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MY GUIDE TO



YouTube *thumbnails*



The ultimate guide for creators
and freelancers to
understanding and crafting
click-worthy YouTube
thumbnails

FREE EBOOK

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SOFTWARE

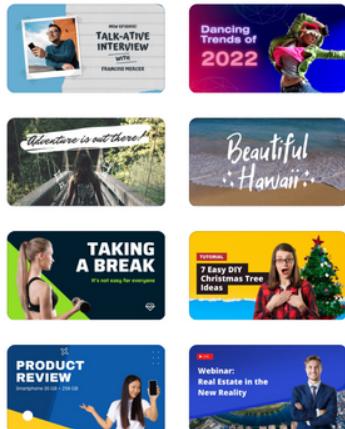


Adobe Photoshop



Adobe Photoshop is a subscription-based service, so you will end up paying more for it over time than Pixelmator. If you are a student, you have access to discounted or free Adobe subscriptions. You have more flexibility working in Photoshop than Pixelmator, but thumbnail editing isn't too much heavy lifting.

All the techniques discussed in this ebook can be applied in any of these platforms.



Your canvas dimensions should be 1280x720 for a YouTube thumbnail and the final file should be under 2 MB.

Pixelmator

I typically use Pixelmator Classic to edit thumbnails. It's a photo editing app available on the Mac App Store for only \$30. It's a simpler and cheaper alternative to Adobe Photoshop, *but* it has all the tools you need to create great looking thumbnails. There's a Pixelmator Pro version that's \$40 and has some more advanced tools.

Canva

Even the free version of Canva has a ton of great thumbnail ideas. You'll be the most limited in terms of editing ability, but it's relatively easy to use and free.

Even for more advanced creators, you can search the "thumbnail" templates on Canva for inspiration.

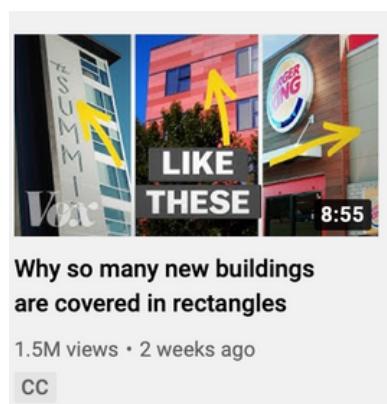
THINKING ABOUT *thumbnails*

One important concept to understand in thumbnail creations is that your thumbnail doesn't have to convey the whole video concept or even summarize it. Instead, think about your title and thumbnail as a **team** that works in tandem with each other. The title is descriptive, and the thumbnail is some element of the video that will make a viewer click on it.

Think about each of these examples in terms of the thumbnail alone, and consider how the thumbnail alone does not represent the video's topic.

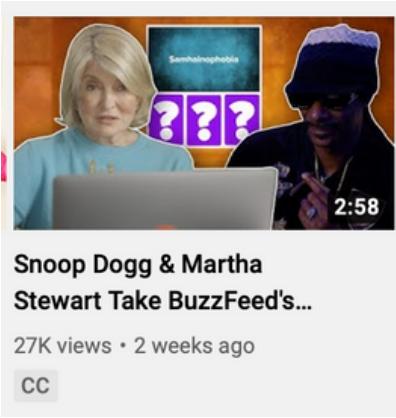


The title and thumbnail can also work together to piece together one full idea, referencing each other.



DESIGN

colors



Using bright colors helps grab a viewer's attention. One way of doing this is creating a filled box layer and making it semi-transparent, so you can show the actual photo's background while still incorporating color.

1. Use a magnetic selection tool to cut out the main subject and duplicate it.
2. Create a filled box in the color of your choice and layer it in between the original image and the new cut-out.
3. Change the opacity of the color box layer as desired.

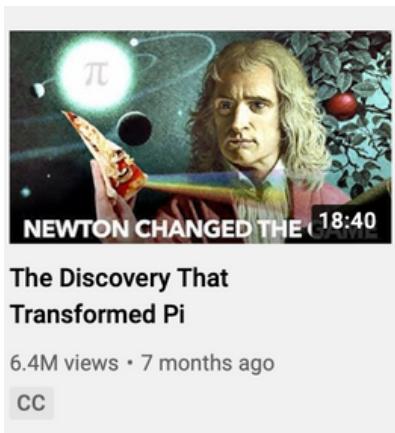
You can also add a Gaussian blur effect to the background layer, drawing even more attention to the cut-out. If you're not sure what color to use for the background, try using colors on the opposite side of the color wheel from a main color in the original photo.

DESIGN

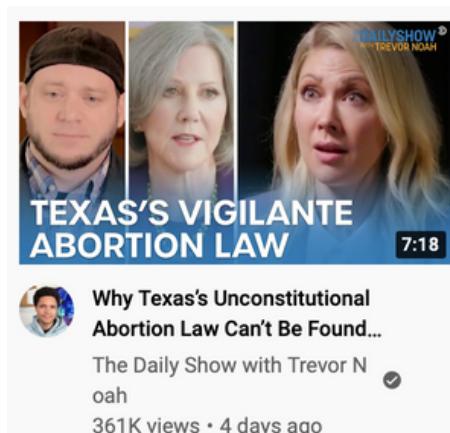
text

A few words in large, visible font can be a good addition to a thumbnail. Watch out for the lower right side of the thumbnail, where the timecode can obscure text. When in doubt, put all text on the left side.

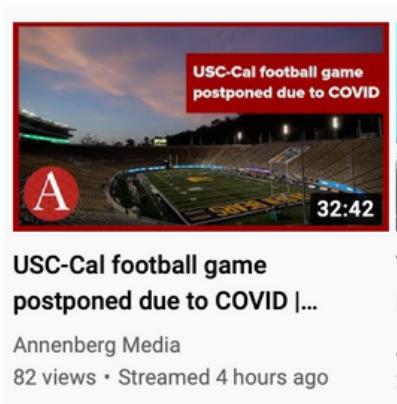
TIMECODE COVERS TEXT



TEXT IS ALIGNED LEFT



If the background image is obscuring the text, try adding a color outline to the outside of the text, or laying text over a color-filled shape, to separate it visually from the background.



DESIGN

text

Don't be afraid to use color in your text! White text is most common, but you can emphasize certain words by changing the font to a bright color like highlighter yellow.



You can download new fonts for free online, and there are lists of popular thumbnail fonts available online. I tend to stick to sans-serif fonts for readability and to put my thumbnail text in all-caps.

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IMPACT

If your video involves money in some way, a price tends to be what creators put on the thumbnail. Not only are people interested in money, but it helps name the stakes and differentiate your video.



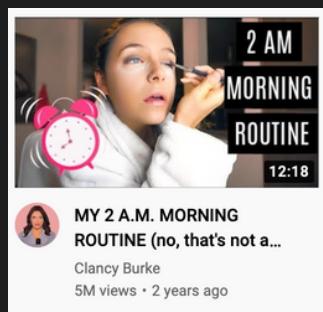
DESIGN

features

Well-lit faces, especially with emotive expressions, often make good thumbnails.



Many thumbnail creators use emojis and PNG icons to fill in empty space. Feel free to combine layering, varied opacity color boxes, and outlining as you add new elements.



It's never too early to start thinking about your thumbnail, but you definitely should think about it while you're shooting. While recording your video, you can take a moment and pose for your thumbnail. No need to deal with a photo timer, because you can screenshot that moment or any other good frames from the video (either on your computer or in Premiere) and bring it into your thumbnail editing software.

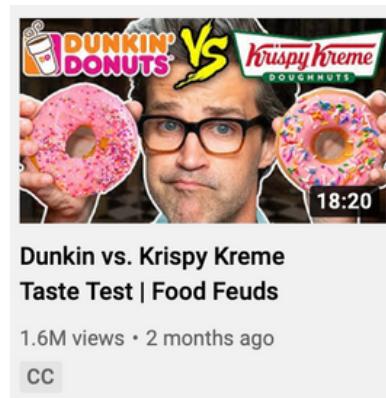
If you get stuck on what to make in your thumbnail, search your video topic on YouTube. See what popular related videos are using to get people to click.

DESIGN

features

Many thumbnails outline various layers in white or other colors. Here are the steps I take in Pixelmator to create these outlines:

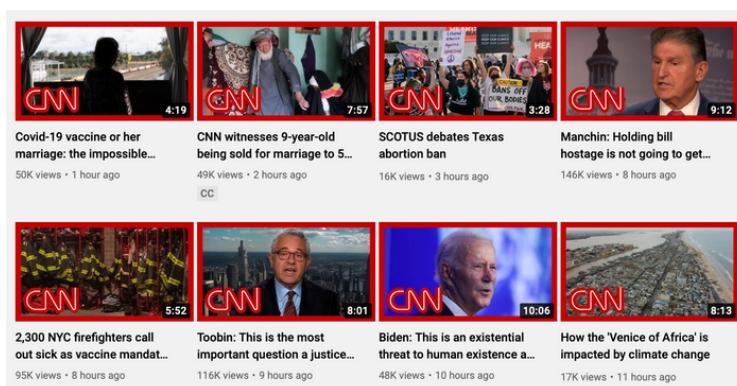
1. Use a magnetic selection tool to cut out the main subject and duplicate it.
2. If the outline of the new cutout is not already selected, click on the new cutout and, from the menu bar, select “Edit > Load Selection.”
3. From the menu bar, click “Edit > Refine Selection.”
4. Adjust the shape roundness to round out the edges. This is a key step because it keeps your outline from looking jagged. Click “OK.”
5. Now that your cutout is selected with rounded edges, you need to delete the rough edges. Invert the selection by clicking “Edit > Invert Selection.” Then press the delete key, or “Edit > Clear.”
6. Now that you have a cutout with rounded edges, go to “Styles” in the window’s top menu. You can adjust the outline’s stroke width, color, and more from this menu.



DESIGN

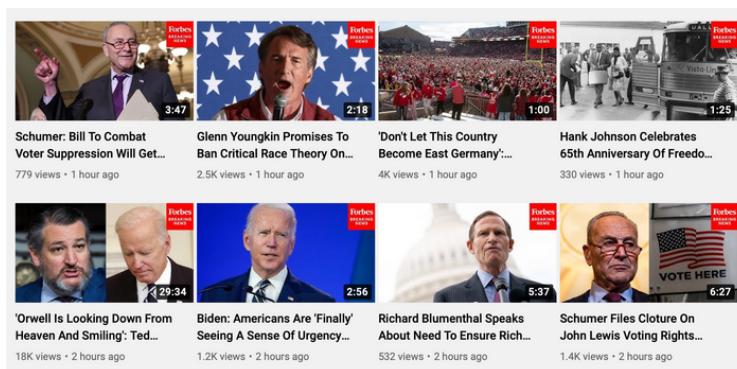
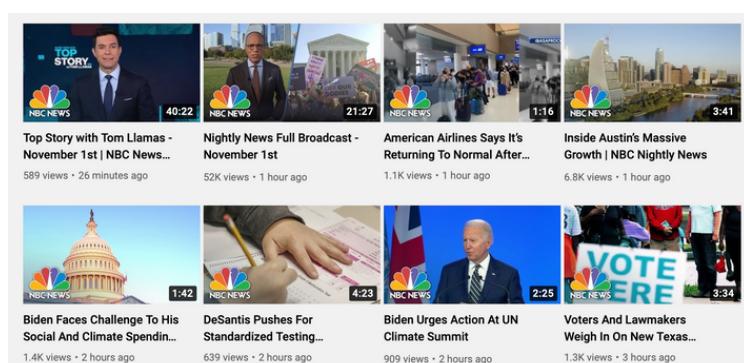
branding

It's common in news organizations, and within video series, to establish a regular style so viewers can recognize your thumbnails when they see them. News organizations tend to use a small logo in the corner without stylized elements like text, emojis and color.



CNN uses a large, distinctive logo with a matching color band around the edge.

NBC News placed their logo in the lower left corner of the thumbnail, with the logo taking up about 1/3 of the height of the image.



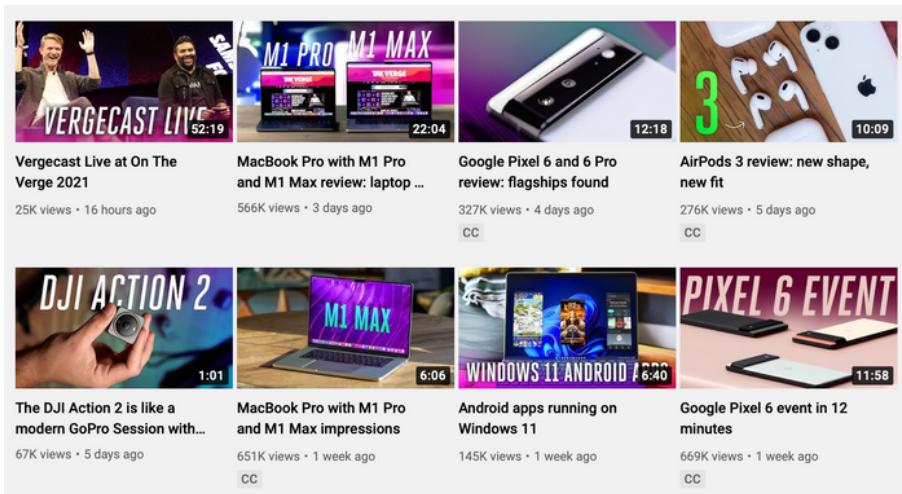
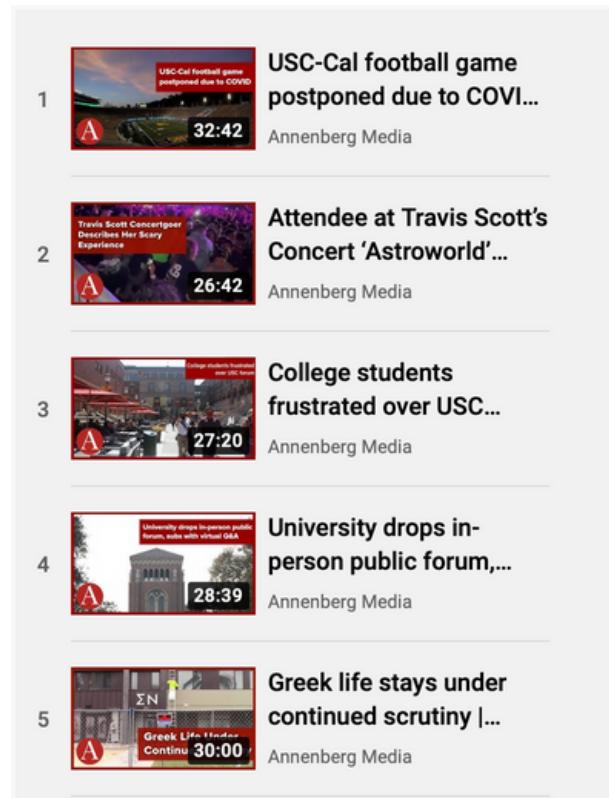
Notice how all these logos are avoiding the lower-right corner, where the timecode is displayed.

DESIGN

branding

You can organize video series into playlists for consistent branding.

Here, we see USC Annenberg Media's ATVN playlist. However, one of the text boxes is improperly placed. Can you identify which one?



Even if all the thumbnails don't have the same structure, you can adopt consistent fonts and colors to make your thumbnails look cohesive on a page.

YOUTUBE TIPS

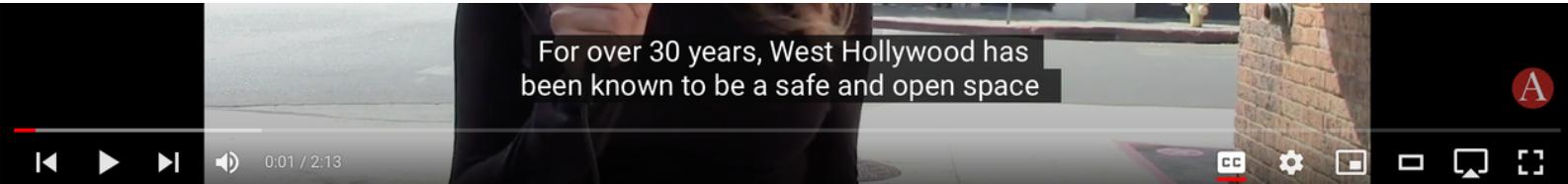
closed captions

CC

Closed captions (CC) are often overlooked on YouTube, but very important for accessibility. Not only do Deaf and hard-of-hearing users use CC, but hearing people who are watching YouTube in noisy environments where they can't use sound. The text in your captions also help Search Engine Optimization (SEO), or the ability for people searching for relevant terms to find your video.

YouTube generates automatic captions, but they don't include punctuation or correct spelling of uncommon names. If there's lots of background noise in your video, the CC can be even less accurate.

Fortunately, the automatic captions make it quick to edit and you don't need to write the CC from scratch. After 24-48 hours of your video being uploaded, go to Captions on the left side of the video's settings in YouTube Studio. Click the "Duplicate and Edit" button on the automatic captions file and make edits to the text and timings as needed. Publish when done.

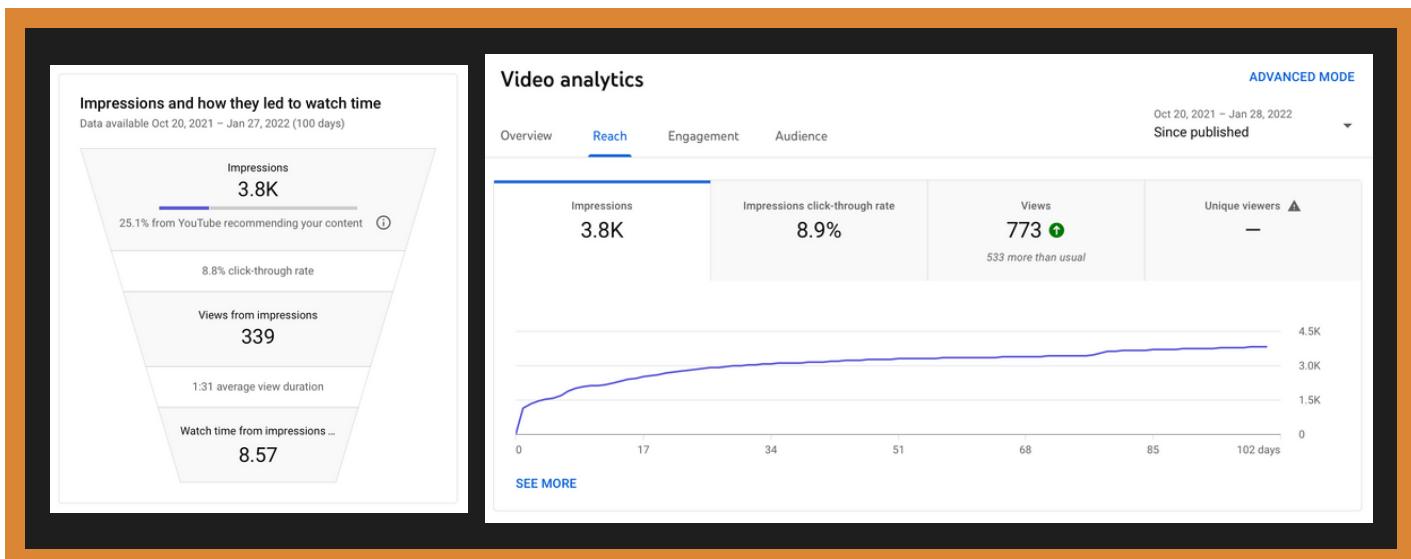


YOUTUBE TIPS

impressions ctr

One relevant statistic to the success of your thumbnail is what's called the Impressions Click-Through Rate.

In YouTube Studio, select a video. Click Analytics on the left panel and Reach on the top menu bar. The Impressions Click-Through Rate will show you how often people are clicking on your video when they see it as an impression (impression = whenever your video thumbnail was shown to a viewer on YouTube). The thumbnail's function is to entice people to click on your video, so a higher click-through rate means your thumbnail is serving its function better.



CONTACT

the author

Rachel Kisela is a freelance social media video editor and graduate student at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. She manages the YouTube channel for USC's student-run newsroom and creates videos and thumbnails for social media influencers centered around female empowerment like The Bunny Barbie (1.9M followers) and Brittani Lancaster (900K followers).



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