Creating Your Own Book Covers

Or Knowing What Your Cover Designer Will Need From You

Karen Prince

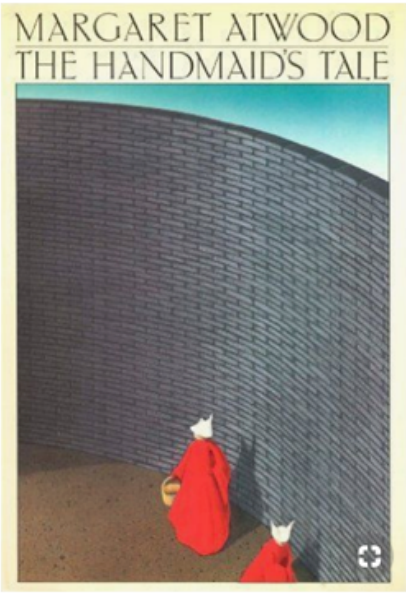
So You Have a Small Budget and You Want a Cover for Your eBook or Paperback Book

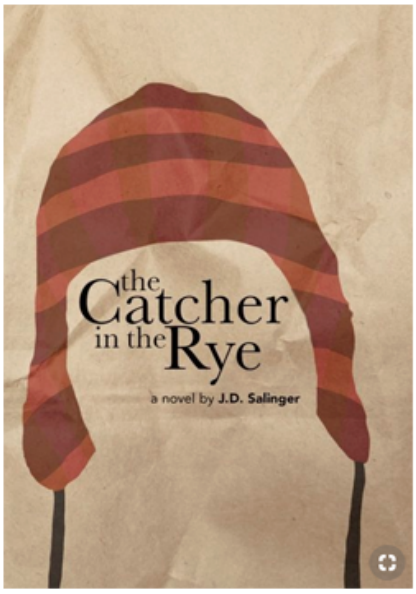
First of all, whether you plan to do it yourself or hire an up-and-coming cover designer on 99designs or Upwork you need to know a bit about what sort of cover sells a book. It may be that your cover designer is an artist who knows little more about book design than you do or they may know exactly what they are doing, but unless you have some idea about what sells and what is and is not possible you won't know when to push for your ideas and when to bow to their expertise.

The job of your book cover is to persuade someone after just one glance that they want to read your book description. This means that the genre and sub-genre must be instantly recognisable as the kind of book they like to read. The images and fonts used need to be similar to existing bestsellers in that genre but somehow stand out when placed beside them.

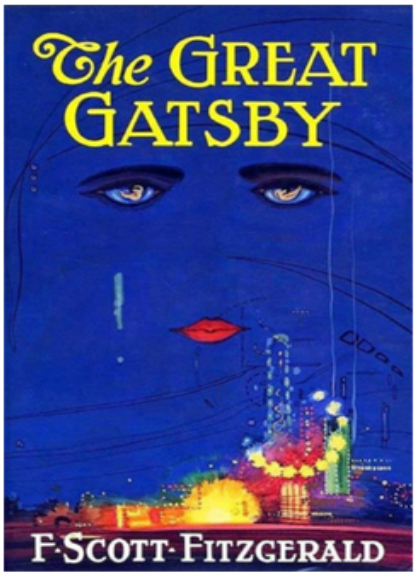
You might be hoping for something artistically clever and go looking for examples of inspirational book covers to emulate, but please bear in mind that a lot of the most creative book covers, whilst being amazing, have been designed for authors that have such a strong following that people will buy the book no matter what the cover looks like.

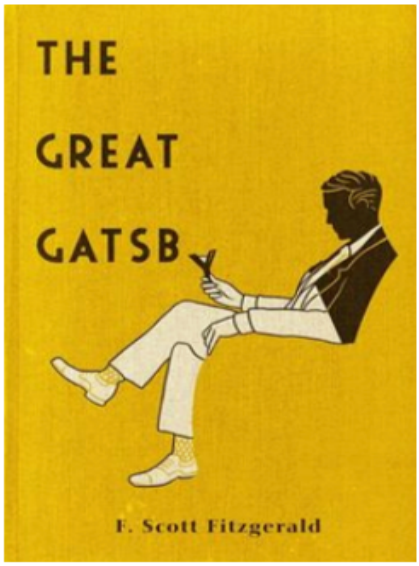
For example, this 'Handmaid's Tale' cover makes all the sense in the world once you have read the book and it is visually compelling, but before you know the story you can't know what to expect from the cover. The same goes for this more recent cover for 'The Catcher in the Rye'.



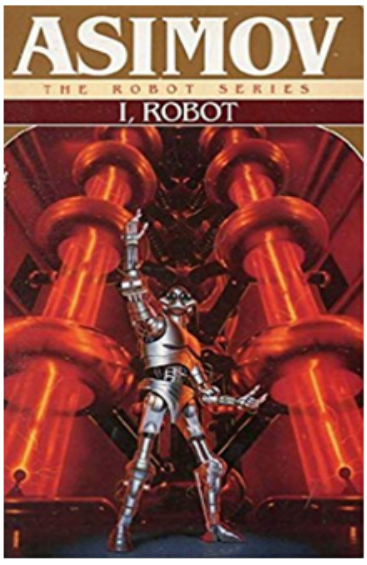


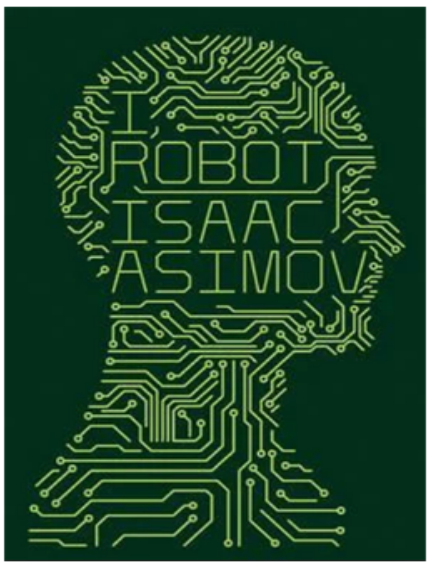
This original ‘Great Gatsby’ cover perfectly describes what’s inside the book and is a very cool cover, but once the book was so well known that people would read it no matter how arty the cover, the publishers went on to create an even more beautiful cover which again makes sense once you have read the book, but if it’s the first time you come across it, it just looks like a guy in a chair.





This early ‘I Robot’ magazine cover in 40’s style showed exactly what you were getting; a science fiction story involving robots that can walk and this robot looks a bit like a superhero so there is a hint that he might want to take over. Now that ‘I Robot’ is so well known the more modern and artistic cover is better. But if you were writing a similar book the first, more obvious cover would work best.



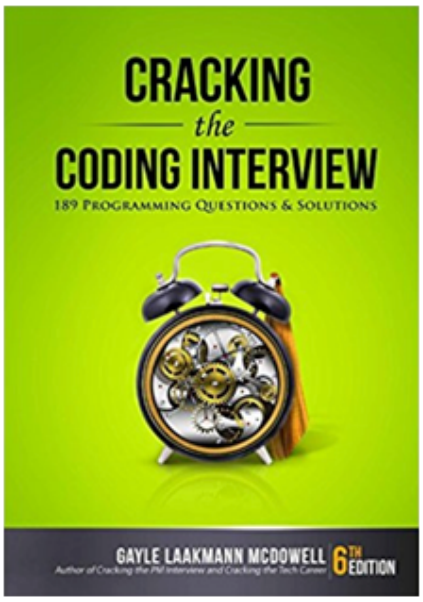


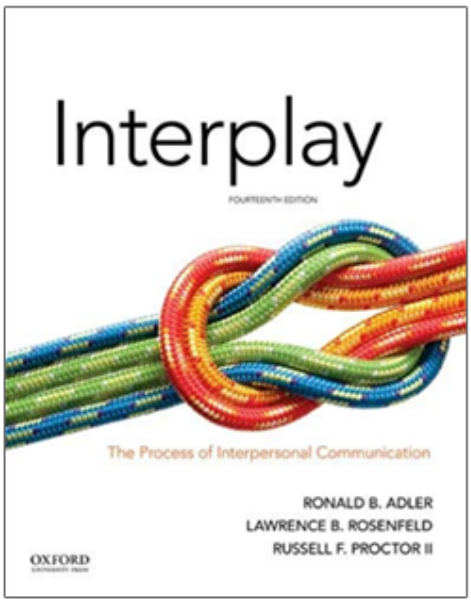
But You Are Just Starting Out

Since you are just starting out, your book cover needs to be very clear about what genre it is in and be eye-catching enough within the general style of that genre to compel readers to want to read your description. It needs to attract, not to explain everything that happens in the book, so shoot for something simple that will give a feel for what's inside.

For non-fiction you need to have done research into keywords for your title as well as your tagline (Subtitle) because if you have the keywords that people are searching for you will sell more books.

Then keep it as simple as possible. Look at non-fiction in the best seller lists on Amazon to emulate, but you can't go wrong with a simple composition involving a title, the subtitle, a small image surrounded by plenty of space and your author name. If you can get clever on top of that like the 'Interplay' cover then please do. Note that all the tagline text in these examples is not that big. This is fine because the words will appear right beside your book cover image in most places.





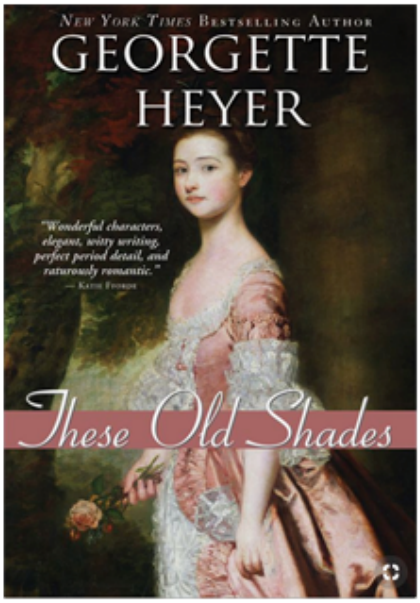
While designing your cover please bear in mind that the display areas on the various websites where it shows up for sale might be white — so if you want your cover to have a white background you might like to give it a narrow border like the 'Interplay' cover on the right so that you can see where your cover ends and the page behind it begins.

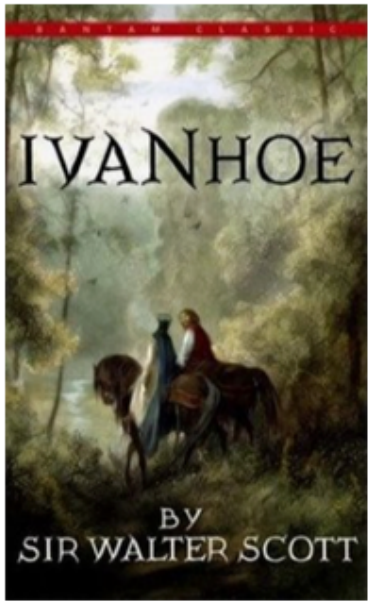
For Fiction the most obvious clue will be in the image or images used. In this first example, Historical Romance, both the first two images have a similar soft feminine colour palette. The first protagonist stands very upright and formal and is intricately dressed suggesting tightly run, civilised society.

The second subject is more casually dressed and looks more windswept and dramatic.

The third image is darker and the red contrast looks more masculine. The horses imply adventure.

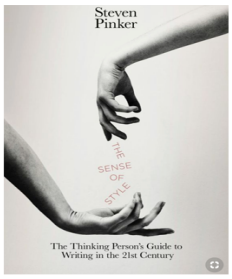
Making things pop using contrast effects your cover differently depending on how it is used. In the first cover the contrast between the subject and the background highlights the delicacy of the protagonist and the intricacy of her dress. In the third cover the contrast between the dark subject and the light background adds drama rather than highlighting the background.





The fonts used in all three covers are romantic. You need to research what sort of fonts and font sizes are used in current best sellers in the genre you are writing for so that your reader is clear what kind of book it is.

Then, notice how the text fits seamlessly into the contrasting spaces or the cover artist has placed a band behind it to make it more legible. Use bevelling, drop shadows and backlighting as sparingly as possible or preferably not at all. Nothing shrieks homemade more than bevelling your text or using drop shadows incorrectly.



While on the subject of text, it is good if your title is readable as a thumbnail but don't let the text size spoil the composition. It is just as important that your cover draws readers in for a closer look. Without being able to read any of the text on this cover I would still zoom in for a closer look.

In these stylish contemporary romance novels, the sophistication is also in the elegant fonts. Also, don't be fooled into believing the half turned subject with face obscured is too cliché for your book. These are the covers that sell.

Teen romance can be a lot more light-hearted, with fun fonts even if the subject matter is fairly serious. Can you see that fun fonts would look terrible on the sophisticated romance covers in the previous images and vice-versa.

Here Are a Few More Images That Are Just Right

Coraline by Neil Gaiman

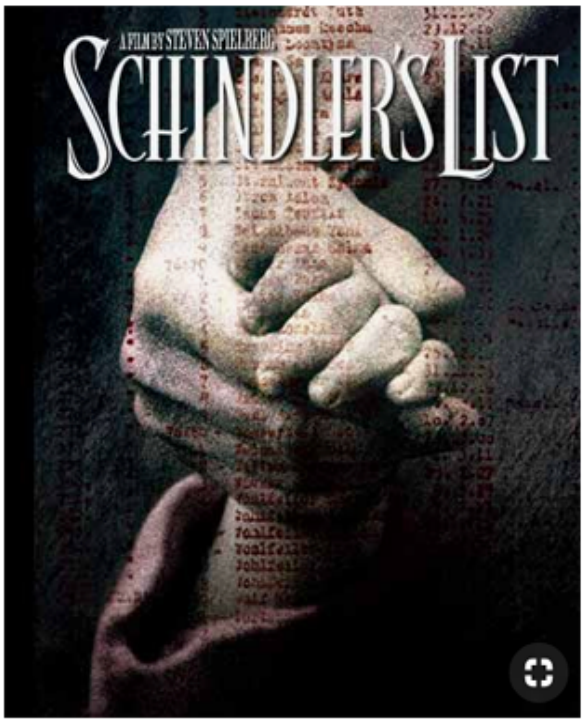
In this image of *Coraline* by Neil Gaimen you can see that it is obviously a book for advanced children or teens that will be creepy or scary. The contrasting red buttons held in the creepy hands will be sewn on to Coraline's eyes so the buttons, needles and thread are a nice touch.

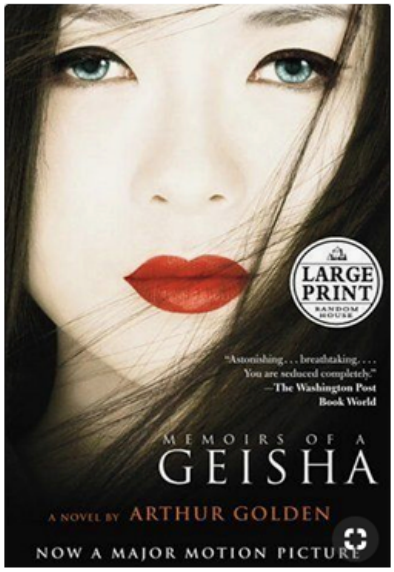
This would be a great cover for a first time publisher because there is a lot of information in the image but you don't have to create this many clues. Even without some of them you know exactly what sort of story this is.

Schindler's List by Thomas Keneally

This is a poster for the movie of *Schindler's List* but the principle still applies. I think the subject was very sensitively managed. This is a dark and ugly topic and not everyone who is browsing for something to read wants to come across graphic images depicting the actual horrors of war.

Even if you had never heard of Schindler the numbers look like a list of people and the adult hand is saving a child. It does not take too much imagination to know this will be about the holocaust.





Memoirs of a Geisha by Arthur Golden

In this cover they have chosen the perfect image to show that, unlike a light romance this book is going to deliver on it's promise of an emotional payout.

If you look hard enough you will find great quality, affordably priced landscapes or close up portraits of both women and men on stock photo sites. Just search for broad terms like landscapes, or beautiful man or beautiful woman. Here's what I found on Depositphotos after searching for just 5 minutes. I always look for portraits that show character rather than someone just being beautiful like on the front cover of a magazine. I would use this for a light romance or a happy memoir

Tying in With Your Other Books and Your Website

Try to design a cover with a concept that can be re-worked with new images and new colours for your next book.

If your book ends up on Goodreads and you have several books, whatever their style or genre, it helps a lot if their covers are similar enough that they are instantly recognisable as **your** books:

If you have a website your covers need to fit in with the general mood or style of your website as well.

If you have any trouble at all with coming up with a mood or colour scheme for your books and your website, **take this quick course on choosing a colour palette, it's FREE**

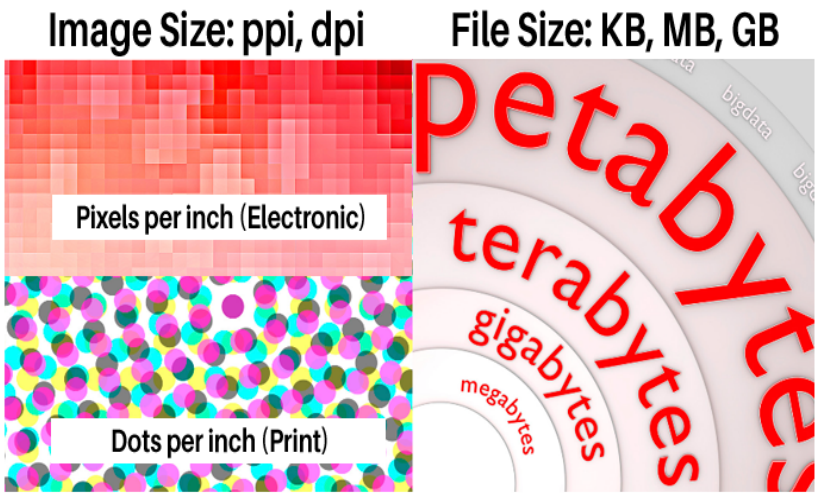
So in conclusion, your cover does not need to be innovative and unusual. It needs to stick to genre conventions so that your reader knows immediately where it fits in and whether they are likely to enjoy it.

Your cover does not have to be an award winning work of art. It's quality simply needs to be good enough for readers not to notice that you are self-publishing and to draw them in to read your description. Once you get them to read your description, your cover's work is done.

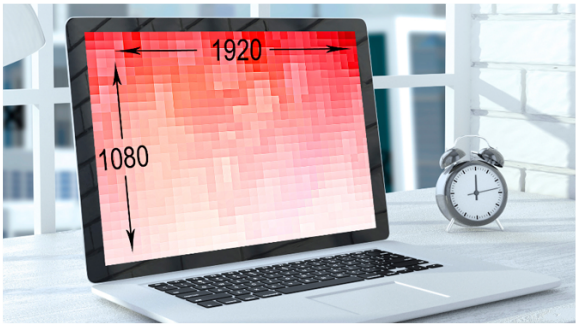
Understanding the Techy Stuff

You still need to understand a bit about the technical aspect of images before you try to create a cover for your book.

Firstly, there is a difference between image size and file size. Image Size refers to the dimensions of the image measured in pixels. File size refers to how much space the image takes up on your hard drive in kilobytes, megabytes, gigabytes etc.



Resolution — ppi or dpi means the number or pixels or dots there are within an inch. The higher your dpi or ppi the higher your resolution and the finer the detail of your image. But at the same time the higher your file size. This becomes important for electronic images because sometimes there are limits imposed on the file size you are allowed. For instance, on Amazon, the maximum file size for an eBook is 50MB.

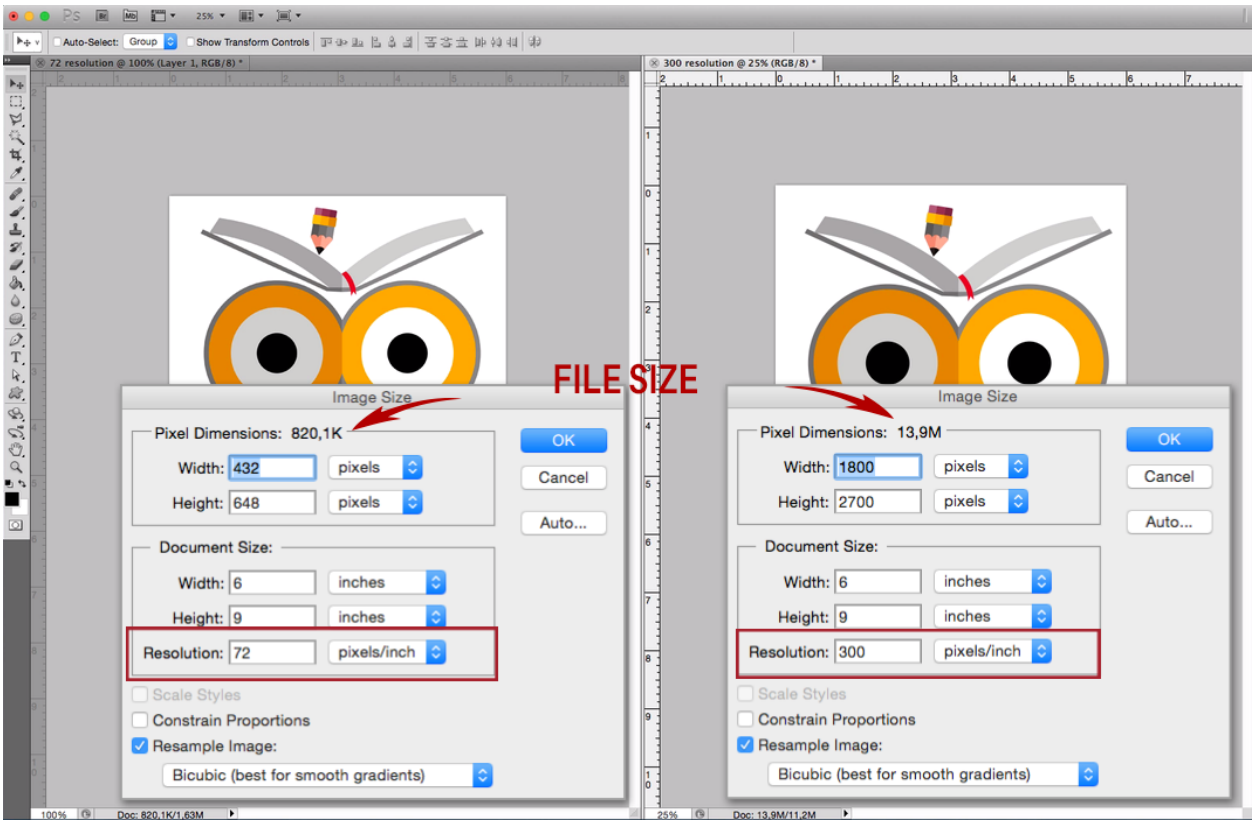


Although ppi refers to the pixel density of a digital image it is also used to describe the pixel density or resolution of a computer screen, tablet screen or smart phone screen. The resolution of this laptop is set to 1920 pixels by 1080 pixels.

When you are sourcing images for your designs it is important to begin with high resolution images even though this increases the file size because you can make a copy at a reduced size to accommodate those times when your file size needs to be lowered but you can't scale up a small image and expand it without losing quality. So if you start off with a low resolution image thinking it will be adequate for your eBook and then decide to publish a paperback of your book afterwards the low resolution image will pixelate when you try to enlarge it to use as a paperback cover.

For example, in the image below you will see two versions of the same image for my 6 x 9 book in Photoshop. I am viewing the one on the left at full size and the one on the right is zoomed out to 25% so that they look the same on the screen

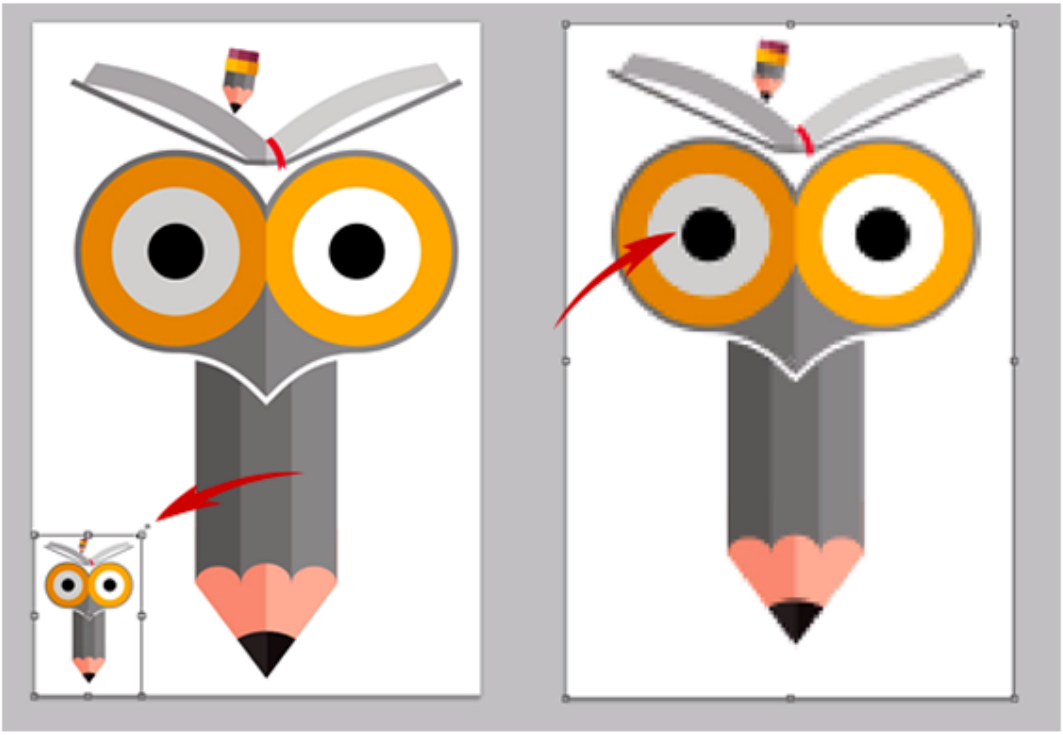
They are both 6 x 9 inches but the one on the left is for an eBook and has a resolution of 72 pixels per inch and the one on the right is for print and has 300 pixels per inch.



The file size of the one on the left is only 820 Kilobytes but the one on the right is 13,9 Megabytes. If you scrutinise the image you will notice that both covers will look fine on the screen where the screen resolution is only 72 ppi anyway. Except that the righthand image is overkill for a screen because it's file size is huge.

You might get away with using an image with a large file size if you only have the one image in your eBook but if you have multiple images you will have to reduce their size because Amazon charges a per gigabyte fee for delivering and also has a 50 Megabyte limit per eBooks.

Conversely, the eBook image on the left, at 72 ppi is roughly 25% of the size of the paperback image on the right so if I were to try to enlarge it to fit the same space, its 72 pixels per inch would have to grow to fit the space, eventually become visible to the naked eye.



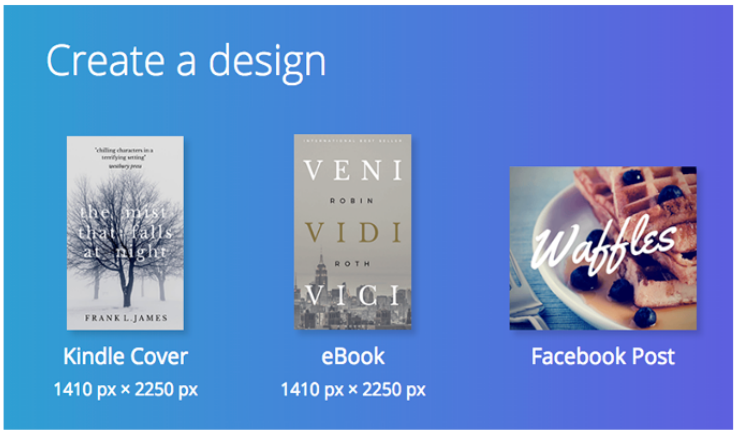
So my best advice is to start with images that are at least 300 ppi incase you want to use your cover for print later but when putting them on the web or using them for your internal ebook cover, reduce them to around 72 ppi to bring down the file size which will save bandwidth, and load them faster. **Learn to resize images in this free course.**

Always ask your book cover designer for any original images you have bought during the design process just incase you want to make changes and your designer has moved on or you have fallen out.

Then, save your original images and store them in a safe place. As images take up space on your computer and you might never need them again you might like to back them up on an external hard drive.

Catalogue Cover Size and Internal Cover Size

You need to start with a cover image that is big enough for the display or catalogue page on each of the different platforms you plan to publish to. Every platform recommends a slightly different size so I have narrowed it down to a universal size of 1410 pixels by 2250 pixels. This is the same size that **Canva.com** uses for their eBook cover template. See img. on the right. I use Canva for a lot of book covers as well as social media banners because Canva keeps up to date with all the ever changing sizes.



Note that 1410 pixels by 2250 pixels does not exactly match the aspect ratio recommended by Amazon or Kobo, but it looks better, I have never had a problem uploading this size and it reduces perfectly to fit inside your ebook as an internal cover.

Then, for your internal cover, each of the different devices have a different aspect ratio.

Since you upload one eBook file to your chosen platform and then your readers can read it on whichever tablet, phone or app they want, you have to decide on a *one size fits all* cover image. The most popular reading devices:

- Amazon Kindle Fire HD
- Samsung Galaxy Tab 4
- and LG G Pad

all have an aspect ratio of 1280 x 800 and this can be achieved easily by scaling down Canva's recommendation for a catalogue cover size of 2250 x 1410 so this is the size I always use.

What File Type to Use For Your Cover

Some of the platforms you want to upload your covers to will have restrictions on the type of file they will accept. Sometimes this will affect your choice of whether you save your cover as a .jpeg (.jpg) or as a .tiff or as a .png.

When you are working with images the biggest difference between a .jpeg and a .png, is that you can make the background of a .png transparent. For instance, you can remove the background from your logo or an image and place it on top of a different background. **Learn how to remove backgrounds in this free course.**

But when you save your book cover image the most convenient file type is a .jpeg (.jpg) because it is compatible with all the servers and due to its small size will upload faster.

The disadvantage is that, since .jpeg is a lossy format you may see compression artefacts, especially in the regions around the text on your cover.

To show you what happens, I've cut the image below in two and saved the half on the left as a .jpeg and the half on the right as a .tiff. Then put them together again. Look closely around the arrow area and you will see what compression artefacts look like on the .jpeg half. The .tiff section on the right hand side is nice and crisp. (The quality of a .png would have been similar to a .tiff)

.Tiff and .png files are lossless and retain all of their quality but their file size can be up to twice the size of a maximum quality .jpeg of the same image.

So it depends on where your cover is going to display and how text heavy it is. You have to test this for yourself because each image is different.

Here is exactly the same split image zoomed out and you can barely see any difference, so for this image I would use a .jpeg.

A good rule of thumb is to go for .jpeg if your cover is mostly made up of images, and resort to .tiff if your cover is text heavy and you are seeing compression artefacts. Also if you ever add images with lots of lines or text like tables.

What Colour System Should You Use?

Have you ever found that the colours of exactly the same image looked different on screen than they did on paper? That is because there are two different colour systems. This affects you because your paperback book cover might be duller than your eBook cover

There's RGB which is a projected light colour system used by computers. You begin with no light, or darkness, and as you add different coloured light rays this produces visible colours. If you overlap all the primary colours, Red, Blue and Green, in equal proportions you will see white.

CMYK is for print and is based on ink or dye. When all the primary colours of Cyan, Magenta and Yellow are mixed in equal proportions you end up with black. Since it is not a perfect black, black has been added. That's what the K stands for. Because B already stands for Blue.

As you can imagine, the ink based CMYK does not have anywhere close to the range of possible colours as when you mix light, so that is why you sometimes cannot produce the vibrant colours you can with RGB. Even though printing has progressed and a lot of digital printers can now print RGB, wherever you can, stick to RGB for web and CMYK for print.

Now that you are familiar with some of the technical terms surrounding image creation, I hope you will be able to make informed choices when working with a book cover designer or when opening a new document and setting it up to design your covers, no matter which app you choose to design them in.