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Just Add Pics

By Jamii Corley

When building websites you need visual interest to keep readers engaged. Content is king, but without a visually compelling page your reader is faced with a wall of words that will cause them to move on to the next link. It's not that people don't want your content, but they've been trained to consume information in small bites.

You can work around this issue with short paragraphs, bullet lists, and pithy text, but you also need something to relax the brain and that's where graphic elements come into play. If you aren't an artist or a photographer, how do you get these needed elements without breaking the bank?

The internet is full of websites that offer free pictures, photos, fonts, and clip art. Is this too good to be true? Sometimes yes, and sometimes no. So how do you evaluate these free offerings?

Creative Commons Licenses

Creative Commons is an international non-profit organization that has created formal licenses for sharing visual, aural, or written information. Their goal is to make it easier to know and respect artists' wishes while sharing their creative endeavors.

Any website that provides sharable assets should let the user know what kind of sharing is permitted. Here are a couple of common licenses to be aware of:

CC0 - These works are completely in the public domain. You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, all without asking permission.

This is the most liberal license and allows use by anyone, but there are some caveats. You can't say you created the

item, nor can you imply the creator of the item endorses you or your agenda. This item may be restricted if it contains images that are protected by other privacy laws.

CC0 is the license I look for on a website supplying free images, because it's the most flexible and you're not likely to get a cease and desist letter from the owner of the material.

CC BY - Attribution - This license requires users give credit to the creator. You may distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, even for commercial use, as long as you give credit (attribution) to the maker.

This gives the author some publicity while you get free use of the image.



Image by Carlos Ngaba, from Pixabay

Creative Commons license names are built up of various parts that tell you what restrictions apply. For example **CC BY NC** requires attribution (BY) and is not for commercial use (NC). Always check the license on a photo to be sure it works for your environment. Most photo websites link to the license information. If not, you can always consult the **Creative Commons website**.

There are many other license types and when you're grabbing some visual interest for your website it's important to pay attention to them. If not, there can be legal consequences. Plus, why not honor the wishes of the creator so they'll go on creating content you can use?

Sources of Visual Assets

Here are a few sites that offer images and videos you can add to your site, both free and paid.

1. **Pixabay.com** has a wide selection of photography, and artwork intended for public use. They have

their own license based on CC0.

2. **Unsplash.com** is another public domain site. They have fewer images, but are high quality and often different in focus from Pixabay. **The Unsplash license** is similar to CC0 with very liberal usage terms.
3. **Negativespace.co** is a repository of CC0 images. Easy to search, smaller than Pixabay or Unsplash.
4. **stocksnap.io** has lovely, high quality images that layout in a responsive grid for viewing. Only photography, no artwork, or vector graphics. All images are CC0.
5. **Designers Pics** has free photography by a single photographer (Jeshu John). **The usage terms** are similar to CC0.
6. **Pexels.com** has interesting imagery, and **their “Legal Simplicity” license** is very similar to Pixabay and Unsplash.
7. **OpenVerse.org** is a search engine for finding open source pictures, music, and videos. It indexes from many sources and has a wide variety of content, either public domain or with Creative Commons licensing. It is run by the WordPress Foundation.

Interfacing with WordPress

Several WordPress plugins can interface with popular photo sites like Pixabay and OpenVerse. One that works easily from within the WordPress Media library and is highly rated is **Free Assets Library**. Once installed and activated, it provides a new "OpenVerse/Pixabay Images" tab in the Media Library which allows you to search for items by keyword and license type.

Gotchas

Many of the sites mentioned above have sponsorship relationships with **iStock** or **Shutterstock**. iStock and Shutterstock are well known, fairly inexpensive services where you can purchase professional photography.

One way these sites fund themselves is allowing companies like iStock to provide links to their own pictures alongside the free ones in your search results. When you search, you'll see the free items, as well as offers from iStock or other commercial

stock houses. These are NOT free and NOT public domain.

There's obviously nothing wrong with buying images from a commercial stock photo house. Just be aware when you are browsing that the free and paid photos are often mixed on the page and it may not be obvious at first glance which are which.

AI in the Mix



Image Source: Midjourney

AI is touching every part of our lives now, and in many cases it is replacing stock photography. The “photo” above was created from the prompt, “a cat committing a copyright violation”. It is easy to generate high-quality visuals to go alongside any content with a tool like **Midjourney**. Images generated with a Midjourney free account are covered under a **CC BY NC** license. If you have a paid account the assets belong to you to use as you wish.

An unanswered question is whether companies like Midjourney, who used loads of publicly accessible data to train their models, are beholden to the copyright owners of those assets, even if you can't point to a specific asset that might have affected the generation of something new. No doubt the courts will have to rule on these issues in the coming years.

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