

Creating Book Covers That Sell!

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Hi. I'm Karlene Browning, a.k.a. Inksplasher. I've been in the publishing industry for most of my adult life. I've done everything from editing to typesetting to e-book formatting. I've even built websites for authors. I've also made book covers for about the last 20 years, and that's what this class is about. So let's get right to it.

Hi. Welcome to the class "Creating Book Covers That Sell." We're going to look at examples of great book covers and talk about what makes them good so that we can recognize a good book cover when we see one, and then we will look at the steps to building a great book cover.

This is a very visual class, and we have to go through the concepts quickly, so don't worry about taking a lot of notes. Just watch to get a feel for the topic. At the end of this class, I will tell you how to get free access to the extended version of this course. So let's get started.

How important is a good book cover? Well, the adage "don't judge a book by its cover" had to come from somewhere, right? But the truth is we do judge books by their covers. In today's highly competitive book market, we want people to judge our covers because that is what makes our book stand out from the crowd. It's what gets the reader's attention first.

Your front cover is the number one most important marketing and promotional tool for your book. This is what will grab your readers eye, stop them in their tracks, and make them pick up your book.

What do readers do after they pick up your book? They turn it over and read the second most important marketing and promotional tool, the back cover. With so much weight carried by your book cover, you really need to make it count. So what do good book covers have in common? They use the building blocks of cover design--color, imagery, typography, and layout--to create a visual metaphor that conveys the core message of your book and intrigues your target reader.

One quick glance at a fiction cover should indicate the genre, the age of the target reader, the tone and emotion the story will evoke, and the overall concept.

Nonfiction covers should reflect the core message of the book. This message may be communicated using a visual metaphor, like this compass, or by using type style and placement to grab attention. It should also indicate the problem the book will solve, what the reader will learn, and a final takeaway point.

Whether fiction or nonfiction, your cover should provide a clue as to what your book is about in a way that will attract your target reader. You've heard of using hooks at the beginning of your story or chapter, right? Well, your cover is the hook for your entire book. A good one sells itself.

Let's look at a few covers to see how they do the job of attracting their target audience. On this cover there's a fashionable woman in bright red heels. The title is in red, and there's a little heart at the end of the word "four." Definitely contemporary romance. The embracing couple on this cover lets us know this is another romance, but their outfits and the background let us know it's historical romance.

The clothing and the sword on this cover let you know it's probably fantasy. But, how old is the target reader? The girl looks like a teenager, so young adult.

Here's the last one. Pretty definitely suspense.

When you design your cover with the target reader in mind, those readers who want that type of story will grab them up. Now let's look at some covers that weren't targeted quite right.

These are covers I created for indie author Julie Coulter Bellon. They each have a compelling central image, they use color and type well, the layout is fine, and they work reasonably well as a series. One of these covers even won an award. So what's wrong with them? Well, what genre are they? The first two definitely have a military vibe. But the next two make me think, "Serial killer?" And who is the target reader? The first two seem to target male readers, while the second two seem to be aimed more at women.

If the test of a good cover is does it attract its target reader, then these kind of give me some concern because this series is actually romantic suspense. The books are clean, heavy on the romance with a suspenseful story as the backdrop. The target readers are women ages 24 to 45. Can you see how the covers might not hit that target on the nose?

A sort of okay cover leads to sort of okay sales. Julie was selling well enough as an indie author, better than she was when she was with a small press, and the covers aren't horrible. They just didn't target as well as they could. A few years later, Julie had new covers created. Ta-da! These covers are perfect. Can you see the difference? Just look at them. They scream romantic suspense, and the images connect the books as a series so much better. The result of these new covers was her sales shot up.

I asked Julie if she could share the impact her new covers had on sales. She said, "The year I redid my covers was the first year I made a five-figure income from my books and I made the Amazon best-seller list. Having an eye-catching cover that was dead on with my readership made all the difference. The older covers were fine, but targeting my readers is crucial."

Let's move on to actually building a book cover. What do you put on the front cover, the back cover, and the spine? Here's a layout tip. I've seen this making the social media rounds, and it's true. Our eyes are trained to read top to bottom, and they tend to go to the largest type first. Always put the most important information in the largest type and usually at the top of your cover.

Let's break down the parts of a cover. As an example, I will be using "Omega Alpha" by Kristen Landon.

For your front cover, start with a compelling image that conveys a sense of the tone and content of your book. We wanted to cover to convey the fear and suspense of a young teen running away from something bad toward something unknown.

We didn't want anything too violent because it's an upper middle grade book for ages 10 to 14. The running boy gives a sense of action and adventure, and the spookiness of the trees give it a feeling of suspense.

Next, we add the title. This is a stand-alone story by an author who has two other books out, but it's been a while since her last book was published, so sales won't be powered by her name. Therefore, the title is our most important information. So we want it large and near the top.

The font you choose for your title should be easily readable and reflect the genre or emotion of the story. A pink flowing script font would not be a good choice for this cover. The holes in this font add to the feeling of instability.

Next is the author name. Traditionally, the author name goes at the bottom of the cover in a slightly smaller type than the title, often using a contrasting but complementary font.

Only big sellers like, say, James Patterson or Stephen King would have their name at the top in a font that's bigger than the title. But with the upsurge of indie authors and graphic designers with little to no training in cover design tradition, the location of the author name has become more fluid. It can be either at the bottom or the top of the cover. Kristen's name is at the bottom in smaller type because from a marketing standpoint, it is less important than the title.

Make the size and placement of the title and author name relative to its importance in attracting the reader. Also make sure the size and the placement works well with the image. On this cover, the title and author name box in the running boy, making it feel constricted and confined.

If it fits in your layout, you can include a tagline or an endorsement on the front cover. On this cover, we put a short tag line up above the title. It's the smallest font on the cover, but being at the top gives it a little more weight.

Some covers put the tagline along the side of the image, but we didn't want to distract from the tunnel-like feeling of this cover. If someday this book wins an award, we could put that over on the side where the yellow circle is. I don't mind losing a bit of that tunnel feeling for an award.

If you're only doing an e-book, you're done now. But before we move on to the back cover for print, let's look at some variations on front covers.

Are you a hugely popular author? Do your fans see your name on the cover and grab a copy? If so, then your name sells the book, and that's the most important thing on the cover. In fact, for some authors, it is the only important thing on the front. Titles and images are there just so you can tell the books apart and don't end up buying the same book twice.

While I like Stephen King's cover, I think Danielle Steel's cover is a little boring. But if you're a big name, you can do whatever you want, or in this case, whatever the publisher wants.

What if you've got a series? You want to make sure the readers can tell that the book is part of a series. For these books by J. Scott Savage, they've drawn attention to the series title by turning it into a graphic element that frames the cover image.

In this series by Cheree Alsop, they flipped it. The title is the largest text on the cover, but they've placed it near the bottom because that works better with the image. The series name is

the smallest text, but it's placed at the top to draw attention, and it's set off by a banner to help it stand out.

Don't be afraid to get creative. But make it very clear to the reader which piece of text is what. For example, looking at this, what would you assume is the title?

I went with "Geeked Out" because it's the largest font and right in the center of the cover. "A Lame New World" is just below that, so I thought that was the series name. But when the second book came out, I realized I was wrong. The Geeked Out series is up at the top, and the title is in the middle of the cover. When you change things around like this, it can invite confusion.

Just to be clear, despite the confusion, I still love these covers. The large Geeked Out type on the first cover is so incredibly clever and fun, I can see why they'd want it front and center of the front book, and these colors scream middle-grade humor.

If you are creating a print book, the back cover is the second most important marketing space. What does this back cover tell you about the book? Absolutely nothing. Don't leave the back of your book blank. I see a lot of blank backs on books by first-time indie authors. This space is much too precious to waste.

At the very least put a short tagline or pull quote here at the top.

Then put your book description here and your website address here as a subtle encouragement to readers to come find out more about you and your other books.

Back covers can be a simple solid color behind your text, like this one, or you can create a pattern, or use an image that coordinates with the front, or even create a full wraparound image that starts on the front cover, goes around the spine, and over the back.

For "Omega Alpha," we used an image of the forest from the front of the book as the back cover. It's a different angle, but it still coordinates very well.

Here's our finished back cover for "Omega Alpha" with the marketing material added. There's the tagline at the very top in a larger font because it's the most important piece. This is a different tagline than the one used on the front of the book.

Then we added a visual icon to separate the tagline from the book description. This toxic waste symbol is repeated inside the book on the chapter pages and also used as scene dividers.

This is the book description. Ours is the same as the description we put on Amazon.

This white box is where the ISBN number and bar code will go. This is usually added by the printer, especially if you're doing print on demand through Amazon or IngramSpark, but you will want to leave a space for it.

This dark space is where my publishing logo should go. But we were rushing this to press to have it available for the launch, and, whoops, I forgot.

Takeaway even when you've been doing this for many, many years: sometimes things slip through. But if you're an indie author doing print on demand, it's an easy fix.

Now let's look at the spine of your book. The physical purpose of the spine is to connect the front cover to the back cover and to hold all the pages in place.

But it also identifies the book when it's shelved with the spine facing out, as is the case in libraries, bookstores, and on personal bookshelves. An easy to read spine will help readers find your book.

Some books are too thin for text on the spine, and that's okay. But if you have a spine large enough for type, there are only two things that must go on it, and the only rule is readability.

A spine must have the title of the book on it. A standard spine will place the text sideways on the spine with the first word of the title at the top. The title has the largest font size. It also needs the author's name. Traditional placement is below the title closer to the bottom of the spine. Turn it to run the same direction as the title. This text is usually a little smaller and often a different font.

There is a third item that I highly recommend on the spine and I always put on one of mine, and that is the publisher's name or logo. If you are self-published and haven't formed your own publishing company, you can leave that off or use a dingbat or icon in place of a logo.

The reason I recommend this is mostly for libraries. Libraries put a label on the spine. I try to leave about a half inch of space for that label, and I push the author name up a bit. If you have a logo or icon there, it won't matter if the label covers it, but it will keep it from looking weird if there is no label there.

As you can see from this group of spines, you can get creative. Just make sure they're easy to read. You can put the author name at the top or the title at the top or line them up however you like. If your spine is wide enough, you can also include other graphic elements. We will look at some of those ideas in a minute.

Now that we've covered the basics of book cover design, let's look at some covers that pull it all together in interesting and creative ways.

These covers use a complete wraparound image where part of the image is on the front cover and part on the back with the spine included.

These two covers aren't wraparounds, but they have cropped, flipped, or resized the front cover art and added it to the back to make it feel like a wraparound.

This bottom left cover uses elements from the front, like the textured strip and the sword, to make the front and back covers feel connected.

At first glance, this cover on the bottom right uses two seemingly unrelated images. But if you read the book description, you will understand why. And it works. I like it.

Here are examples of creative title placement. In each case, the title is placed to accentuate or coordinate with the cover image. On the left, the title is at the top and centered with the image of the two laptops. This creates a funnel drawing your eye from top to bottom. The middle cover puts the title right smack in the middle of the image, and it works wonderfully.

The cover on the right uses the text and some graphic elements to create a frame for the main image. In each one, the image and the title placement support each other.

You can be just as creative with the placement of the author's name. On the left, the image is the focal point with the title, a graphic element, a best seller alert, and then the author name drawing the eye down. The middle book has a much larger author name up at the top with the smaller title just below it. Again, this one draws your eye down to the image. And the book on the right is just downright creative, turning both the title and author name sideways and placing them near the spine. Again, the text placement and the image work together perfectly.

Let's look at some nonfiction covers. On the left, the title is in the bottom third in red. The subtitle is smaller and placed just below the title, giving it the feeling of being one continuous

thought. The middle book isn't anything fancy, but that yellow banner with the subtitle draws your eye straight to it. On the right, we see another sideways text placement with the very large title running sideways by the spine.

An award, the subtitle, and author name are off to the right side of the cover looking like a newspaper column.

Once you have your image title and author name coordinated together, you can add on some extras. The book on the left shows an alternate placement for a tagline, just below the title. On the right, we have a short endorsement at the very top.

Here the book on the left has a USA bestseller status in that gray circle. On the right, there's an award in the top left, plus a New York Times bestseller status in a stripe along the outer edge.

Be creative on your backs, too. The book on the left uses elements from the front cover to frame the text on the back. The one on the right uses an entirely different image from what is on the front cover, but it continues the wedding theme. And I love the way the type curves to fit the skirt on the bridal dress.

This back cover has added images of the other two books in the series. They've also added a bunch of social media icons and a QR code. Personally, I think this is a little busy, and really, it's not like you can tap those social media icons and go anywhere. But the series covers and QR code are cool.

This nonfiction back cover is filled with endorsements, one after the other. I wouldn't recommend this for fiction covers, but you often see it on nonfiction as a way of establishing authority on their topic.

Here, they've used color and the edge of the compass image from the front to add interest. Who would have thought that a bunch of endorsements could look pretty?

This book has a headshot and author bio on the back. This is most often seen on nonfiction covers as well to help establish the author's credentials.

Here are some creatively designed spines. If your spine is wide enough, you can include things like the series name and number, a New York Times bestseller banner, or a graphic element from the front of the book.

As you can see, almost anything can be included. Just make sure it's easy to read. Now, I know I'm not giving you enough time to really look at and evaluate these images, but they will be included in the free content course.

Let's talk images. You have two options for cover art: original art, which you commission or create yourself, or stock images purchased from a stock photo site. There's not a right or wrong, but there are pros and cons to both. Either way, you need to start with a large high resolution image that is suitable for print.

Original artwork is awesome. You commission a photographer or an artist and pay them a work-for-hire fee. The artwork is created especially for your book exactly the way you want it. Because it is a unique piece of art, you are guaranteed that no book will ever have a cover like yours.

Unfortunately, original art can be expensive. A photographer charges for their time plus model and accessory expenses. The cost of original drawings or paintings depends upon the skill and reputation of the artist.

Sometimes you can find existing artwork and pay a licensing fee to use it as your cover. The cost for this varies widely, but it is usually less costly than having an original drawing created from scratch.

Now you might think you can illustrate the cover yourself or hire a friend or family member. And maybe you can. If they are a professional artist and if they understand what's needed for book covers. Not all excellent artwork makes a good book cover. Also be very careful when hiring nonprofessionals because a poorly done illustration is often worse than no illustration at all.

High-quality stock photos and illustrations are easier to find and usually much less expensive. You find them on stock photo sites where you pay per image or get a subscription that lets you download a certain number of images per month.

Another positive for stock images is what you see is what you get. There is no guessing as to the quality of the final image as there is when you hire someone to do an original illustration. The downside to stock images is you run the risk of having other books out there with the same cover.

With the advent of stock image sites, some graphic designers create premade covers. They put together the image and fonts in a mock cover, and you purchase the cover, and they customize it with your title and author name.

Now let's look at whether you should create your book covers yourself or if it makes sense to hire a cover designer to do it for you.

20 years ago when I first started, not everyone had the computers and software to create and publish their own books or book covers. That has changed. As computers became a household item and software became more widely available, it became possible for authors to publish outside of the traditional publishing houses.

With access to computers and software, whether or not you do it yourself became a question of time versus money. You made your choice based on what you had the most of.

But now there are so many inexpensive graphic manipulation programs and apps plus designers doing the less expensive premade covers, it's now become a choice between talent-- which includes the time and the resources to buy and learn the software and the basics of typography and layout-- and temperament, which is whether you want to be bothered learning to do it yourself. You have to ask yourself, "Where do you want to spend your time--learning a new skill or writing more books?"

Here's a very quick breakdown of cost that includes time and money for do-it-yourself versus outsourcing to a designer.

If you do it yourself, you'll need some type of image manipulation software to resize, recolor, delete, add, and layer your cover images. Photoshop is considered the industry standard, but it's also very complex and very pricey.

There are so many other options to consider, and these are just a few. Your best option is to ask for recommendations from friends because then they can help you with the learning curve if you get stuck.

Next, you will need to learn the software you've chosen. The more complex it is, the more time it takes. You will also need to learn the basics of design layout.

You will want to spend more time looking at the current best sellers in your genre to see what's popular. Yes, there are trends in book cover design, layout, and even the colors used. You want to create a cover that will fit in with those other books but that is also unique in some way.

Once you have an idea of what you want, you will need to find your images and fonts. This can take a lot of time. Even though stock images can be as low as \$1 apiece with some subscriptions, you will still probably need several images. And some of the best images are very pricey, up to \$100 per image or more. If you want original art, you can expect it to start at \$250 for something simple and go up from there.

Once you've collected everything, it takes time to build the cover, especially if you are combining and blending images.

If you decide to hire a designer, you don't have to worry about software or learning how to do design and layout. You still have to find a designer, and that takes some time to research as well, asking your author groups who they recommend.

You will also still need to do your best seller research. And if you're lucky, you can find a premade cover for as little as \$25 if you only need it for an ebook. A print cover will be more. If you want a more customized cover, the prices go up. A designer will usually make up to three covers for you to choose from.

The downside to outsourcing is that some designers are booked several months out. So you'll want to get started on that cover as soon as you have an idea of what your book is about.

So how do you decide? If you like tech things and learning new skills and you think designing a book cover would be fun, by all means, go for it. But if you're doing your own because you think that will save you money, I suggest you go the premade route.

I've been designing book covers for over 20 years. I own Photoshop. I know how to use it. I have stock image accounts, and I've learned the principles of book cover design. But when it was time to publish "Omega Alpha," I didn't make the cover because my time was better spent doing the other publishing tasks for this book.

So I Googled middle grade premade covers, and I found Cover Quill, and she had premade ebook covers for \$35. However, they weren't perfect. In the original cover, there was a shadowy figure standing there in the center.

But she had another premade cover with a much different background that had the running boy with the red coat, and she was happy to swap them out for a small fee.

I also needed this as a full wrap because we were doing a paperback cover. All together, it cost me \$110, and it saved me hours and hours of research and looking through stock photos.

I can't guarantee the prices will be this good all the time, but if you find several designers who do premade covers in your genre and you keep a close eye on what they're listing, you can generally save both time and money and get a cover you love.

Now, we're running out of time, so I want to remind you about my extended course "Creating Book Covers That Sell." It goes into much more detail on everything we've covered today, plus some topics I haven't even mentioned. It also includes downloadable checklists and resources, and you can access it free.

Thank you for attending this class. I hope you found this short overview on book covers helpful. Give me just a second to close out of this and bring up the information on the free course.

For those of you attending this class at the LDSPMA conference, whether watching it live or on replay, I'm offering you free access to an extended version of "Book Covers That Sell." Go to my website www.inksplasher.com and click on the courses tab.

You will need to create an account. Follow the instructions as if you are going to purchase the course. Before checking out, enter the coupon code BCLDSPMA20, all in capital letters. This code expires November 1, 2020.

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