

# Using web images in academic work

Where to find them and how to use them legally

**Academic Skills Centre  
University of Canterbury**

[www.academicskills.canterbury.ac.nz](http://www.academicskills.canterbury.ac.nz)

## Best practice

While images are relatively rare in academic essays<sup>1</sup>, they have become commonplace in PowerPoint presentations, posters, reports, and theses. Before you decide to use images, however, be sure you genuinely need them and make intelligent choices about which ones to use.

Adding images as decoration or filler is counterproductive; likewise, images that are irrelevant or difficult to interpret will undermine your work.



**“We may be cute, but we serve no useful purpose”**

Conversely, carefully selected images used appropriately can quickly illustrate a concept, process, or example that would take many words to explain.

Images can also help to gain and keep the attention of audiences accustomed to visually-based platforms like social media, television, and video games. Used strategically, they can break up visual monotony and increase engagement.

## Technical considerations

To get the most out of your images, make sure they are well-presented and clear.

- *Choose quality images.* While this requires subjective considerations on your part, avoid

<sup>1</sup> Subjects such as art history and media studies that deal with images as core subject matter are important exceptions.

images that are out of focus, poorly composed, hard to interpret, or so commonplace that they have become cliché.

- *Download the correct size and maintain proportionality.* Anything beyond a modest increase in size will reduce image resolution and quality. Similarly, changing proportions will introduce distortions into the image.
- *Create strong colour contrast.* If you add text over images, ensure that there is adequate colour contrast so your text is legible in its entirety. This will preclude the use of images that contain both light and dark sections in the areas in which you wish to write.
- *Captions.* Use a caption if it helps to clarify your point, but if you find yourself writing a long explanation search for something more self-explanatory.

## Easy access to legal images

If you have a project that would benefit from photos, illustrations, or other visual media, avoid the temptation to simply download or capture the first photo that catches your eye. Not only should photos be directly related to your project, you must also ensure you can use them without breaching someone’s copyright.

Downloading and using images without permission from the copyright holder (usually the creator and/or publisher) is often a violation of copyright and could result in legal action.



**Illegal download**

To avoid copyright infringement, images that are considered to be in the “public domain” or that carry

Creative Commons (CC) licensing are your best options.

## Public domain and Creative Commons CC0

Some sites provide images that allow for unrestricted use without attribution (that is, without attributing ownership to the creator). This may be because the image is no longer under copyright, or because the creator has waived all interests in their work. [Pixabay.com](http://Pixabay.com) and [Flickr.com/commons](http://Flickr.com/commons) are good sources, and the latter provides links to collections from art galleries, libraries, and agencies like NASA that are increasingly making public domain images available.



If you are unable to find a suitable image in the public domain, images licensed under CC provide a good alternative. The most common licence (CC BY) simply requires attribution, while others restrict use to non-commercial uses, non-derivatives, a “share-alike” provision or any combination of these restrictions. Details on these licenses are available on the CC website at [creativecommons.org/licenses](http://creativecommons.org/licenses). To locate images, [search.creativecommons.org](http://search.creativecommons.org) and [Compfight.com](http://Compfight.com) are popular and easy-to-use sites<sup>2</sup>; the Harvard Law School Library’s guide on “Finding Public Domain & CC Media” is also very helpful: <http://goo.gl/PNMgnt>.

## Attribution

CC attribution ideally includes a title (if provided), author, the type of CC licence used by the creator, and a link to the URL/source for each item. This example applies to images that require attribution only:



[Creativity](#) by [Sean MacEntee](#) used under [CC BY 2.0](#) (where the 1<sup>st</sup> link is to the individual image, the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the creator’s profile, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the CC licence being used).

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<sup>2</sup> Choose the Creative Commons filter within the Compfight search tool to view only CC images.

Not all attributions are so straightforward, however. As CC remark in a useful post on best practice (<http://goo.gl/axUaHs>), “There is no one right way; just make sure your attribution is reasonable and suited to the medium you’re working with”. CC works are offered in a spirit of generosity; make sure you return the favour and give credit where it is due. Be sure to also provide attribution in a way that is consistent with guidelines provided by your department, discipline, or publishers.

## Fair dealing

Students may also use materials that are neither in the public domain nor licensed in the CC scheme through the provisions of “fair dealing”. Fair dealing allows for the copying of artistic works, maps, photos, sheet music, and other copyrighted materials as long as they are used for the purposes of research or private study, are copied only once, and are not copied in full.

Common examples include graphs, diagrams or images that are being critiqued or reviewed as part of an essay. Individual cases can be complex, however, so it is advisable to refer to the University’s web page on copyright and fair dealing at [canterbury.ac.nz/irm/copyright/research.shtml](http://canterbury.ac.nz/irm/copyright/research.shtml). Please note: images used in theses normally require permission from the copyright holder.

**Warning:** Avoid using copyrighted materials under the provisions of fair dealing in work that may be published online, as the web allows public access and therefore violates the requirement to only copy materials once. If your work is intended for online publication or might be uploaded at some point in the future, you must obtain copyright permission from the owner or use public domain or CC materials to avoid copyright infringements.

## Useful links

The short video “Wanna Work Together?” (<http://goo.gl/IA5xb>) explains the philosophy behind CC as well as how to license your own creative works. A Creative Commons guide (<http://goo.gl/8emnen>) on creating remixes using CC content provides additional information and a useful guide on video, audio and photo editing techniques and tools.