

Guide to using free images

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When sourcing free images from the web to illustrate your own site, there are a number of issues that you should consider. Some of these are **essential** for avoiding potential copyright infringement, while others are **best practice**.

Is the image free to use?

Just because an image is online, it does not mean it can be re-used. Even if the image is on the University of Cambridge website, it does not necessarily mean you can re-use it – it will depend on the image licence.

Instead, you should look for **public domain** images or images available through a **Creative Commons** licence. There is list of resources at the end of this document.

What are public domain images?

These are images that you can use and re-use freely. You do not need to credit the creator.

What are Creative Commons images?

CC images are licenced for re-use, but with certain requirements (check the licence for details). You **must** credit the creator.

What are royalty-free images?

These are images purchased with a one-off licence that you can re-use as many times as you like.

Copyright infringement

Failure to add an appropriate credit could result in you being asked to pay a fee to the copyright holder (which tend to range from £150 to £450). You will likely be contacted by one of several companies dedicated to copyright enforcement, such as PicRights.com. You are unlikely to succeed in asking for the fee to be waived because of accidental infringement.

Be aware of Copytrack, however. They recently contacted the Office of External Affairs and Communications on behalf of WENN Rights International Ltd, claiming infringement over use of an image. It became clear that WENN did not own the copyright to the image being claimed for.

Does the image belong to the person claiming the copyright?

Be very careful when using images from sites such as Flickr and Unsplash. On Flickr, there are some users who appear to be re-posting photos from agencies such as Associated Press (AP). We are aware of one case where a user has re-used one of these images in good faith, with the appropriate Creative Commons credit, but has been contacted for infringement on behalf of AP.

Both Flickr and Unsplash carry photographs of artworks. According to [guidance from the Intellectual Property Office](#), “If someone takes a photo of a work protected by copyright, and the work forms an essential part of the image, using that photo on the web is likely to be an infringement of copyright”.

Images subjects

Children – You should only use images of children if you are confident that a parent/guardian has approved their use. Where the photo is clearly a stock image/posed, this is a reasonable assumption, but sites such as Flickr and Unsplash include images of street children, children in African villages, etc. where it is very unlikely that permission will have been sought and obtained. If in doubt, you could contact the photographer to ask.

Reflecting diversity – Where possible, we recommend reflecting diversity among the people who appear in the images you use.

Reinforcing stereotypes – Be careful about reinforcing negative stereotypes when using images. For example, recent campaigns have argued against the use of [‘headclutchers’ for mental health stories](#) while others have asked us to consider [how we portray obesity](#).

Free image resources

A useful starting point is the [Creative Commons search engine](#). You can use this to find CC images in a number of sites, including Flickr and Wikipedia Commons.

Other useful image libraries

The following image libraries are mostly free to use, but some may include a mix of public domain, Creative Commons and royalty free. **Always check the licence before using an image.**

Cambridge images

Cambridge Digital Library	https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/
Cambridge University Image Library	https://www.cam.ac.uk/photos
Cambridge University Flickr	https://www.flickr.com/photos/cambridgeuniversity/
Cambridge University Hospitals Stock Library	https://adobe.ly/3c9ytXu

General stock images

Centre for Better Ageing: positive images of people aged 50 and over	https://ageing-better.org.uk/news/age-positive-image-library-launched
Flickr (make sure you are looking at Creative Commons images)	https://www.flickr.com
Pexels	https://www.pexels.com
Pixabay	https://pixabay.com/
Pond5	https://www.pond5.com/free
Unsplash	https://unsplash.com/

Specialist images

Apollo’s list of free art gallery archives	https://www.apollo-magazine.com/open-access-image-libraries-a-handly-list/
Biodiversity visuals	https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/
British Library	https://imagesonline.bl.uk/
CDC Public Health Image Library	https://phil.cdc.gov/default.aspx
Climate visuals	https://climatevisuals.org
European Space Agency	https://www.esa.int/ESA_Multimedia/Images
Greenpeace	https://media.greenpeace.org/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=Home

Library of Congress and LOC science images	https://www.loc.gov/free-to-use/
Look and Learn - historical picture archive	https://www.lookandlearn.com
NASA	https://www.nasa.gov/multimedia/imagegallery/index.html
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration	https://www.photolib.noaa.gov/Collections
New York Public Library	https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/
NIH History of Medicine	https://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/ihm/index.html
NIH: lots of links to free medical/science image databases	https://www.nihlibrary.nih.gov/resources/subject-guides/web-search-thinking-beyond-google/images
Rijksmuseum	https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/research/image-requests
Smithsonian	https://www.si.edu/openaccess
The Met (NY)	https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection
UN Environment programme	https://www.flickr.com/photos/unep/albums
US Dept of Agriculture	https://www.ars.usda.gov/oc/images/image-gallery/
US Geological Survey	https://library.usgs.gov/photo/#/
Wellcome Collection	https://wellcomecollection.org/images
Wiki Commons	https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Images
World Obesity Image Bank	https://www.worldobesity.org/resources/image-bank

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