

# Book Cover Design — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into a working method you apply to one real book. Choose a title now, your own manuscript, a public-domain classic from Project Gutenberg you want to re-cover, or a clearly defined imaginary book in a genre you know well, and carry it through every exercise so you finish with a portfolio-ready cover rather than abstract notes. Each section maps to one course module, moving from the brief and genre, through thumbnail-first composition, type and image craft, to a print-correct jacket, e-book file, and clean delivery.

## What a Cover Is Really For

Ground the project in its commercial job: define the reader and promise, pull comps, and decode the genre conventions you must speak fluently.

### Exercise: Choose Your Book and Write Its Promise

Pick a single real or clearly defined book you will use for the entire course. It needs a known genre and a target reader. Write its one-line promise, the single accurate flicker of recognition the cover must give the right reader, before doing anything visual.

- What is the book, and is it your manuscript, a public-domain classic, or a defined imaginary title?  
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- Who is the target reader, and what else do they already read in this exact subgenre?  
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- In one sentence, what is the promise the cover must make to that reader?  
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- Which format matters most at launch (e-book first, print, audiobook), and does that change your priorities?  
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### Worksheet: The One-Page Cover Brief

Fit the brief onto one page so you are forced to decide what matters. Fill every field for your book; if you cannot, that gap is research to do before opening a design tool.

Genre and specific subgenre (e.g. domestic psychological thriller, not just thriller)

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Three to five tone words (e.g. dark, tense, intimate)

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The one motif: a single object, place, figure, or symbol that is strong and honest to the book

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Author-name prominence: modest (debut) or dominant (brand-name)?

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Series or standalone, and any must-include element or constraint

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Primary format and any platform spec it imposes (KDP, IngramSpark, Audible)

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## Worksheet: Comp Title Analysis

Pull eight to twelve recent successful covers in your exact subgenre from the relevant Amazon category bestseller and new-release lists. These are the dialect your reader speaks. Record what they share so you can speak it fluently before deciding where to break it.

List of 8 to 12 comp titles and where you found them (category and list)

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Shared palette mood across the comps (e.g. cold blue + red, warm brights, muted desaturated)

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Shared imagery type (illustrated couple, lone figure, single object, abstract, landscape)

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Shared type style (distressed sans, elegant serif, hand-script, geometric sans)

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Shared busyness level (type-dominant, image-dominant, banded)

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The micro-signals of heat or tone (e.g. illustrated vs photographic) and what they promise

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## Checklist: Genre Signal Readiness

- I can name the subgenre in specific words, not just the broad genre
- I have 8 to 12 real comps from my reader's actual bestseller list
- I can list the specific conventions: palette, imagery, type style, busyness
- I have decided which conventions to honour to signal the genre clearly
- I have identified the single, deliberate place I will break a convention to stand out
- I have decided author-name prominence and whether this is a series template

## Composition That Survives the Thumbnail

Turn the brief into a layout that works where it counts: choose an archetype, compose thumbnail-first, and rank the elements into a clear hierarchy.

## Worksheet: Archetype and Layout Selector

Choose a proven structure instead of a blank canvas. Decide the archetype from your genre and comps, then plan the focal point and use of space before placing any element.

Archetype chosen (type-dominant, image-dominant, split/banded, symbolic/object, series template)

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Why this archetype fits the genre and the comps you analysed

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The single focal point the eye should land on first

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How negative space is used (especially if literary or upmarket)

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Rule-of-thirds or deliberate asymmetry plan to avoid a dead, centred layout

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If a series: what is locked in the template and what changes per book

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### Exercise: Set Up the Thumbnail Preview

Configure your working file so you judge the cover at the size readers first see it. Keep a thumbnail preview at about 100 to 160 pixels tall visible the entire time you design. This single habit catches most failures.

- What is your full working canvas size (e.g. 1600 by 2560 px for e-book), and how are you previewing it at ~100 to 160 px tall?

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- At thumbnail size right now, can you read the title and name the genre at a glance?

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- Does the central image hold as one shape, or does it dissolve into mud when small?

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- Which secondary elements vanish at thumbnail, and is that acceptable because the title is the priority?

### Exercise: Run the Squint Test and the Grid Test

Stress-test the thumbnail against the two real-world contexts. Squint at or step back from the thumbnail, then drop it into a screenshot of its actual Amazon category competitors. The goal is a cover that both stands out and clearly belongs.

- Squint test: when you squint or step back, is the title readable and the genre obvious?

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- Grid test: dropped among real category competitors, does your thumbnail stand out from them?

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- Grid test: does it also clearly fit the genre, or does it look like the wrong kind of book?

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- What one change would improve standing out or fitting in without sacrificing the other?

### Worksheet: Element Hierarchy Plan

Decide the reading order before styling. List every element, rank it for this specific book, and assign tiers so the eye lands on the right thing first at thumbnail size.

Every element that must appear (title, author, image, tagline, series line, endorsement)

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Rank order of importance for this book (driven by the brief and author fame)

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Tier for each: hero (largest, highest contrast), secondary, tertiary (small, quiet)

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Which tool enforces each rank (size, weight, colour, position) beyond size alone

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Tagline decision: include and keep tertiary, or cut as generic clutter?

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Thumbnail check: does the hero element win the eye instantly at small size? (yes/no)

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## Type and Image Craft

Build the two materials of the cover: title typography that signals genre and reads when small, and imagery that is strong, on-genre, and legally cleared.

### Worksheet: Title Type and Pairing Sheet

Choose the title face as a genre decision first, then pair it for contrast with purpose. Fill this in and confirm the licence before setting the title.

Title typeface and the genre signal it sends (e.g. distressed slab = gritty, high-contrast serif = literary)

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Paired secondary face for author and supporting text (one neutral, legible face)

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How the two faces contrast in role so they do not fight (weight, size, style)

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Key word in the title to emphasise, and which connecting words to shrink

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Kerning and tracking notes for the large display title (pairs like AV, To; all-caps tracking)

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Font source and confirmed commercial cover licence (Adobe Fonts, MyFonts, Google Fonts, or purchased)

### Worksheet: Imagery Source and Rights Log

Decide the imagery source by matching it to budget and risk, then clear it legally. Complete one row of this log for every image asset you use, because licensing is where covers get pulled.

Asset and source (Shutterstock/Adobe Stock/iStock, commission, public domain, or AI)

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Exclusivity (non-exclusive stock, exclusive commission, public-domain)

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Licence type held and whether it explicitly covers commercial book-cover use

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Unit-count or print-run cap on the licence, and whether an extended licence is needed

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Editorial-only? Identifiable people needing a model release? Trademarks or private property risk?

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If AI-generated: platform restrictions checked and copyright limits understood

### Exercise: Composite, Colour-Grade, and Keep the Title Legible

Turn affordable sources into a bespoke-looking cover and solve the hardest practical problem at the same time: a legible title over a varying background. Composite your image in Photoshop or Affinity Photo, grade it into one on-genre mood, build a quiet zone or separation technique for the title, then verify with the greyscale test.

- Which separate sources did you composite (e.g. sky from one, figure from another, texture overlay), and how did you grade them into one coherent, genre-matching mood?
- Where is the quiet zone (sky, shadow, negative space) the title sits in, or which technique did you use

(scrim, soft shadow, glow, knockout band)?

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• Is the title's contrast built on lightness, not just hue, so it survives small sizes and e-ink?

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• Greyscale test: when you convert the cover to greyscale, does the title still separate clearly from the background, and if not, what did you change to increase separation?

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### Checklist: Type and Image Craft Checklist

- Title face chosen from subgenre conventions, not personal preference
- One display face plus one neutral face, contrasting clearly in role
- Kerning manually corrected on the large display title; no ugly gaps when scaled up
- Every image asset is licensed for commercial cover use with the right unit count
- No editorial-only images; model releases obtained; no risky trademarks or private property
- Title legible over the image and confirmed by the greyscale test

## Print, E-book, and Delivery

Take the design to correct, deliverable files: a print-correct front, a full wraparound jacket with a calculated spine, a platform-correct e-book cover, and a clean handoff.

### Worksheet: Print Document Setup Sheet

Build the print file to the printer's rules so it trims, prints, and colours as designed. Fill this in before exporting any print PDF.

Trim size (e.g. 6 by 9 inches) and document resolution (300 PPI)

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Bleed amount on every edge (typically 0.125 inch / 3 mm) and what extends into it

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Safe margin distance (about 0.25 to 0.5 inch) and confirmation all text sits inside it

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Colour mode: working in or proofing to CMYK; which vivid screen colours need adjusting

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Rich black recipe for large black areas per the printer's recommendation (not plain K100)

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Export format the printer requires (e.g. PDF/X-1a or PDF/X-4) with bleed and crop marks

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### Worksheet: Spine and Wraparound Layout

Lay out the full jacket as three panels and calculate the spine, never guess it. Use the printer's official template generator and record the values here.

Page count and paper stock used for the spine calculation

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Spine width from the printer's template generator (KDP, IngramSpark, or Lulu)

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Is the page count high enough for spine text (often about 80 to 100+ pages)?

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Spine text plan: title and author, running top-to-bottom, with a safe inset from the edges

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Back-cover layout: blurb (not a summary), optional review quotes, short author bio

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Reserved barcode/ISBN zone (usually lower-right) kept clear of artwork

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### Worksheet: Multi-Format Export Plan

Each shelf needs its own file built to its own spec. Plan every format the book will actually ship in, not just the print front.

Print wraparound: PDF/X format, CMYK, with calculated spine, bleed, and crop marks

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E-book cover: front-only, RGB, Kindle 1.6:1 at about 1600 by 2560 px, JPEG or TIFF

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Greyscale e-ink check passed for the e-book title legibility (yes/no)

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Audiobook (if going wide): square version, often 2400 by 2400 px, re-composed not cropped

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Each format exported at the exact pixel size, colour mode, and file type the platform specifies

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### Checklist: Final Delivery and Proofing Checklist

- Print-ready PDF in the printer's required format with bleed and crop marks
- RGB e-book cover at the correct pixel size for the target platform
- Layered, editable source files (InDesign/Affinity/Photoshop) with fonts and links collected
- A flat preview image provided for approvals
- Every font licensed for the use and all imagery rights cleared
- Title and author name proofread multiple times, ideally by a second person

### Your Action Plan

1. Choose one real or defined book and write its one-line promise and target reader
2. Pull 8 to 12 comps from your reader's actual bestseller list and record their shared conventions
3. Write the one-page brief: subgenre, tone words, the one motif, author prominence, and constraints
4. Pick a cover archetype from the genre and plan one clear focal point and use of negative space
5. Set up a persistent thumbnail preview, design at about 100 to 160 px first, then pass the squint and grid tests against real competitors
6. Rank every element into hero, secondary, and tertiary tiers so the eye lands correctly at thumbnail
7. Choose the title face from subgenre conventions, pair it for contrast, and fix the kerning
8. Source imagery legally, log every licence, composite and colour-grade to one on-genre mood, and confirm the title's legibility with the greyscale test
9. Build the print file with correct trim, bleed, safe margin, CMYK, and a template-calculated spine
10. Export the print PDF, the RGB Kindle cover, and any square audiobook version, then proofread and deliver the package











