

MEDIA/PUBLISHING

Does your book cover pass the 7-second test?

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How much time do you spend looking at each book while browsing in a bookstore?

When readers pick up a book, they will usually scan it for just a few seconds before they decide whether they are interested. About seven seconds, to be precise.

If a cover appeals to readers at a glance, they will pick it up, look at the front and back covers, and either put it down or seriously consider buying it.

Industry insiders call this the seven-second test.

For successful books, hours of work go into making those seven seconds count, and major publishing houses know this. They have decades of experience crafting elegant covers that engage readers, and it pays off to use their time-tested methods.

A quality cover will signal not only to readers, but also to bookstores that they can expect a high-quality book.

Experienced designers have learned how to make the most of this brief window of opportunity.

Five guidelines for passing the seven-second test

Genre

While authors may already have a vision of what they want their cover to include, genres have conventions that act as visual cues for readers, whether they are conscious of it or not.

For example, science fiction and fantasy book covers often combine fantastical content with a realistic illustration style, and even favor specific choices such as all-caps titles and blue or amber coloring.

Non-fiction, on the other hand, often uses a clever or thought-provoking image to engage readers on a cerebral level.

Even if readers do not realize they are looking for these signals, they will notice that your book looks similar to

others they have read and enjoyed.

Emotion

A cover should also spark emotion.

Fiction covers should immediately trigger a reaction in readers, with color, action and affecting imagery.

It is less about explaining your plot, and more about giving readers a sense of how your book will make them feel.

Thumbnail

For digital sales, it is increasingly important that a cover design is equally effective as a thumbnail image.

On digital platforms, readers will first view a cover in a reduced size before, hopefully, clicking on it and seeing the full-size version.

A clear and readable book title, with solid or vividly contrasting colors, will be most effective in a thumbnail. This also connects to our next point about simplicity and clarity.

Simple

Authors may have details in mind that seem important to include on a cover. But one of the most common mistakes is to try to include too much hidden meaning, making it too busy and visually unappealing.

Remember, the function of a book cover is more to draw new readers than to impress readers who have finished a book with clever references to the content.

Simple is good. Being visually engaging is more important than being descriptive.

Unique

Finally, if you are going to use stock art, do the research to make sure it has not been used for other book covers or other graphics.

Doing a simple [search engine image search](#) will help.

With so many books published in the digital era, you want to stand out and avoid recycling an image that readers will see elsewhere.

Cover design options

There were more than 1 million books self-published in 2017, using a range of options available to authors for designing a book cover.

But the rule of thumb here is that you will usually get exactly what you pay for.

DIY

Many retailers offer a simple cover template generator that is free to use.

But with this method, you run a serious risk of adding your book to the flood of generic-looking self-published books already out there, with a lackluster design that screams "homemade."

With this method, your design choices will be limited in aspects like color and font, and with thousands of other authors using the same tools, your book will probably look similar to theirs.

Graphic designer

Hiring a general graphic designer is a common choice for book covers.

An entry-level graphic designer will cost between \$100 and \$400.

Usually they have some design experience, but will not have a top bestseller under their belt.

Often, they will offer just one cover option with stock art that could be in use for multiple books or other projects.

The quality will usually be much higher than with a template, but often will not make the most of the seven seconds you will have to win over readers.

Book cover designer

A senior designer or art director at a major publishing knows what it takes to grab readers' attention and those seven seconds. They will do research, using a cover information sheet to learn the details of a book such as its elevator pitch, a sense of the target audience, and how to fit the cover design into a broader marketing plan.

The designer is also much more likely to take the time to read portions of the book itself. He or she may work on the project for several weeks, but ultimately offer three to five cover options and even a chance for some minor revisions.

A designer who has worked for a major publisher will run \$2,800 or more, and an art director for a major publishing house could cost upwards of \$4,000.

When working with a professional book cover designer, authors can also hire a photographer and everyone they need for a photo shoot to commission a unique piece of artwork exclusively for their book.

In any case, do the research to understand the copyright, and whether the license agreement entitles you to use the image as you want, the way you want.

WHATEVER DESIGN option you choose, make sure you use proven visual tools to make a simple and direct appeal to your target audience if you want to win them over in those seven seconds.

*Tim McConnehey is founder/CEO of **Izzard Ink**, a Salt Lake City, UT-based publisher and one-stop-shop for authors that provides services such as editing, cover design, layout and illustrations, printing, audiobook recording and ghost writing.*

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