UNESCO Publishing

United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Guidelines for Book Cover Design

DO

- ➢ **Plan ahead.** Designing a cover is a long process, requiring preparation, consultations and numerous drafts and adjustments. Start planning and budgeting from the beginning of your writing project.

- ➢ **Hire a graphic designer.** You will save time and have a cover that is professional and can withstand comparison with the competition.

- ➢ **Prioritize your information.** Not everything appearing on your cover is equally important.

- ➢ **Consider buying in photos from image banks.** This way you can be sure of getting photos of high enough technical quality.

- ➢ **Integrate gender dimension** in the design of your cover. If the context of the publication is suitable, prefer an illustration including girls or women for example.

DON'T

- ➢ **Overload your cover.** Mosaics, photomontages and complex typography should be absolutely avoided.

- ➢ **Decide alone.** It takes creativity to design a cover, so you need to make sure that those involved understand and approve your choices.

- ➢ **Put lots of detail** on the cover in an attempt to show all the ideas contained in the book.

- ➢ **Set the style** of the cover to suit your own personal tastes.

This guide is intended as a tool to assist with the process of designing of a book cover. It is aimed at programme specialists responsible for planning publications.

As a step-by-step guide, it will enable you to:

- ✓ identify the key factors in a high quality cover, and
- ✓ select the information to give the graphic designer to ensure their proposals meet your expectations.

Designing your own book cover is a risky exercise. **It is best left to a professional**.

By hiring a graphic designer, you will get a professional cover and be able to spend your time on the parts you can do better yourself. The graphic designer can also design an internal page layout that visually relates to the cover, for instance by harmonizing the pages and chapters.

A beautiful cover – yes, but why?

"A person spends about eight seconds looking at the front cover of a book"
Wall Street Journal study

This means you have very little time to make an impact.

The cover is the reader's first contact with the book. It is what sparks their curiosity, and one of the best tools you have to promote your book.

The cover of a book comprises not just the front cover but is a set of elements that also includes the back cover and the spine (edge), and less frequently an inside cover and an inside back cover where the print is double-sided.
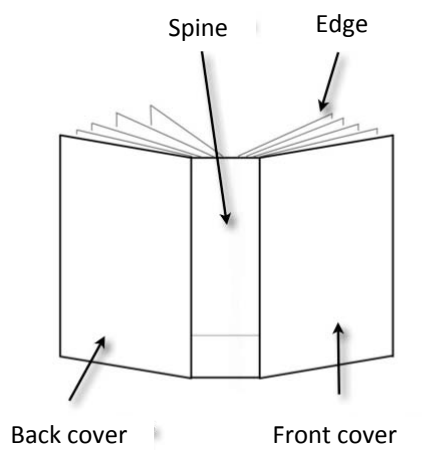
A good cover conveys the essence of the book. It is readable, and its message is clear. It is also aesthetically appealing. Designing an effective front cover requires preparation and several drafts. This is why you should start considering its design at the outset of your writing project. Working on it as you go along will enable you to adjust the design and obtain the necessary sign-offs.

Here are some pointers to help you with this.

The design process can be summed up in two stages: the preparatory phase and the graphic design.

1. The preparatory meeting sets out the scope of your project (objectives, readership, constraints and resources) and uses graphic research to decide on the visual ambiance that sets the scene for the reader. At the end of this stage, you should draw up a document (brief) that sets out all this information for the graphic designer.

2. The graphic design gives form to the cover design. The professional designer must draw up a number of graphic approaches to meet your expectations, based on the document produced earlier. The more relevant information that document contains, the more targeted the creative response will be.

Stage one: the preparatory meeting

A preparatory meeting lays the foundations the graphic designer can use to pursue his or her creative research. It will lead to a reference document for all decisions concerning the graphics, aesthetics or ergonomics of the publication.

You should know how to put together a detailed presentation document based on objective criteria and reasoned choices. You will need guidance and stimulus here to formulate your ideas.

The **programme specialist, the Publications Officer** in your Sector, **DPI/PBM** and **MSS/CLD** must all be present at this preparatory meeting. If your partner or joint publisher is involved in the decision-making process, now is the time to bring them in.

Start the meeting by deciding on the following aspects:

1. The scope of your project

1.1 Who is this aimed at?

Designs should not be created to suit our personal tastes. The message, tone, graphics, colour code, iconography and typography used must all be weighed up and justified for their impact on your ultimate readership.

→ Whom are you aiming to reach? Scientists, academics, politicians or younger readers?
→ What are the characteristics of your target public? What are their expectations, and how do they perceive the topic?
→ What is the geographical range of your publication: local, regional or international?
→ Are you considering different language versions?

1.2 What is your message?

The graphic designer will not read the entire publication. To guide his or her visual and typographical choices, summarize its content in a few lines and select five to ten key words that express the general idea and the emotional response you want to produce.

→ What is the unifying thread in your narrative? What is the spirit of the book? What lesson or message do you want to convey to your reader?

1.3 Is it a series or a one-off publication?

→ Is your publication part of a series or collection? Is it an existing or new collection? Now is the time to think of the title of the collection. It will be an integral part of the graphics of the cover, so you need to position it at the outset to strike the right balance with its visual weight.

→ On the other hand, is it a first edition or a re-issue? In the case of an update, it can be helpful to capitalize on the first version by incorporating one of the visual elements from the previous cover, while still making a clear distinction between them.

→ Think about the variations between publications in a single collection. To show that the publications in a single series belong together but make it easy to tell them apart, you can have:

- One graphic feature that is common to all the covers

- One single visual, with different colour variations
- Different visuals that vary within the same chromatic range
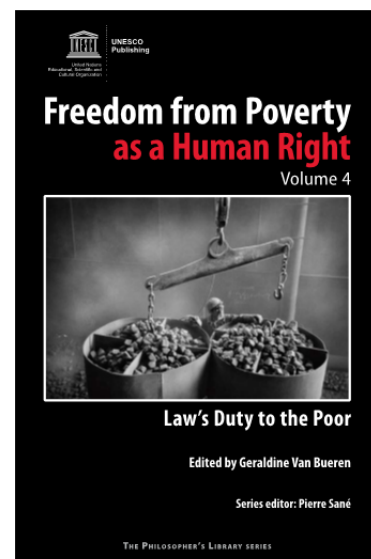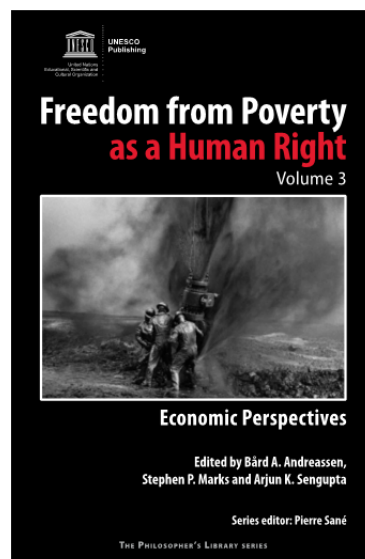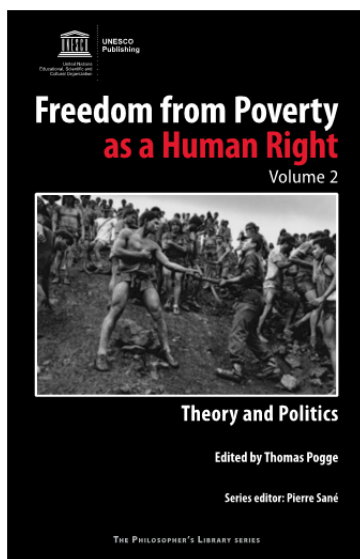
1.4 What are your constraints?

These can be:

➔ **Graphic**: Are there graphics guidelines associated with the collection, or does your partner have a house style? To what extent must the cover comply with these? Are certain colours prohibited or to be avoided?

➔ **Technical:** How much time do you have? Is there a format imposed by your partner? Are you considering other language versions? Certain languages can have an impact on the choice of images, typography, etc. For example, bear in mind that in Arabic, the text reads from right to left.

➔ **Budgetary**: What budget do you have available for the graphic design of your cover? Some designs or layouts can drive up the costs of production.

1.5 What will be the format of your publication?

➔ Which category does your publication belong to? Is it a report, or a practical guide?

For more information, consult the reference document: [Strategizing publications for impact](#).

It is recommended to simplify and harmonize UNESCO publication formats as much as possible, namely:

- Category 1 – Report formats: 210 x 280 mm
- Categories 2 and 3 – Book formats: 150 x 230 mm
- Paperback formats: 125 x 190 mm
- "Coffee table" formats: 240 x 300 mm - portrait (French-style) or landscape (Italian-style)

1.6 What will be the digital formats of the publication?

Right from the conception of your publication, you should bear in mind that the book might also be published in a non-paper version. This has technical implications in terms of the choice of illustrations, the book's page layout and so on. New guidelines will be prepared separately on electronic publishing including the relative pertinence of different electronic formats.

2. The visual ambiance of your cover

Choices of colour, illustration and title should not be made lightly. The elements of the cover must be persuasive and must make people want to read your publication.

You have defined the scope of your project and you know your readership. Now you must decide on the visual ambiance that will set the scene for your reader. It must, therefore, be in line with the expectations of your target public.

To do this, you need to look at and study what is being done around you.

2.1 Graphic research

→ Look for sources of inspiration to give you ideas. Use other people's experience and explore what has been done in the past. Look at the covers of books from your section/division/sector.

→ Seek out publications with a similar theme to yours, take a close look at their features, and find out how the texts and images illustrate the subject (for instance on Amazon).

2.2 Choice of title

How long should the title be, and how much space is allocated for it? Your publication needs an incisive and revealing title that will work for it.

→ A good title should above all be significant. Consider the content of your work and adjust your title accordingly. But do not reveal too much: the reader should be intrigued enough to want to read the whole thing. If your book is aimed at a specific target, address your message directly to your readers.

→ Sometimes a title comes to your mind from the start. But then, during the writing, the structure and the theme are changing and the title does not really reflect the content of the publication anymore. Once the manuscript is complete consider a more suitable title if necessary.

→ The title should not be too long. A short title leaves more imagination in the reader's head. Remember that a title must be able to read easily, specially on the internet where the covers are thumbnails.

→ It is important to keep the same tone. Your title should both reflect the theme of the publication, but also the shape, style and tone.

→ Finally, make sure your title does not exist! In addition to confusion, it reveals a lack of originality. A search on Google and you will be quickly set!

The series title can sometimes be given more importance than the actual title.
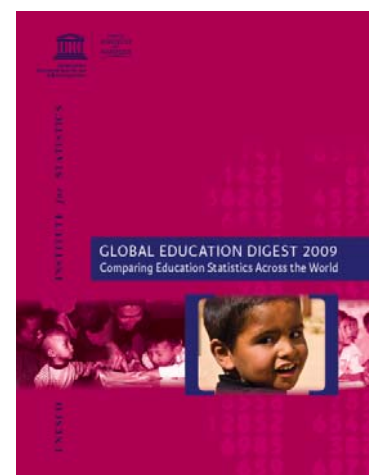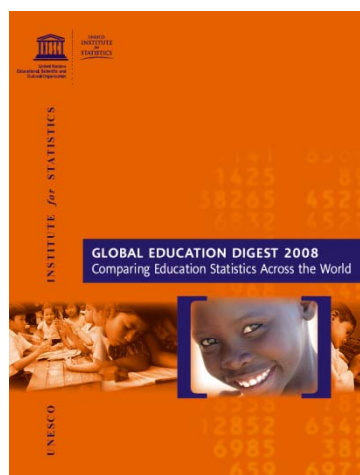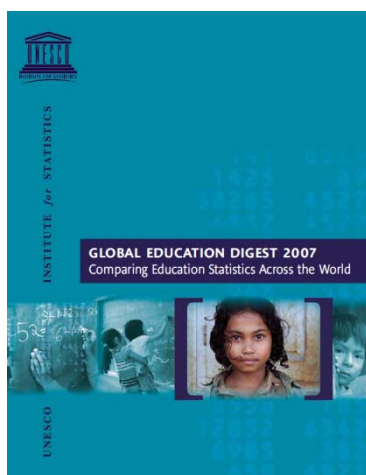
You can use the typography to convey your message. A cover can be made powerful and attractive simply by the use made of typography: embedding an image in the typography of the title, making the characters in the typeface into an illustration, and so on.
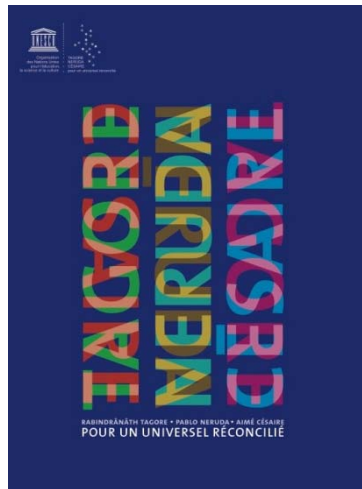
2.3 Photos and illustration

To make your cover attractive, it is advisable to illustrate it with a visual. An image is a way of conveying atmosphere, desire, feeling, concept, or theme. Composition, lighting and original framing are essential elements in choosing a photo. You can use any kind of visual (photo, drawing or painting), full page or as a vignette. The main thing is for your title to be clearly legible (see the section on Legibility, page 9).

→ Make a first selection of images by a random trawl of the Internet, for instance the "Pins" on Pinterest. Ethnic patterns on a fabric, a colourful background to a photo or a magazine cover can give you a clear idea of the atmosphere you want to create.

→ Make a list of what you don't want: any blue-coloured visual, or image that is too sad or pessimistic, or a depiction of a particular community that would limit the scope of your message.

→ If you already have a selection of photos, make sure they are of high enough technical quality (300 dpi for the actual print size you want) before sending them to the graphic designer.

→ Go for strong visuals. Composition, colour and style can sometimes make all the difference.
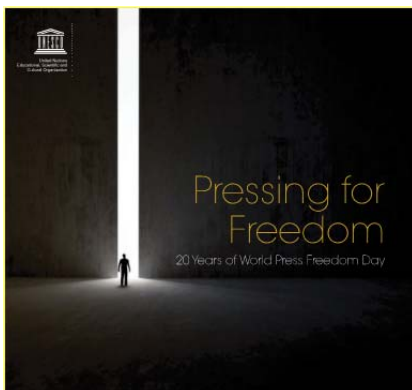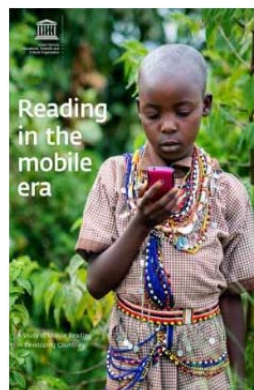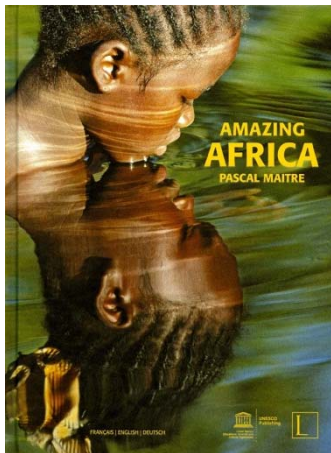
<u>Composition</u> <u>Colour</u> <u>Style</u>

→ Above all, don't overload your cover. **Avoid mosaics**. One single image is preferable to a composition of five images (however strong they may be individually). Soberness often makes for better legibility and visual ease. Clarity enhances the power of the image.

→ Steer clear of visuals that are too obvious. Instead, go for comparisons, metaphors or abstraction, for instance. Conveying a feeling can be much more powerful than a mere visual rendering of the content.

→ Illustration can be an interesting alternative to photography, bringing a different character and personality to the publication (and that includes illustrations found in image banks).
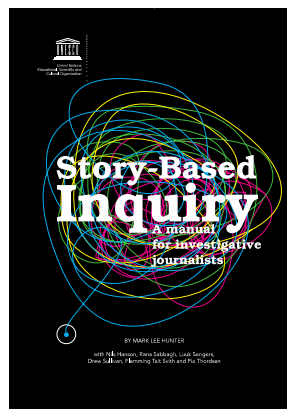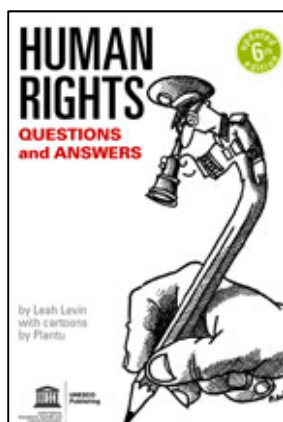
→ Don't forget to state the credits for the photos on the copyright notices page, or even on the back cover.

Beware of:

- **Over-complex photomontages**: photos often have different viewpoints, saturation levels and styles, and putting these together can give an impression of amateurishness that undermines the professional quality of the content.

- **Copyright**: not all the images you find on the Internet are copyright free. First search the photo databases that are free of charge and free of copyright, such as www.photo-libre.fr; www.bajstock.com; http://wir.free.fr/Wir; http://fr.fotolia.com/.

Using maps: it is not advisable to use too clear and precise a geographical representation. If you absolutely must indicate the geographical area, you can use effects or alternatives: blurring, a colour range that corresponds to a country's national flag or symbol, a symbolic landscape, and so on. Using maps always carries risks. To reduce them, use only maps from reliable sources and check that they are still up to date at the time of publication of the book. If your publication covers several territories or peoples, make sure, as much as possible, that they are equally represented in your illustration.
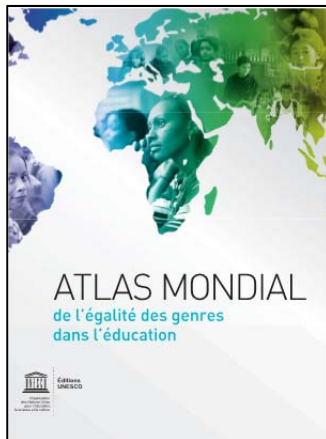
- **Visual clichés** from the image banks: be careful here, as many copyright-free photos have been used a number of times for different subjects and no longer look very original. If you choose a visual of this kind, be inventive and have graphic work done on the photo, maybe by incorporating part of photo into a simplified background, or by the use of typography. Remember: buying photos from image banks is a sure way of securing quality images (the average investment is US$500). If you decide to work with **MSS/CLD**, you will be given access to a subscription to Shutterstock.

- **The quality of your photos:** don't confuse technical quality with artistic quality. Some photos will never have enough "artistic" quality to be used on a front cover.
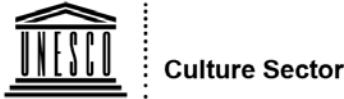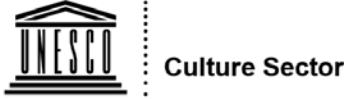
You can also consult the list of image banks in the UNESCO Publications Guidelines (Appendix 7).
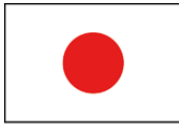
2.4 Use and placement of the logo

→ Follow the guidelines set out in the UNESCO Logo Toolkit, as to size, placement and legibility.

→ Contact ERI/DPI/PBM at logo@unesco.org for advice and use the table below for reference.

Placement of the logo in UNESCO Publications

Type of publication	Front cover	Back cover
Publications for sale	UNESCO Publishing logo OR Institute logo (in the case of an Institute)	Programme sector logo* OR Conventions/programmes logo* OR Field Office logo*
Free publications	UNESCO logo OR Institute logo (in the case of an Institute)	Programme sector logo* OR Conventions/programmes logo* OR Field Office logo*

Co-publications With a co-publication agreement	UNESCO logo (featured on the left as the first logo) **+** logo of copublisher 	UNESCO logo* **+** logo of copublisher*
Publications with support from partners (but without co-publishing agreement)	UNESCO logo 	**+** « With the support of » (in text) **+** partner's logo Japan Funds-in-Trust

*Optional

2.5 Choice of colours

The colour ambiance of a cover can give an instant clue to the content. Some colours predispose us to specific sensations: red for blood, blue for the ocean, green for pastures, and so on. Thus, colours can create an emotional response, whether stimulating, calming or hostile.

This characteristic also applies to the cover of a book. We normally associate certain tones with a particular literary genre: sombre and lugubrious for a mystery, vivid and colourful for children's literature.

In different countries, cultures, and time, colours have different significance. For example, while in the West the colour white symbols purity; in most Asian countries, it is linked with mourning. Since colours have specific meaning and symbolizes different things, colours should be chosen with care.

Some pointers to guide you:

- dominant red will necessarily suggest tension or an aggressive aspect;
- warm colours in harmony – red, orange, yellow, ochre – will convey warmth, a tropical setting, or even joyfulness;
- cool colours – blue and green – are more readily suggestive of serenity and purity, as well as of light, energy and freshness.
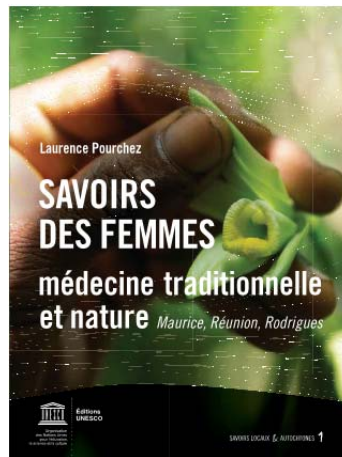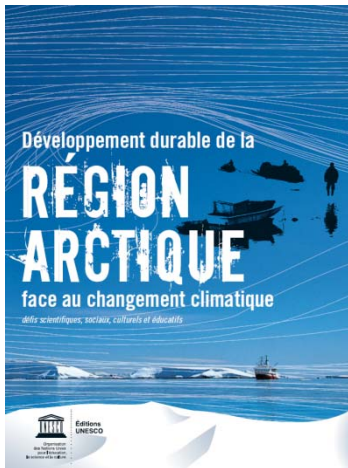
Gather all the elements together in a presentation document (see Annex). You will have to obtain the written sign-off of your **Director of Division** before sending it to the graphic designer.

Here are some golden rules for a successful document:

- **Summarize.** Don't inundate the recipient with documents, but give them the information they need to make the best recommendations. Draw up a document that provides a working summary.
- **Be specific.** Your readership must be clearly identified.
- **Don't take decisions alone.** Involve your supervisors as much as possible in the design of your cover, right from the start of the process.
- **Use examples to illustrate** what you consider as effective or relevant to the subject, or even what you want to avoid at all costs, and if possible explain why.

Stage two: the graphic design [1]

The main purpose of the graphic design is to bring out, and express in the form of specific designs, the information contained in your presentation document. This is the point of handover between the programme specialist and the graphic designer.

→ An internal team of graphic designers is available within CLD, and the programme specialist can also decide to look for professional graphic designers from outside

→ Before choosing your graphic designer, make sure that: (i) he or she has the creative and technical skills needed for your type of publication; (ii) he or she is in a position to work with you throughout

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[1] For publications to be produced within the framework of implementation partnership agreements and co-publishing agreements, the guidelines stated below should be adapted according to the context and the clauses that have been agreed with the partner.

the entire process (some graphic designers are geared more towards actual design, while others specialise in layout) and (iii) the schedules are compatible. **MSS/CLD** can help you with this stage.

→ Once the graphic designer is chosen (whether he/she is from inside or outside), a contract must be established through CLD (via a request in DMS, Document Management System).

→ Ask him or her to produce two or three quite different draft covers that comply with your criteria.

→ Working together with your Director of Division, and in consultation with ERI/DPI/PBM, select one single graphic approach that the designer can then rework to arrive at the final cover.

Remember that there is no magic formula for getting the perfect cover, but there are some basic rules that will help you make your choice from the proposals. Pay special attention to the following aspects:

3.1 Content and order of the different elements

Title, subheading, series and logos are all important elements, but they do not carry the same weight. It is essential to order them correctly by use of size and boldness of typeface, placement and choice of colour (for instance, by leaving enough space between a title and subheading).

→ The harmony of a cover is the product of the graphic composition of the page: the right balance between filled and empty spaces, and the proportion of image to typography, are essential factors in giving a clear, powerful result.

→ An element assumes more importance when there is a space around it. One word, even a small one, draws the eye when it is alone in a large white space. If all the elements have the same importance, it is harder for the eye to focus and the immediate impression is less striking.

3.2 Legibility and contrast

At a time of online distribution and thumbnails, make sure your cover still stands out even in a small format.

For this:

→ The text must be clearly visible and legible at a distance. It has to stand out: light on dark, most of the time, taking care that each element of the publication is naturally clear.
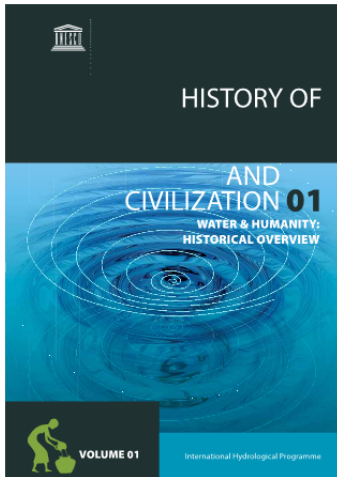
→ Beware of backgrounds with too much contrast: if the background is too variable in intensity, the title will not be legible whether it is light or dark. There are several ways of solving this problem, such as a band or block of colour, or an image that leaves plenty of room for the text.

→ Be careful, too, how the image is framed in relation to the titles: it is preferable, for example, for the focal point of the visual not to be below the title.

3.3 Typographic choices

If no one can read the title of your book, how can you hope to promote it? Typeface is an aspect that is too often neglected when designing a cover. In fact, it is crucial for legibility.

→ Opt for simple characters in a size big enough to be read from a distance.

→ Avoid having multiple typefaces on the same cover. Choose two typefaces at the most, or even just one, and use different degrees of boldness or italics to distinguish between the elements of the text and establish the order between them.

→ Avoid typefaces and characters that are too fancy or with too strong connotations (Papyrus or Western are examples) as they are more difficult to read.

With a printed book, and where the colour has a strategic importance, do a colour test with the printer that will be used for the final publication. The perception of colours on a screen is often very different from what comes out on paper.

<u>Presentation of the draft cover (brief)</u>

Title of the book	
Sub-heading of the book	
Series title	
Category/genre (practical guide, report, etc.)	
Format	
Readership (characteristics, perception)	
Summary of book (Blurb)	
Key words	
Nature (philosophical, historic)	
Style (contemporary, traditional, concrete or abstract, etc.)	
Tone (institutional, humorous, etc.)	
Elements to appear (author's name, partner's logo, etc.)	
Persons involved + role	

Stages in the design of a front cover

Preparatory meeting
Programme specialist, Publications Officer, DPI/PBM, CLD

↓

Preparation of the draft cover document
Programme specialist

↓

Document sign-off
Programme Director

NO

↓

Choice of graphic designer and briefing
Programme specialist, Publications Officer, DPI/PBM, CLD

↓

Graphic design
The graphic designer submits 3 draft covers to the Programme specialist

Contract
through
CLD
(DMS)

↓

The programme specialist:

- Discusses the proposals with the Programme Director
  - Takes advice from ERI

AND

- Chooses one draft cover from among the proposals and submits comments to the graphic designer for finalization

OR

Rejects the proposals and requests new graphic approaches (a fresh briefing with the graphic designer is necessary)

REJECTION
(once only)

↓

Second proposal
The graphic designer submits 1 or 2 new approaches based on the comments of the Sector and PBM

↓

Final decision
The programme specialist and Director make final corrections to the chosen draft cover
+ ERI Validation

↓

Finalization and preparation of the final page proofs (BAT)
Graphic designer