com/creativecloud.html>
- Albumarium: <http://albumarium.com/>
- Canva: <https://www.canva.com/>
- Death to Stock: <http://deathtothestockphoto.com/>
- Dafont: <http://www.dafont.com/>
- Easel.ly: <http://www.easel.ly/>
- Flat UI Color Picker: <http://www.flatuicolorpicker.com/>
- Font Squirrel: <https://www.fontsquirrel.com/>
- Infogr.am: <https://infogr.am/>
- Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/>
- Piktochart: <https://piktochart.com/>
- Unsplash: <https://unsplash.com/>
- Venngage: <https://venngage.com/>

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## Further Readings

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