

## Finding and Using Openly Licensed Images: A Quick Guide for Students





# Finding and Using Openly Licensed Images: A Quick Guide for Students

*RACHAEL NEVINS*



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# Dedication

*Made with love for New York City public school  
students, from Pre-K through CUNY*



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# Introduction

As the parent of two New York City public school students and as a CUNY student myself, I've seen how often students need to use images in their work, for posters, presentations, and written assignments. However, students don't always know where to look for images that are free to use. In fact, sometimes students don't even know that some images *aren't* free to use. And students often don't know how to give proper credit to the creators of the images they use.

My hope in this guide is to give you clear and helpful information on finding and using images for your schoolwork and other creative projects. The guide has three parts. The first part goes over the basics of why some images are free to use and some are not. The second part shows you where and how you can find images to use. And the third part tells you about some best practices for using images, including giving credit to creators.

This guide was produced as the final project for the Creative Commons Certificate course in summer 2022. I want to thank Ann Fiddler and Andy McKinney for making my participation in this certification course possible, Jen Hughes for her guidance as the facilitator of the course, and Elizabeth Arestyl for all that I've learned from and with her in our OER fellowship at the Office of Library Services. Additionally, I want to thank my older child, a rising high school student, for reviewing the text for clarity. Any errors and faults in this work, of course, are mine alone.

*Cover image by Yeh Xintong via Unsplash*





# COPYRIGHT, LICENSES, AND THE PUBLIC DOMAIN



# Why Use Open Images?

## *Learning Objectives*

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to

- Give reasons to include images in your schoolwork and creative works.
- Explain why copyright prohibits you from using any image you want.

Including images in your work is a way to provide information. You might include a photograph of the subject of a biography to show what the person looked like. You might include illustrations along with the text when explaining how to do something. You might include maps to help your audience follow a narrative about a voyage.

Including images in your work is also a way to influence your audience emotionally or grab their attention. Including an image of *The Triumph of Death* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder at the beginning of a presentation on the Black Death, for example, would almost certainly grab the attention of an audience!



*The Triumph of Death by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, via Wikimedia Commons, is in the public domain.*

The emotional impact of this image isn't merely sensational. The image also provides information, suggesting that the fear and instability caused by a fourteenth-century plague still animated the imagination of a sixteenth-century artist. It's just one example of the many layers of meaning that images can bring to your work.

Because of copyright, not all images are legally available for your use. Copyright is the area of law that limits how others may access and use the original works of authors or creators<sup>1</sup>, including photographs, drawings, paintings, and other kinds of images.

Fortunately, some creators give permission to allow others to

1. This definition is from 2.1 Copyright Basics by Creative Commons, licensed CC BY 4.0.

reuse and even adapt their images (and other works). These creators use Creative Commons licenses and other open licenses to grant this permission. Additionally, many images are part of the public domain. Images in the public domain are (by definition) not under copyright.

How can you find these images, and how can you use them? This guide will tell you how. In this first part of the guide, we'll go over some of the basics of copyright and Creative Commons licenses so that you have a framework for understanding how to use openly licensed images.

# What Is Copyright?

## *Learning Objectives*

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to

- Describe the basic rights involved in copyright.
- Give examples of what kinds of works are copyrighted.
- Explain how works are copyrighted.

At one time, copies of texts were made by hand.



*This illustration from a manuscript of Liber Floridus, via Wikimedia Commons, is in the public domain.*

The emergence of the moveable-type printing press in the sixteenth century made the mass reproduction of text and images possible. Many more copies of texts and images could be made in a short time! Less than two centuries later, in 1710, the first copyright law was enacted in England. This law began the process of legally defining who could make copies of what, and how, when, and for what purposes those copies could be made.

## Questions and Answers About Copyright

Now that almost everything we do online involves making a

copy, copyright is a regular feature in our lives. But you might have questions about what can be copyrighted and who controls the rights to a copyrighted work. Here are some questions you might have—and their answers. Note that what follows is a very basic introduction to a complex area of law; none of it should be taken as legal advice.

## What rights are involved in copyright?

Copyright grants a set of exclusive rights to copyright owners, which means that no one else can copy, distribute, publicly perform, adapt, or do almost anything else other than simply view or read the work without permission of the copyright holder.

## What kinds of works can be copyrighted?

Copyright grants rights to literary and artistic works that are original. Copyright is available to everything from paintings to blog posts, but all works must meet a certain standard of originality to warrant copyright. Generally speaking, this means the work must have been a creation of its creator and not copied from another work.

## Can ideas be copyrighted?

Copyright does not protect facts or ideas themselves, only the expression of those facts or ideas. The difference between an idea and the expression of that idea can be tricky, but it's also quite important to understand. While copyright law gives creators control over their expression of an idea, it does not



allow the copyright holder to own or exclusively control the idea itself.

## How can I claim copyright over my works?

As a general rule, copyright is automatic the moment a work is created, though some countries, such as the United States, require that the work be fixed in a tangible medium before granting copyright. In other words, in the United States, you can't claim copyright for the idea for an image; you can claim copyright only for an image that has been fixed in some way—rendered as a photograph, sketch, painting, etc.

Registration with the local copyright office is not required to gain copyright protection.

## How long does copyright last?

Copyright protection lasts a long time, often many decades after the creator dies.

## Is the author or creator always the person who holds the copyright for a work?

Typically, the first owner of a copyright will be the individual person that created a work. However, the exclusive rights granted by copyright can be transferred to others, including legal entities such as corporations, publishers, or universities. Understanding who controls the exclusive rights granted by copyright is necessary in order to understand who has authority to grant permissions to others to reuse the work (e.g., adding a CC license to the work).

However, it is important to note that the author of a work may not necessarily be the copyright holder. For example, works created in the course of your employment are likely to be owned by your employer, though ownership rules vary by jurisdiction. Similarly, depending on the terms of their contract, independent contractors may or may not own and control copyright in the works they create in that capacity. Additionally, teachers, university faculty, and learners may or may not own and control copyright in the works they create in those capacities.

At CUNY, students own the copyright to their work.

## What else should I know about copyright?

Copyright protection is balanced against other public interests. The rights granted to copyright owners may be considered against other public interests, such as freedom of expression rights, the right to access information, and the needs of people with disabilities. There are occasions when copyright protections may be limited to serve the public interest. See the chapter in this guide on fair use for more information on these limitations to copyright protection.

## Attribution

This chapter is excerpted from 2.1 Copyright Basics by Creative Commons, licensed CC BY 4.0. The learning objectives, introductory text, and question-and-answer format are original to this version.

# What Are CC Licenses?

## *Learning Objectives*

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to

- Explain the purpose of Creative Commons licenses.
- Describe the permissions given by the six different Creative Commons licenses.

Some copyright holders want to share their work and give others permission to reuse and adapt their work. Open licenses like Creative Commons (CC) licenses enable copyright holders to do so. CC licenses don't replace copyright; they work with copyright. For example, by placing a CC license on their work, a copyright holder isn't giving up their copyright. Instead, the license enables them to tell potential users of a work upfront how that work can be used.

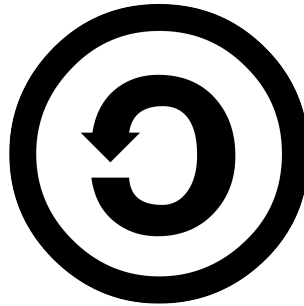
## **The Elements of CC Licenses**

There are six different CC licenses. Each license is composed of a different combination of the following four elements.



One license element is attribution, or “BY.”

The attribution license element requires users of a work to give credit to the creator. All Creative Commons licenses include this element.



Another license element is share alike, or “SA.”

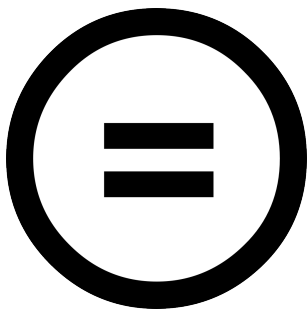
The share-

alike license element requires users of a work to share any adaptations of the work with the same or a compatible license.



Another license element is non-commercial, or “NC.”

The non-commercial license element prohibits others from using a work or adaptations of a work for commercial purposes.



The fourth license element is no derivatives, or “ND.”

The no derivatives license element prohibits others from adapting a work.

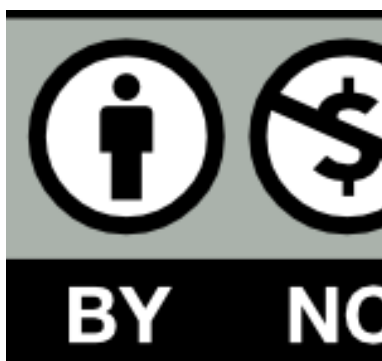
What is an adaptation? You are likely familiar with adaptations, such as novels adapted for film, or works translated from one language to another. Cropping an image, adding text to an image, or changing an image from full color to black and white are also examples of adaptations. Changing an image from a digital to a print format is not an adaptation, however.

## The Six CC Licenses

These four elements—BY, SA, NC, and ND—are combined in different ways in the six Creative Commons licenses.



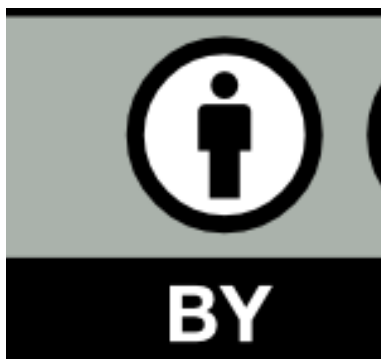
The CC BY license is the most permissive, allowing people to use or adapt a work for any purpose, including commercial purposes. It requires only attribution.



The CC BY-NC-ND is the most restrictive, prohibiting adaptations and allowing only noncommercial uses of a work.



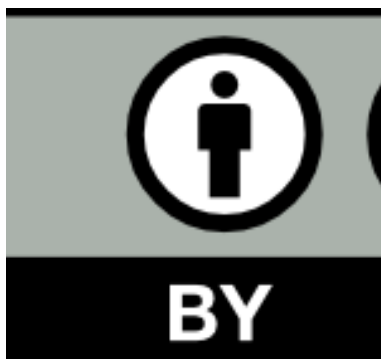
And the other four licenses are CC BY-SA,



... CC BY-NC,



... CC BY-NC-SA,



...and CC BY-ND.

Notice that the SA element and ND element are never included in the same license because they are incompatible with each other. Whereas the SA element asks that adaptations be

shared with the same or a compatible license, the ND element prohibits sharing adaptations altogether.

Remember, a CC license doesn't replace copyright. Instead, it works with copyright. So a CC license can't be used to grant permissions that copyright already gives anyway. For example, a CC license can't be used to give people permission to watch a copyrighted video or listen to a copyrighted podcast, like this one. Those uses are already permitted by copyright. Inversely, a CC license can't be used to place restrictions on work that is already unrestricted anyway, such as works in the public domain.

But what is the public domain? Read the next chapter to find out.

## **Attribution**

This chapter is excerpted from the transcript of Anatomy of a CC License by Rachael Nevins, licensed CC BY-NC 4.0. The learning objectives and introductory text are original to this version, and the text has been adapted for a written (rather than audio) format.



# What Is the Public Domain?

## *Learning Objectives*

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to

- Define the “public domain.”
- Explain how works enter the public domain.
- Describe how works in the public domain may be used.

The public domain consists of works that are not subject to copyright.



*The Public Domain Review collects strange and compelling works in the public domain, such as this illustration from an anonymously authored sixteenth-century treatise on comets, via ORKA – Open Repository Kassel.*

## How Do Works Enter the Public Domain?

Works enter the public domain in one of four ways.

## 1. The copyright expires.

Copyright terms may be long, but they do not go on forever. In most countries, the term of an individual's copyright expires 50 years after the individual's death. In some countries, the term is longer and can be up to 100 years after the author dies.

## 2. The work was never entitled to copyright protection.

Copyright covers vast amounts of content created by creators, but certain categories of works cannot be copyrighted. For example, remember that ideas and facts cannot be copyrighted. Additionally, in the United States, works created by officers or employees of the U.S. government as part of their official duties are not copyrighted; nor are such official legal documents as judicial opinions and laws.

3. The creator dedicates the work to the public domain before copyright has expired.



In most parts of the world, a creator can decide to give up the protections of copyright and dedicate their work to the public domain. Creative Commons has a legal tool called CC0 (“CC Zero”) Public Domain Dedication that helps authors put their works into the worldwide public domain

to the greatest extent possible.

4. The copyright holder failed to comply with formalities to acquire or maintain their copyright.

Today in most countries, there are no formal requirements to acquire or renew copyright protection over a work. This was not always the case, however, and many works have entered the public domain over the years because a creator failed to do what was needed to keep their copyright.

## **What Can Be Done with Works in the Public Domain?**

You can do almost anything with works in the public

domain—but it depends on the scope and duration of copyright protection in the particular country where the work is used. Depending on the country, for example, a work in the public domain may still be covered by moral rights that last beyond the duration of copyright. (Moral rights, according to Creative Commons, “are rights that protect, sometimes indefinitely, the bonds between authors and their creative outputs.”) It’s also possible that a work is in the public domain in one country, but is still under copyright in another country. This means you may not be able to use the work freely where copyright still applies.

## **Attribution**

This chapter is excerpted from 2.3 The Public Domain by Creative Commons, licensed CC BY 4.0. The learning objectives and introductory text are original to this version, and the text has been adapted for a student audience.

# What About Fair Use?

## *Learning Objective*

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to define “fair use.”

As explained in the chapter in this guide on copyright, there are exceptions and limitations to copyright protection. In some countries, those exceptions and limitations are clearly defined in law. In the United States, on the other hand, the fair use doctrine provides guidelines but not strict definitions of the exceptions and limitations to copyright. This approach allows for flexibility, especially as new technologies emerge, but it can result in uncertainty.

The U.S. Copyright Office identifies certain types of uses of copyrighted materials as the kinds of activities that may qualify as fair use: criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research. The Copyright Office also describes the four factors to consider when determining when fair use applies.

1. For what purpose is the work being used? Is the use of a commercial nature? Is it for nonprofit educational purposes?
2. What is the nature of the copyrighted work? Using more creative or imaginative works is less likely to be seen as fair than using works of a more factual nature.

3. How much of the copyrighted work is being used?
4. How is the use of the copyrighted work likely to affect the potential market for or value of the work?

For more information about when fair use might apply to your use of a copyrighted work, see the guide [Fair Use and Copyright: Students](#) from the CUNY Office of Library Services or consult with a librarian at your school.





# FINDING OPENLY LICENSED AND PUBLIC DOMAIN IMAGES



# Finding Images on Wikimedia Commons

## *Learning Objective*

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to find images to use on Wikimedia Commons.

Wikimedia Commons is a media file repository making available public domain and freely licensed educational media content (images, sound and video clips) to everyone, in their own language. It acts as a common repository for the various projects of the Wikimedia Foundation, but you do not need to belong to one of those projects to use media hosted there. Wikimedia Commons may look and feel familiar to you because it uses the same wiki-technology as Wikipedia, and everyone can edit it.<sup>1</sup>

Here is an image from Wikimedia Commons.

1. This explanation of Wikimedia Commons is from Welcome by Wikimedia Commons, licensed CC BY-SA 3.0.



*"Helianthus\_annuus2" by Meshari Alawfi, via Wikimedia Commons, is licensed CC BY 4.0.*

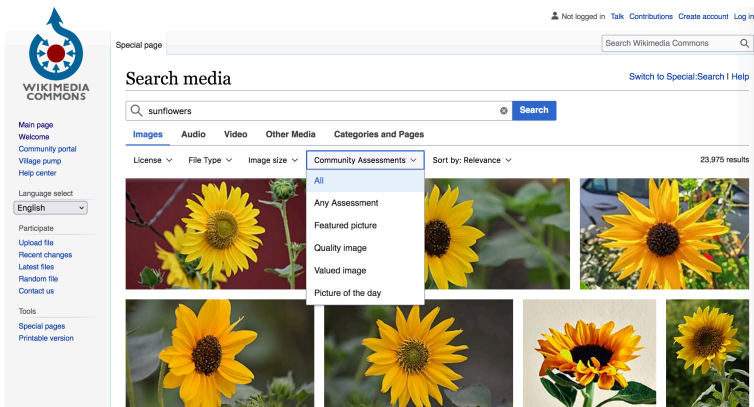
How can you find images like this one?

## How to Find Images on Wikimedia Commons

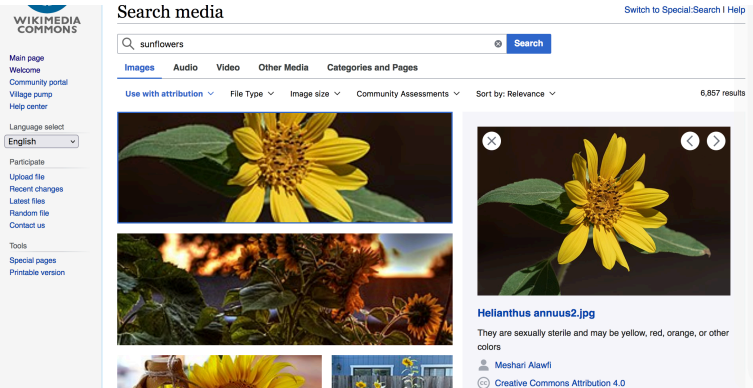
Go to the main page of the site: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>. Find the search bar on the upper right. Type a keyword related to the subject of the image you want, and hit return.



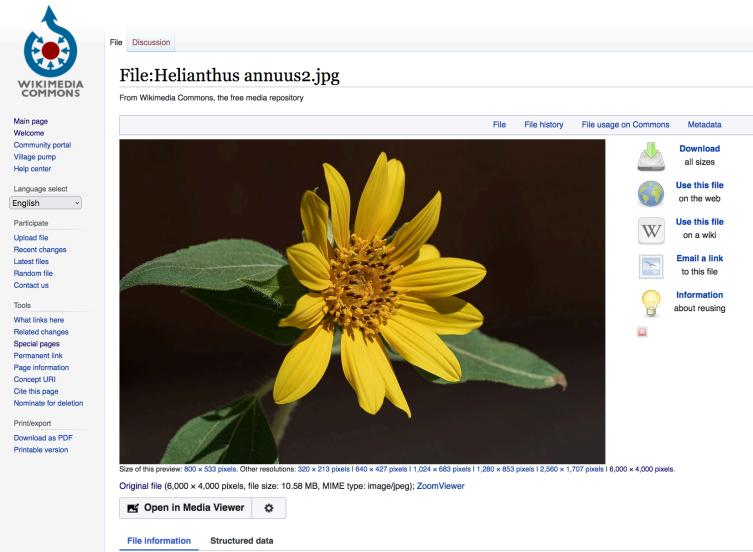
Use the filters in the horizontal menu to sort the results of your search. You can search for audio and video files as well as images. You can search for images by license (including images in the public domain), file type, and file size. Using the **Community Assessments** menu, you can also search for images that have been featured on the site or for images that the Wikimedia Commons community has seen as valued or high quality.



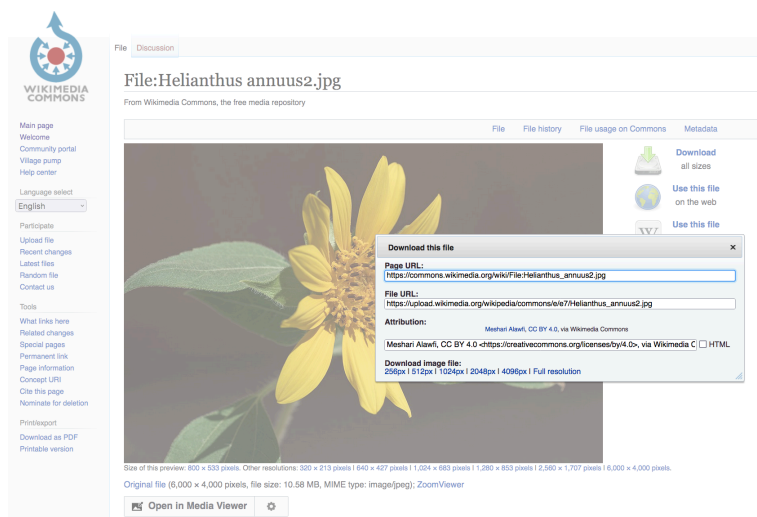
Click on an image that you might want to use to see some of the information associated with that image—the file name, description, creator, license, and so on.



Click on the file name of the image to go to that image's page on the site.



Click on **Download** (on the top to the right of the image) to choose the size of the file you want to download. The dialog box also provides URLs for the image's webpage and for the image file, as well as text that you can use for the image attribution. (See the chapter in this guide on attributions to learn more about attribution.)



## What Else Should I Know About Wikimedia Commons?

### Picture of the Day

Every day a new image is selected for display on the main page as the **Picture of the day**. These striking images come from all over the world, and you can view all of them going back to November 2004.

## Photo Challenges

Wikimedia Commons also hosts monthly photo challenges. Each challenge invites photographers to take pictures related to a theme and upload them to Commons. The themes for the month of August 2022, for example, were **Islands in freshwater lakes** and **Insects**.



# Finding Images on Flickr

## *Learning Objective*

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to find images to use on Flickr.

Flickr is a website for sharing and organizing photographs. Many of the photographs on the site (but far from all of them) are licensed or dedicated to be reused and adapted by others.

Here is an image from Flickr.

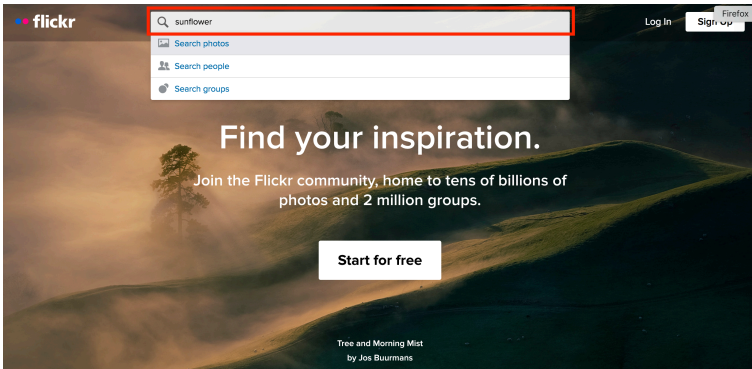


*"Sunflower" by Amanda Slater, via Flickr, is licensed CC BY-SA 2.0.*

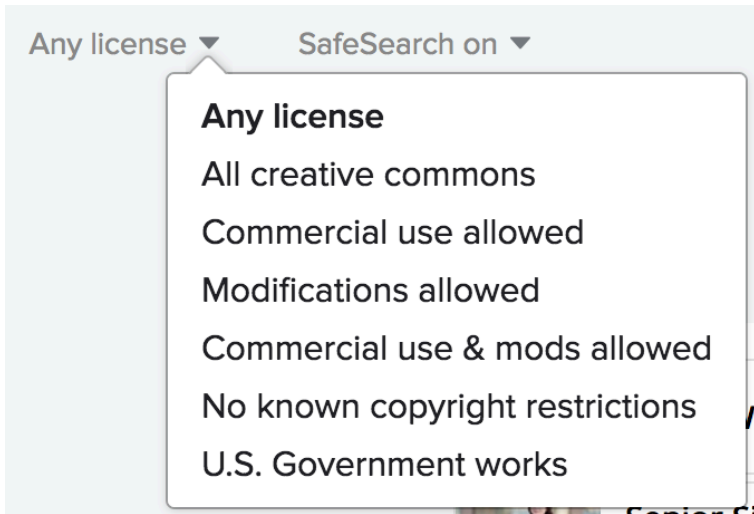
How can you find images like this one on Flickr and be sure that they are images you can use?

## How to Find Images on Flickr

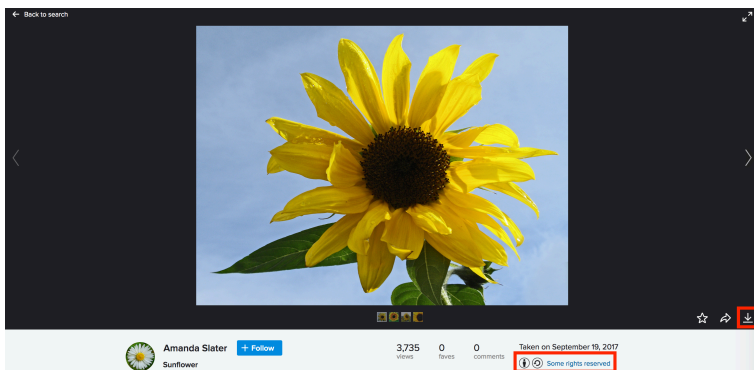
Go to the main page of the site: <https://www.flickr.com>. Find the search bar at the top of the page. Type a keyword related to the subject of the image you want, and select **Search photos** from the drop-down menu.



On the next page, find **Any license** toward the top left side of the page, and click on the triangle to display the drop-down menu. Each of the first four items on the list—"All creative commons," "Commercial use allowed," "Modifications allowed," and "Commercial use & mods allowed"—filters the results for the corresponding CC licenses. "No known copyright restrictions" and "U.S. Government works" filters the results for images in the public domain. Select the license type or permissions you want.



Click on an image that you might want to use to see the creator of the image and its license. The license information is below the image on the right side. Click on **Some rights reserved** to see the license deed. If you decide to use the image, click on the icon with the arrow pointing down, below the image and all the way to the right.



## What Else Should I Know About Flickr?

Flickr has a repository called The Commons or Flickr Commons, where publicly held photographs are shared. Unlike on Wikimedia Commons, these photographs are made available by institutions—such as the Library of Congress, Smithsonian Institution, and New York Public Library—rather than by individuals. These photographs are believed to be in the public domain.

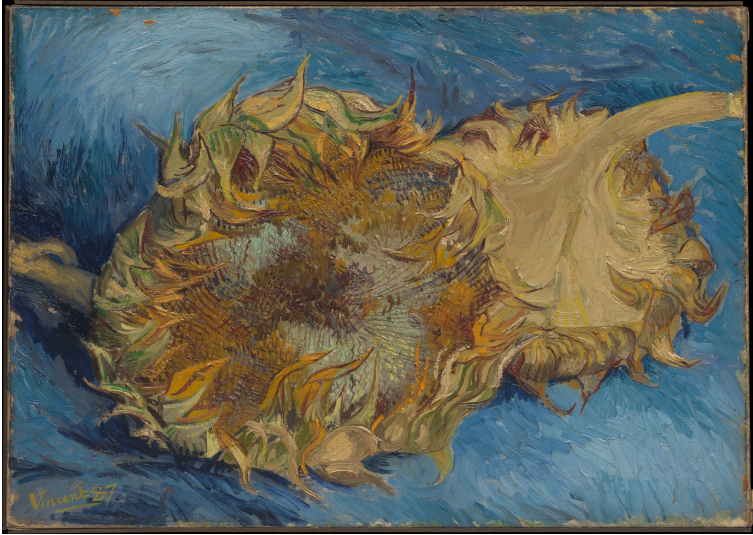
# Finding Images from the Met

## *Learning Objective*

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to find images to use at the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Museums and other cultural institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City display digital images of works in their collections on their websites. In many cases—but not all!—these images are free to use.

The tens of thousands of objects on view at the Met itself represent only a portion of the museum's entire collection. A greater part of the collection can be viewed digitally on the museum's website. These digital images represent many artworks in the public domain, such as this oil painting of sunflowers by Vincent Van Gogh.

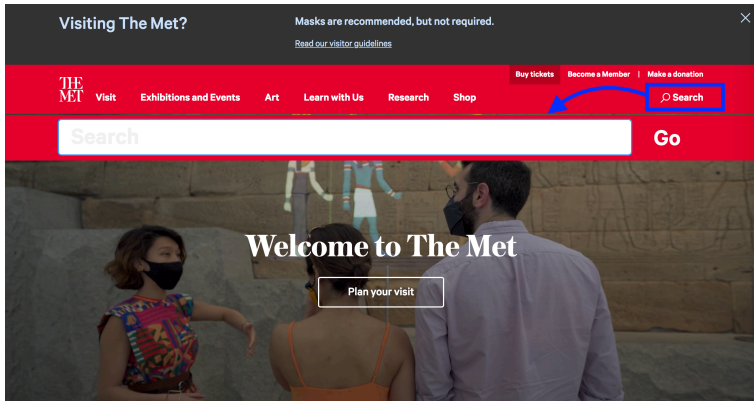


*"Sunflowers" by Vincent Van Gogh, via the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is in the public domain.*

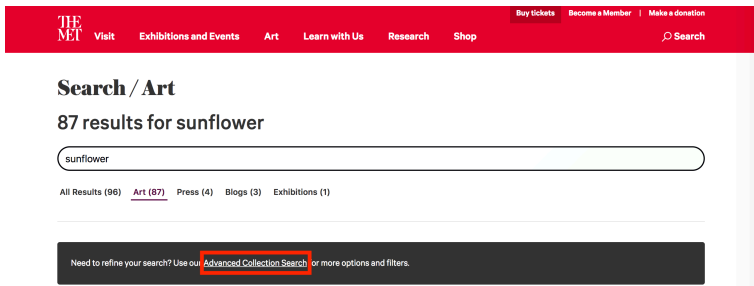
How can you find images of works in the public domain at the Met's website?

## How to Find Images of Works in the Public Domain at the Met's Website

Go to the main page of the site: <https://www.metmuseum.org/>. Click on **Search** at the top right of the page, and the search bar appears.



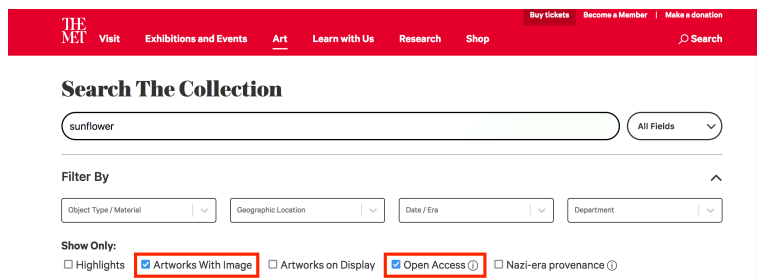
Type your keyword or keywords in the search bar and click **Go**. Click on **Art** in the horizontal menu below the search bar at the top of the results page, and a dark box appears asking if you need to refine your search. Click on **Advanced Collection Search**.



A range of filters appears. For example, you can filter the results by material (e.g., paintings, ceramics, textiles), geographic location, or era. To find images that you can use,



check the boxes next to **Artworks With Image** and **Open Access**.<sup>1</sup>



THE MET Visit Exhibitions and Events Art Learn with Us Research Shop Buy Tickets Become a Member Make a donation Search

### Search The Collection

sunflower All Fields

Filter By

Object Type / Material Geographic Location Date / Era Department

Show Only:

☐ Highlights ☒ Artworks With Image ☐ Artworks on Display ☒ Open Access ☐ Nazi-era provenance

After the Open Access filter is applied, the images on the results page all should be free to use. These images are covered by the museum's Open Access Policy.

## What's the Deal with the Open Access Policy?

*The Public Domain Review* explains, “Rights and licenses applying to public domain works can [...] be divided into two broad categories:

1. “The rights status of the **underlying work**, by which is
1. You might wonder what the “Nazi-era provenance” filter option is all about. These works are related to the museum’s “Provenance Research Project, the purpose of which is to determine whether any works of art in the Museum’s collection could have been unlawfully appropriated in the Nazi era and not subsequently restituted to their rightful owners.” See Provenance Research Project for more information.

meant the actual original work itself (the words of a book, the actual physical painting or drawing, a musical score, etc).

2. “The rights status of the **digital copy**, by which is meant the digital reproduction of this original work (the scan, photograph, digitisation etc., i.e. the medium by which the underlying work makes its way onto screens and the internet).”

Some institutions claim copyright over the digital images of works in their collection, regardless of whether or not the works are in the public domain. According to *The Public Domain Review*, such claims are “highly questionable.” The position of the Wikimedia Foundation is more assertive: that “faithful reproductions of two-dimensional public domain works of art are public domain.” However, keep in mind that these views are not universally accepted. If you want to use the digital image of a work in the public domain provided by a cultural institution, be sure to check out the policy at that particular institution. Many have policies like the Met’s Open Access Policy, which makes it clear that the digital images are free to use—but many institutions do not.

See Rights Labeling on Our Site by *The Public Domain Review* for a thorough discussion of this topic.

# Finding Images on Unsplash

## *Learning Objective*

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to find images to use on Unsplash.

Unsplash is a website where photographers share stock photography to be used freely by anyone. Searches on this site are straightforward, because all of the photographs on the site have the same license.

The Unsplash license is similar but not identical to CC licenses. The most significant difference between the Unsplash license and CC licenses is that attribution is appreciated but not required. It is recommended that you *do* provide attributions for photographs from Unsplash in your schoolwork; see the chapter in this guide on attribution for more information.

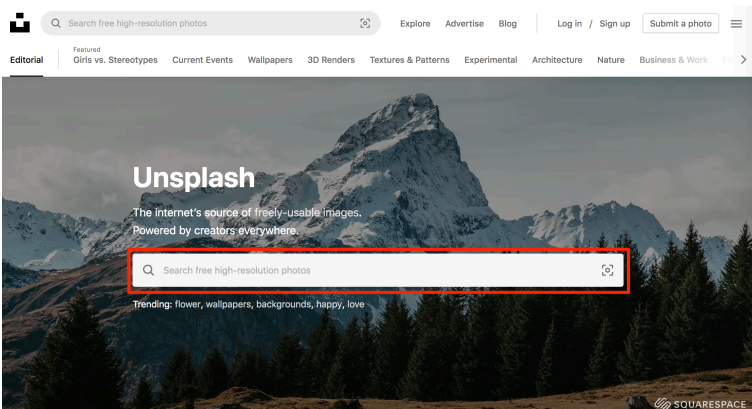
Here is an image from Unsplash.



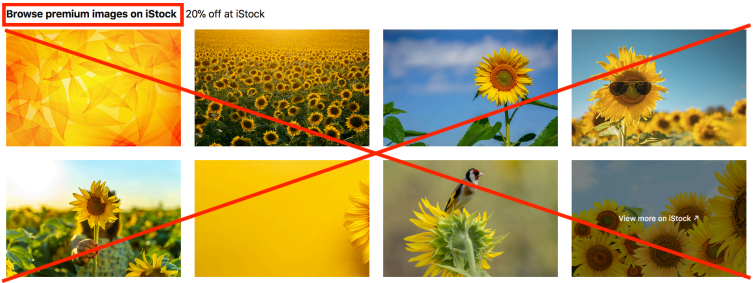
*"Flower Pose" by Thanuj Mathew, via Unsplash*

## How to Find Images on Unsplash

Go to the main page of the site: <https://unsplash.com/>. The search bar is in the center of the home page.



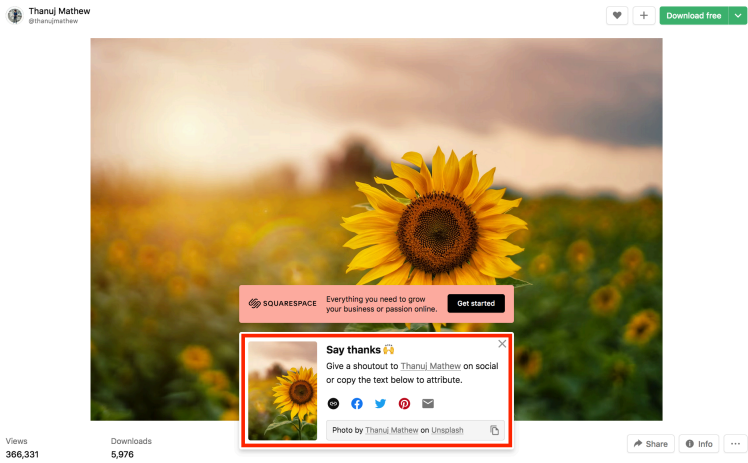
Type a keyword related to the subject of the image you want, and hit return. When scanning images on the results page, be sure to avoid selecting any of the images directly under the heading “Browse premium images on iStock”; these are *not* openly licensed images.



Click on an image that you might want to use and click on the green button labeled **Download free** on the upper right to download the image.



The image downloads right away, and a dialog box appears with attribution information you can copy and use.



# USING AND SHARING IMAGES





# Attribution

## *Learning Objective*

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to provide proper attributions for images you reuse or adapt in your work.

One condition of all CC licenses is attribution: when you reuse or adapt an image, you must credit the creator. What is the best way to do so?

## **Title, Author, Source, License**

The acronym TASL, which stands for *title*, *author*, *source*, and *license*, can help you remember the best practices for attribution.

**Title:** What is the name of the material?

If a title is provided for the material, include it in the attribution. Sometimes a title is not provided; in that case, don't worry about it.

## Author: Who owns it?

Name the author or authors of the material. Sometimes, the licensor may want you to give credit to some other entity, like a company or pseudonym. In rare cases, the licensor may not want to be attributed at all. In any of these cases, just do what they request.

## Source: Where can it be found?

Since you were able to access the material, you know where to find it. Provide the source of the material so others can, too, usually via a URL or hyperlink to where the material resides.

## License: How can it be used?

You are obviously using the material thanks to its CC license, so make note of it. Don't just say that the material has a Creative Commons license, because that would say nothing about how the material can actually be used. Instead, identify which of the six different CC licenses applies and provide a link to it.

Of course, if the licensor included a license notice with more information, include that information as well.

## Lastly, is there anything else I should know before I use it?

When you accessed the material originally, did it come with any copyright notices, a notice that refers to the disclaimer of warranties, or a notice of previous modifications? Because

that kind of information is important to potential users of the material, the best practice is to retain such notices by copying and pasting them into your attribution. Additionally, if you modify the work yourself, be sure to note that you have done so.

These best practices are based on actual CC license requirements. Noting the title is a requirement of all CC licenses version 3.0 or earlier and is optional for 4.0. Noting the author, source, and license, and retaining any extra notices is a requirement of all CC licenses.

## TASL in Practice

These best practices are demonstrated throughout this guide. Let's take a look at another example.



*"Traveling Photographer" by msmmelendez, via Flickr, is licensed CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.*

The attribution in the caption includes all the needed elements.

- Title: “Traveling Photographer”
- Author: msmmelendez, linked to their Flickr page
- Source: title linked to the Flickr page
- License: CC BY-NC-ND 2.0, linked to the license deed

## Attributions of Modified Images

When you revise or remix CC-licensed images, make note of the changes and additions you have made as part of the attribution statement. Take a look at this example.



*“Super Capta” by Boxy Brown’s Bling, via Flickr, is licensed CC BY-NC 2.0. Noir filter applied.*

A description of the modification to this image—“Noir filter applied”—is included with the attribution statement. If the image were modified to such a degree that a new work was created, a new title, author, and (compatible) license of the derivative work could be declared along with the attribution statement. See *Best practices for attribution* for more information.

## Placement

In this guide, attribution statements for images have been given in image captions. Attribution statements could also be provided at the bottom of the page (for example as a footnote) or all together at the end of the work, similarly to a bibliography or list of works cited.

## What If Attribution Isn't Required?

For images provided at sites like Unsplash, attribution isn't required, but it is best to cite *all* your sources in any of your classroom assignments and scholarship.

## Attribution

This chapter is adapted from “Best Practices for Attribution” in the *CUNY Pressbooks Guide* by Andrew McKinney, Rachael Nevins, and Elizabeth Arestyl, licensed CC BY-NC 4.0. The learning objective and sample attributions are original to this version, and the text has been adapted for a student audience and to address the specifics of image attributions.

# Writing Alt Text

## *Learning Objective*

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to

- Explain the purpose of alt text.
- Begin writing alt text for images.

People who are visually impaired or have certain cognitive disabilities use screen readers to help them access the content of web pages and other digital media. Alternative text, or alt text, is descriptive text that enables these people to perceive the content of images.

Platforms and sites like WordPress, Instagram, and Twitter make it easy to provide alt text for images. But how do you write alt text?

First, consider the purpose of the image. What information does it convey? And then write a description that clearly and briefly summarizes that information.

Let's take a look at an example.



*"WFE003: Jacob" by Rosenfeld Media, via Flickr, is licensed CC BY 2.0.*

The alt text for this image is "person using a computer and screen reader." This description clearly and briefly summarizes the purpose of the image: to illustrate a person using a computer and screen reader. It is not necessary to say that the person appears to be a man or that he is wearing headphones or dark glasses or a green pullover. Those details are irrelevant to the purpose of the image in this context and would only be distracting.

With alt text, context is everything! For this reason, if the caption or surrounding text suitably describes an image, it is unnecessary to include alt text.

See [Alternative Text by WebAIM](#) for more information on writing alt text. And please be assured that the more practice you get writing alt text, the more ease you will have in doing so.

# Contributing to the Commons

## *Learning Objectives*

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to

- Give reasons to contribute images to the commons.
- Choose a CC license for images you contribute to the commons.

Openly licensed images at sites like Wikimedia Commons and Flickr are crowdsourced. You, too, could be part of the crowd supplying images licensed for others to use in their creative projects.

## **Why Contribute Images to the Commons?**

The commons is the cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a society, including natural materials such as air, water, and a habitable Earth. These resources are held in common even when owned privately or publicly. By contributing to the commons, you enrich the resources available for everyone to use.





*The drawing with watercolor illustrates an English commons. It is titled “Harrow Common, Middlesex” and attributed to Edward Dayes, via the Yale Center for British Art, and in the public domain.*

## What Should I Consider First?

The licenses and CC0 are irrevocable.

“Irrevocable” means a legal agreement that cannot be canceled. In other words, once you apply a CC license to a work, the CC license applies to the work until the copyright on the work expires. This aspect of CC licensing is important to reusers because they have confidence knowing the creator can’t arbitrarily pull back the rights granted them under the CC license.

Because the licenses are irrevocable, it is very important to carefully consider the options before deciding to use a CC license on a work.

**You must own or control copyright in the work.**

You should control copyright in the work to which you apply

the license. For example, you don't own or control any copyright in a work that is in the public domain, and you don't own or control the copyright to a photograph by Lorna Simpson. Further, if you created the material as part of your job, you may not be the holder of the rights and may need to get permission from your employer before applying a CC license. Before licensing, take care to be sure that you have copyright to the work to which you're applying a CC license.

## **What Licenses Should I Choose for My Images?**

The six CC licenses provide a range of options for creators who want to share their work with the public while still retaining copyright. The best way to decide which license is appropriate for a given image is to think about why you want to share it and how you hope others will use the work.

For example, here are a few questions to consider.

1. Do you think people might make interesting new works out of your creation? If so, then you should choose a license that allows your work to be adapted.
2. Is it important to you that your images could be incorporated into Wikipedia? If so, then you should choose CC BY, BY-SA, or CC0, because Wikipedia does not allow images licensed under any of the NonCommercial or NoDerivatives licenses except in limited circumstances.
3. Do you want to give away all of your rights in your work so that it can be used by anyone in the world for any purpose? Then you might want to think about using the public domain dedication tool, CC0.

Creative Commons provides a tool called the License Chooser to help you decide.

## How do I apply a CC license to my work?

Once you've decided you want to use a CC license and know which license you want to use, applying it is simple. Technically, all you have to do is indicate which CC license you are applying to your work. However, it is strongly recommend that you include a link (or writing out the CC license URL, if you are working offline) to the relevant CC license deed (e.g., <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>). Depending on where you share the work, you can provide the license in the copyright notice for your work, on the footer of your website, or any other place that makes sense. The important thing is to make it clear what the CC license covers and locate the notice in a place that makes that clear to the public. See Marking your work with a CC license for more information.

## To apply CC licenses on particular platforms

Platforms like Wikimedia Commons and Flickr provide guidance and tools for choosing and applying a license to an image.

- Wikimedia Commons allows you to choose a license through their built-in system, but it is only limited to the licenses that the Wikimedia projects accept.
- Flickr provides a guide on the topic.

## Attribution

This chapter is mainly excerpted from 4.1 Choosing and Applying a CC License by Creative Commons, licensed CC BY 4.0.

- The learning objectives and introductory text are original to this version, and the text has been adapted for a student audience.
- The definition of the commons is from Commons at Wikipedia, licensed CC BY-SA 3.0.

# More Places to Find Images

Under each item, see directions for finding Creative Commons–licensed photos and images, as needed.

- **Age-positive image library**  
This collection of images from the Centre for Aging Better is intended to show “positive and realistic images of over 50s in a bid to challenge negative and stereotypical views of older age.” These images are dedicated to the public domain via the CC0 1.0 dedication; check the guide for more information on using the images.
- **Disabled and Here Collection**  
“This stock library is a disability-led effort to provide free and inclusive images from our own perspective, with photos and illustrations celebrating disabled Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC).” Images are licensed CC BY 4.0; check the Usage Guidelines for more information on using the images.
- **Diversity and inclusion—open collections from across the world**  
“Digitised cultural heritage collections can play an important role in protecting and promoting diversity and inclusion. Explore this selection of material from across the world featuring the cultural heritage of various communities.”
- **Flickr Advanced Search**  
To find Creative Commons–licensed and other rights-free images, select the desired criteria from the drop-down menu on the left. Options include “All creative commons,” “No known copyright restrictions,” and so on.

- **FreeDigitalPhotos.net**  
To download images, you'll need to provide an email address or register, and you may also be asked to watch an ad. See the terms and conditions for details on using images from this site.
- **The Gender Spectrum Collection: Stock Photos Beyond the Binary**  
Created by Broadly and now at VICE.com, "the Gender Spectrum Collection is a stock photo library featuring images of trans and non-binary models that go beyond the clichés. This collection aims to help media better represent members of these communities as people not necessarily defined by their gender identities—people with careers, relationships, talents, passions, and home lives." The images in this collection are all licensed CC BY-NC-ND 4.0; read the guidelines about their use.
- **The Greats**  
This collection provides "remarkably designed campaign materials (posters, social media visuals, postcards and many more) concerning human rights issues to be printed, shared or adapted (non-commercially) and distributed by activists and organizations all across the world, online and offline." Images are licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.
- **Google Images**  
After entering your search terms and getting a gallery of results, click on "Tools" in the menu above the results. Then click on "Usage Rights" and select "Creative Commons licenses" from the drop-down menu to filter the results for Creative Commons–licensed images from Wikimedia, Flickr, and other sites.
- **Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)**  
Check the box next to "Show public domain images only" before entering your keywords in the search bar. For more information on using this site, see the LACMA blog

Unframed.

- Nappy  
“Beautiful photos of Black and Brown people, for free.”  
These images are dedicated to the public domain via the CC0 1.0 dedication.
- National Park Service Multimedia Search  
Use the filters on the left to find photos. Note that only multimedia credited to NPS without any copyright symbol are in the public domain; other photos may have rights reserved.
- NOAA Photo Library  
“The NOAA Photo Library collections reflect NOAA's broad mission of advancing science ‘from the bottom of the ocean to the surface of the Sun.’ [...] The collection includes thousands of weather and space images, hundreds of images of shores and coastal seas, and thousands of marine species images ranging from whales to the most minute plankton.” All images are in the public domain.
- Noun Project  
Noun Project provides two sets of resources: a collection of more than 3 million icons and a “professionally curated collection of authentic, beautiful images that celebrate diversity and represent a more inclusive world.” Icons are available for free download under a CC BY 3.0 license; photos are available for free download under a CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 license. Users need to log in to download resources and may pay to download and use icons and photos without attribution.
- Open Access Artworks (The Met)
- Open Access at the National Gallery of Art  
“The National Gallery of Art has an open access policy for images of works of art in our permanent collection which the Gallery believes to be in the public domain. Images of these works are available for download free of charge for any use, whether commercial or non-commercial.”

- **Open Peeps**  
Use these hand-drawn images by Pablo Stanley to create characters. “The library works like building blocks made of vector arms, legs, and emotions. You can mix these elements to create different Peeps.” These illustrations are dedicated to the public domain via the CC0 1.0 dedication.
- **Pexels**  
“Pexels provides high quality and completely free stock photos licensed under the Pexels license.”
- **Pixabay**  
This repository includes stock photos licensed under the Pixabay license. First results are often sponsored and lead to fee images; skip over these.
- **PIXNIO**  
This repository includes stock photos licensed under the Pixnio license.
- **Smithsonian Collections Search Center**  
Select the filter “Only return results with CC0 media” to search for media in the public domain.
- **Unsplash**  
Unsplash provides high-quality, stylish stock photos taken by photographers around the world. Note that the Unsplash license is different from Creative Commons licenses in that attribution is not required, although it is appreciated. Unsplash maintains a FAQ about using its photographs.
- **What are good resources for finding diverse images of people?**  
This wiki at OEG Connect lists sites where openly licensed or royalty-free diverse images are available. Check the terms of use before using images from any of these sites; not all of them provide openly licensed images.
- **Wikimedia Commons**  
The search bar is in the upper right of the main page. After initiating a search, filter for “Images,” and select the



desired license from the “License” drop-down menu.

## **Attribution**

This appendix is excerpted from the Open Educational Resources at BMCC site by jean amaral, licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# List of Links by Chapter for Print Users

This appendix lists links to the external resources referenced in this book for people using the print version.

## Introduction

- Creative Commons Certificate:  
<https://certificates.creativecommons.org/>
- Cover image attribution
  - Yeh Xintong: <https://unsplash.com/@blsnki>
  - Unsplash (link to image): <https://unsplash.com/photos/hFI4L5iUgy0>

## Why Use Open Images?

- Wikimedia Commons (link to image):  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_Triumph\\_of\\_Death\\_by\\_Pieter\\_Bruegel\\_the\\_Elder.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Triumph_of_Death_by_Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder.jpg)
- Attribution in footnote
  - 2.1 Copyright Basics:  
<https://certificates.creativecommons.org/cccertedu/chapter/2-1-copyright-basics/>
  - Creative Commons: <https://creativecommons.org/>
  - CC BY 4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## What Is Copyright?

- Wikimedia Commons (link to image):  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Liber\\_Floridus\\_Scribe.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Liber_Floridus_Scribe.png)
- At CUNY, students own the copyright to their work:  
<https://guides.cuny.edu/cunyfairuse/faculty>
- Attribution in footnote
  - 2.1 Copyright Basics:  
<https://certificates.creativecommons.org/cccertedu/chapter/2-1-copyright-basics/>
  - Creative Commons: <https://creativecommons.org/>
  - CC BY 4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## What Are CC Licenses?

- Attribution in footnote
  - Anatomy of a CC License:  
<https://learningaboutcc.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2022/07/17/anatomy-of-a-cc-license/>
  - Rachael Nevins: <https://commons.gc.cuny.edu/members/raerae/>
  - CC BY-NC 4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

## What Is the Public Domain?

- *The Public Domain Review*:  
<https://publicdomainreview.org/>
- ORKA – Open Repository Kassel:

<https://orka.bibliothek.uni-kassel.de/viewer/!image/1336039708836/1/-/>

- Creative Commons:  
<https://certificates.creativecommons.org/cccertedu/chapter/2-1-copyright-basics/>
- Attribution in footnote
  - 2.3 The Public Domain:  
<https://certificates.creativecommons.org/cccertedu/chapter/2-3-the-public-domain/>
  - Creative Commons: <https://creativecommons.org/>
  - CC BY 4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## What About Fair Use?

- U.S. Copyright Office: <https://www.copyright.gov/fair-use/>
- Fair Use and Copyright: Students: <https://guides.cuny.edu/cunyfairuse/students>

## Finding Images on Wikimedia Commons

- Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)
- “Helianthus\_annuus2”: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Helianthus\\_annuus2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Helianthus_annuus2.jpg)
- CC BY 4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>
- Picture of the Day: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Picture\\_of\\_the\\_day](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Picture_of_the_day)
- Monthly Photo Challenges:  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Photo\\_challenge](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Photo_challenge)
- Attribution in footnote

- Welcome: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Welcome>
- Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)
- CC BY-SA 3.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

## Finding Images on Flickr

- Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/>
- “Sunflower”: <https://flic.kr/p/YzdiL7>
- CC BY-SA 2.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>
- The Commons or Flickr Commons: <https://www.flickr.com/commons>

## Finding Images from The Met

- Metropolitan Museum of Art: <https://www.metmuseum.org/>
- “Sunflowers”: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436524>
- Open Access Policy: <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/policies-and-documents/open-access>
- *The Public Domain Review* and Rights Labeling on Our Site: <https://publicdomainreview.org/rights-labelling-on-our-site/>
- Provenance Research Project (in footnote): <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/policies-and-documents/provenance-research-project>

## Finding Images on Unsplash

- Unsplash: <https://unsplash.com/>
- Stock photography: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stock\\_photography](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stock_photography)
- Unsplash license: <https://unsplash.com/license>
- “Flower Pose”: <https://unsplash.com/photos/8CSTVoDMEXg>
- Thanuj Mathew: <https://unsplash.com/@thanujmathew>

## Attribution

- “Traveling Photographer”: <https://flic.kr/p/e8RXiK>
- msmmelendez: <https://www.flickr.com/people/msmmelendez/>
- CC BY-NC-ND 2.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>
- “Super Capta”: <https://flic.kr/p/bxNg6z>
- Boxy Brown’s Bling: <https://www.flickr.com/people/32212028@N02/>
- CC BY-NC 2.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>
- Best practices for attribution: [https://wiki.creativecommons.org/wiki/Best\\_practices\\_for\\_attribution](https://wiki.creativecommons.org/wiki/Best_practices_for_attribution)
- Attribution in footnote
  - “Best Practices for Attribution”: <https://pressbooks.cuny.edu/cunypressbooksguide/chapter/best-practices-for-attribution/>
  - CC BY-NC 4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

## Writing Alt Text

- Screen readers: <https://www.afb.org/blindness-and-low-vision/using-technology/assistive-technology-products/screen-readers>
- “WFE003: Jacob”: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/rosenfeldmedia/11496864803/in/album-72157638911360206/>
- Rosenfeld Media: <https://www.flickr.com/people/rosenfeldmedia/>
- CC BY 2.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>
- Alternative Text: <https://webaim.org/techniques/alttext/>

## Contributing to the Commons

- “Harrow Common, Middlesex”:  
<https://collections.britishart.yale.edu/catalog/tms:7725>
- License Chooser: <https://creativecommons.org/choose/>
- Copyright notice: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copyright\\_notice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copyright_notice)
- Marking your work with a CC license:  
[https://wiki.creativecommons.org/wiki/Marking\\_your\\_work\\_with\\_a\\_CC\\_license](https://wiki.creativecommons.org/wiki/Marking_your_work_with_a_CC_license)
- Guide on the topic (from Flickr):  
<https://www.flickrhelp.com/hc/en-us/articles/4404078674324-Change-Your-Photo-s-License-in-Flickr>
- Attributions in footnote
  - 4.1 Choosing and Applying a CC License:  
<https://certificates.creativecommons.org/cccertedu/chapter/4-1-choosing-and-applying-a-cc-license/>
  - Creative Commons: <https://creativecommons.org/>
  - CC BY 4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

- Commons: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commons>
- Wikipedia: <https://www.wikipedia.org/>
- CC BY-SA 3.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

## More Places to Find Images

- Age-positive image library:  
<https://ageingbetter.resourcespace.com/pages/home.php>
  - CC0 1.0: <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/>
  - Guide: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-05/Age-positive-image-library-May-21.pdf>
- Disabled and Here Collection: <https://affecttheverb.com/collection/>
  - CC BY 4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>
  - Usage Guidelines: <https://affecttheverb.com/usage/>
- Diversity and inclusion—open collections from across the world: <https://medium.com/digital-storytelling-festival/diversity-and-inclusion-open-collections-from-across-the-world-e73ac0e304f4>
- Flickr Advanced Search: <https://www.flickr.com/search/advanced/>
- FreeDigitalPhotos.net: <http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/>
  - Terms and conditions: <https://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/terms.php>
- The Gender Spectrum Collection: Stock Photos Beyond the Binary: <https://broadlygenderphotos.vice.com/>
  - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>
  - Guidelines: <https://genderphotos.vice.com/guidelines>



- The Greats: <https://thegreats.co/>
  - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>
- Google Images: <https://images.google.com/>
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA): <https://collections.lacma.org/>
  - Unframed: <http://lacma.wordpress.com/2013/03/14/what-do-cats-have-to-do-with-it-welcome-to-our-new-collections-website/>
- Nappy: <https://nappy.co/>
  - CC0 1.0: <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/>
- National Park Service Multimedia Search: <https://www.nps.gov/media/multimedia-search.htm>
- NOAA Photo Library: <https://www.photolib.noaa.gov/>
- Noun Project: <https://thenounproject.com/>
  - CC BY 3.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>
  - CC BY-NC-ND 2.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>
- Open Access Artworks (The Met): <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search?showOnly=withImage%7CopenAccess&pageSize=0&sortBy=Relevance&sortOrder=asc&searchField=All>
- Open Access at the National Gallery of Art: <https://www.nga.gov/open-access-images.html>
- Open Peeps: <https://www.openpeeps.com/>
  - Pablo Stanley: <https://www.instagram.com/pablostanley/>
  - CC0 1.0: <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/>
- Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/>
  - Pexels license: <https://www.pexels.com/license/>

- Pixabay: <https://pixabay.com/>
  - Pixabay license: <https://pixabay.com/service/license/>
- PIXNIO: <https://pixnio.com/>
  - Pixnio license: <https://pixnio.com/license>
- Smithsonian Collections Search Center:  
<https://collections.si.edu/search/gallery.htm>
- Unsplash: <https://unsplash.com/>
  - Unsplash license: <https://unsplash.com/license>
  - FAQ about using its photographs:  
<https://help.unsplash.com/en/collections/1463188-unsplash-license>
- What are good resources for finding diverse images of people? <https://connect.oeglobal.org/t/what-are-good-resources-for-finding-diverse-images-of-people/1521>
- Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)
- Attribution in footnotes
  - Open Educational Resources at BMCC site:  
<https://openlab.bmcc.cuny.edu/oer/find-oer/open-and-zero-cost-multimedia/>
  - CC BY-NC 4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

# About the Author

Rachael Nevins is currently a student in the Graduate School of Library and Information Studies at Queens College and has worked on open educational resources with CUNY's Office of Library Services and at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. She has more than two decades of experience designing, writing, and editing both print and online educational materials for students in K-12 and beyond. On and off through the years since 2004, she has maintained a blog, for which she has done many searches for openly licensed and public domain images; *The Variegated Life* is now available via Substack.