



Local Enterprise Office Cork North and West

How to create eye-catching images using Canva

Course Summary

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Prepared by The Marketing Crowd *with the help of one of our AI colleagues* 😊

Course Overview

A poll at the start showed the group's starting point: none of the attendees rated themselves as strong Canva users, 75% said they use it a little but are not sure how to get the best from it, and 25% had never used it at all. A second poll showed most attendees are on the free plan, with a smaller group on the paid plan at €12 a month. Evan used this to set expectations that no question was too basic, and that the course would show what's possible for free as well as what sits behind the paid plans.

The three ways to use Canva

Evan framed the whole course around three approaches, and returned to this framing throughout:

1. Designing from a blank canvas (from scratch)
2. Using one of Canva's professionally designed templates and customising it
3. Using Canva AI to generate a design or image from a written description

He estimated roughly 75% of the "design from scratch" tools are free, about 25% of templates are free (75% require payment), and AI is mostly limited on the free plan.

Getting started and plans

To sign up, go to canva.com and click Sign Up in the top right. No card details are needed to create a free account. Logged in status is shown by a small circle in the bottom left corner.

There are three plans: Free, Pro (around €12 a month, which Evan is on), and Business (around €17 a month). Business is really only worth it for a company that wants a shared team account or a lot more AI usage. Evan said the €12 plan is enough for the vast majority of small businesses.

Choosing a canvas and canvas sizes

From the Canva homepage you choose what you want to design. For social media, everything is pre sized: Instagram post is 4x5 (slightly taller than wide), Instagram or Facebook story is portrait at 9x16 (1080x1920), and the same 4x5 Instagram post size also works well for Facebook and LinkedIn posts. There are also readymade sizes for LinkedIn background photo and Facebook cover.

For anything not on social media (an image for a website, an email header, and so on) use Custom Size in the top right and type in your own width and height. To match an existing image on your website exactly, save that image to your desktop, hover your mouse over it in File Explorer, and it will show you the pixel dimensions to use for your new custom canvas. Always check the unit is set to pixels, not inches, millimetres, or centimetres.

Canva also offers presentations, a built in video editor (Evan said it is usable but not the best, and recommended the free Edits app from Instagram as a strong alternative, alongside

CapCut which costs around €15 a month), printed items like business cards and letterheads, documents such as invoices or CVs, whiteboards, spreadsheets, simple websites (fine for a personal project but not robust enough for a small business needing SEO), and email designs that can be exported and pasted into MailChimp or MailerLite. Today's course focused mainly on social media graphics, though every technique shown applies to any canvas shape.

A participant asked about reaching customers who are not active on social media platforms. Evan's answer was that digital marketing is broader than social media. You can design something in Canva at any size and send it by email or WhatsApp if the person has opted in to receive it, and Canva places no restriction on what you design something for. It is entirely up to the business how the design is distributed.

Adding images, logos, and text (core workflow)

The fundamental workflow, repeated across every exercise:

1. Choose your canvas size
2. Go to Uploads in the left hand menu and upload files from your computer (everything you design happens on Canva's server, so your own image first has to be uploaded into your Canva library)
3. Click the image to place it, then right click and choose Set Image as Background so it fills the canvas correctly (dragging corners manually is not the recommended method)
4. Double click the image to reposition it within the frame. If the image's original shape does not match the canvas shape, part of it will be cropped, and double clicking lets you nudge it left, right, up, or down to choose which part shows
5. Add your logo the same way, via Uploads, then click to place it and resize as needed
6. Add text via the Text menu on the left, choosing Heading or Subheading, then drag the box to resize and double click to edit the wording

A key principle Evan repeated throughout is that Canva only shows a formatting menu for an element once you click on it. Clicking text brings up font, size, colour, bold, italic, underline, alignment, bullet points, and animation options. Clicking an image or logo brings up a different, relevant menu.

When exporting, the file name box defaults to the name of the first text element, so it is worth renaming it to something identifiable before downloading. Downloading is done via Share then Download, which converts the design to an image file.

Four ways to add eye catching text

Evan showed four distinct approaches to text, building in sophistication:

1. **Heading and Subheading:** basic text boxes from the Text menu. Evan described this as looking a bit like PowerPoint and not especially professional on its own
2. **Font combinations by keyword search:** in the Text panel, search a relevant word (for example "sale," "Christmas," or "love") to bring up professionally paired font combinations designed around that theme. You can edit the wording and colour freely even though the combination was built around different words
3. **Browsing font combinations generally:** scroll down in the Text panel past the search box to "font combinations," where hundreds of professionally designed text pairings are available regardless of theme. Evan's advice was to ignore the sample wording (for example "feeling cute" or "let's party") and judge purely on the look, since any wording can be swapped in afterwards
4. **Graphics, found under Elements, not Text:** search a keyword such as "wow," "sale," or "Black Friday" in the Graphics section. Graphics cannot have their wording changed, since they are pre-designed images, and their colour can only be changed if Canva shows a colour option when you click on them. A filter lets you narrow results to Free only, and to Static or Animated

A small crown icon on any font combination, graphic, image, or template indicates it is a paid-only asset. It can still be added to a design on the free plan, but Canva will block the download and prompt you to replace it or upgrade.

Animating text and images (turns the file into a video)

Any text box can be animated: click the text, then choose Animate from the menu, and pick from options such as Bounce, Stomp, or Wiggle. Because a static image cannot contain movement, adding an animation automatically converts the export into an MP4 video rather than a PNG image. On a platform like Instagram Stories, this plays automatically with no visible play button or progress bar, so viewers simply see it as a lively looking static post.

Choosing colours (five ways)

Colour options appear for both backgrounds and text once you click on the relevant element and choose Background Colour or Text Colour. Evan demonstrated five methods:

1. **Default colours:** around 20 preset swatches, with more available under "See all"
2. **Search by name:** type a colour word (for example "brown") into the search box within the colour picker to bring up all shades matching that name
3. **The colour wheel (recommended method):** click the plus icon to open a full colour picker. Pick a hue along the bottom, then drag the marker within the square: top right gives the brightest, most saturated version, top left moves towards white, bottom moves towards black

4. **Colour code:** if a designer has given you an exact hex code, type it directly into the code field
5. **Colour picker (eyedropper) tool:** click the small eyedropper icon next to the plus, then click anywhere on your screen (including a photo already on the canvas) to match that exact colour. This is particularly useful for pulling a colour straight out of a product photo

Gradients (one colour blending into another) are chosen the same way, via the plus icon then the Gradient tab. Canva provides default gradient presets, but Evan recommended creating your own by picking colour one and colour two individually, then choosing a style (left to right, top to bottom, diagonal, or radial from the centre). His professional tip: the most polished looking gradients use one colour graduating into a lighter or darker version of itself, rather than two contrasting colours, since this is the technique used by brands such as Vodafone and Sky in their marketing.

A participant asked whether compressing a file reduces image quality. Evan confirmed compression only reduces file size (weight), not visual clarity. It is recommended for anything going into an email or onto a website, since large files slow loading and can trigger spam filters, while a heavy image on a webpage slows the page down. In Evan's live example, compressing a 601 kilobyte image brought it down to 151 kilobytes with no visible difference in sharpness. Compression is a paid feature.

Removing image backgrounds

To place a subject on a plain or coloured background convincingly, the original background first needs to be removed, otherwise the design looks amateurish (Evan showed this with a logo that looked "plonked" onto a background until the white box behind it was removed).

On the paid plan, click the image and choose BG Remover directly within Canva.

On the free plan, use the third party site remove.bg (no sign up required, completely free). Upload the image there, let it scan and remove the background, download the result (the file is automatically suffixed "remove bg preview"), then upload that transparent version back into your Canva project as normal. The end result is identical either way; the free route just takes a couple of extra steps.

File types and export settings

When downloading a design, Canva suggests what it considers the best format, but this can be changed manually. PNG and JPEG look identical in practice (Evan said nobody can visually tell the difference), while PDF is useful if you want something easily downloadable and emailable that anyone can open regardless of software. On the paid plan there is also a Compress option at download, useful for anything destined for email or the web.

Brand kits (paid feature, with a free workaround)

On the paid plan, go to Home and then Brand in the left hand menu to set up a Brand Kit. Give it a name, then either enter your website URL (which will attempt to automatically pull in your logo and brand colours) or upload your logo manually. Once a logo is uploaded, Canva

extracts its colour automatically, and you can add further colours to build a full colour palette, along with your own fonts and any photos you want easy repeated access to (for example headshots or office photos). When designing, selecting Brand from the left hand menu then makes your logo, colours, fonts, and saved photos available in one place.

Free plan users cannot create a full brand kit, but can still access their own brand colour: simply place your logo image onto the canvas (even temporarily), then open the background or text colour picker, and Canva will show the colours pulled directly from that image. The logo can then be deleted from the canvas afterwards; the colour remains available to select. If your logo is a single flat colour, Canva will also suggest a few complementary colours alongside it.

If a logo is placed on a background of the same or a very similar colour, it can visually disappear. Evan's fix was to click the logo, go into Edit, and add a Shadow (he used the curved shadow style) so the logo appears slightly three dimensional and separates from the background. This is checked by zooming in on the design.

Shapes and transparency

Shapes are found under Elements, alongside Graphics. Putting text inside a shape (Evan used a jagged circle) helps draw the eye, and the shape's colour can be changed the same way as any other element, including matching it to a colour already used elsewhere in the design for consistency.

Shapes also support a transparency slider (found when you click the shape): 100 is fully solid, 0 makes it invisible, and around the midpoint gives a semi transparent "bubble" effect that Evan felt looked far more polished than a solid, "plonked on" colour block. He also noted a shape does not need to sit fully within the canvas; letting it bleed off one edge can create an interesting cropped effect, though this is a matter of taste.

Evan's general workflow tip for fine tuning a design: once a design is close to finished, use the three dot menu in the bottom corner of the page thumbnail to Duplicate Page, then try a small variation (a different shape colour, with or without a shape, and so on) on the copy. Comparing a few near final versions side by side makes it easier to spot which one actually works best, and you can choose to download several or all pages at once.

Canva's built in stock photo library

Canva has deals with major stock libraries, giving access to around 10 million images directly inside the design tool (no need to upload your own). These appear under Photos in the left hand panel; if Photos is not visible, click Apps above the menu, scroll to "More from Canva," and select Photos from there, after which it will remain visible on the left for future designs. Roughly 7.5 million of these images are paid only and 2.5 million are free, so it is worth checking for the crown icon before committing to one.

Everything you design is automatically saved

Canva saves continuously; there is no save button to click, and nothing is ever lost. Every previous design is available from Home under your recent designs, and is fully searchable

by any word used within it (for example, searching "Instagram" will surface any past design containing that word anywhere in the text or file name). Past designs can be reopened and edited, or used as a starting point for a near identical new design by replacing the image, changing the wording, or swapping the logo, effectively turning any of your own past work into a reusable personal template.

Using templates (the second way to use Canva)

Go to Templates (available from the left hand menu or the top navigation) and search for whatever the design is about, such as "new arrivals," "yoga classes," or "art exhibition." The results can be filtered by category (Instagram post, poster, flyer, collage, and so on), by style (for example black and white, or collage), and by language.

Evan's key advice: when browsing templates, ignore the images, colours, and wording shown; everything can be replaced. Judge templates purely on their layout and composition. He also encouraged attendees not to limit their search to templates that literally match their industry (for example, a menswear retailer searching "jewellery" or "art exhibition" purely for a layout they liked), since the images, text, and colours in any template can be swapped for your own.

To customise a chosen template, click "Customize this template," then replace images via Uploads (holding Ctrl allows selecting and uploading several images at once), delete or edit any unwanted text boxes and shapes, change the background colour using the same colour tools covered earlier, and swap in your own logo. Every technique from the "design from scratch" section (colour choices, shapes, gradients, background removal) applies equally well inside a template.

A participant asked whether a design can be reused repeatedly with only small changes each time to keep branding consistent. Evan confirmed this works well: build the layout you're happy with once, save it, then each time you need a new version go to File and "Make a Copy" so the original template is preserved, and only edit the image and wording on the copy. Searching for the template's file name later will always bring it back up, and over time this builds a personal library of your own reusable templates.

Another participant asked whether it is possible to resize an already finished design into a different social media shape. Evan showed the Resize button in the top toolbar, which lets you convert a design into another preset size (for example turning an Instagram post into an Instagram story) while keeping the original intact; the content will need to be manually rearranged afterwards to remain legible in the new shape. He noted this feature had recently moved from paid only to free, though it now counts against your AI usage credits. Ask Canva (covered below) can also be asked directly to resize a design, though this also uses AI credits.

A participant asked whether Canva handles photos of real people well. Evan clarified there is no issue at all uploading and placing a normal photograph of yourself or a person into a Canva design; any distortion or stretching only occurs if the AI is asked to generate or alter a person's image (as with tools like ChatGPT or Gemini), which is a separate and different use case from simply placing an existing photo onto a canvas.

Canva AI (the third way to use Canva)

Canva AI usage is metered through a credit system that applies on both free and paid plans, similar in concept to a mobile data allowance: some AI actions barely use any credit, while others use a lot. Usage can be checked via the profile circle in the bottom left, then Settings, then Billing.

Roughly speaking, tools sit in three tiers:

- **Standard** (light usage): Magic Write, accessed by right clicking a text box, which can rewrite, fix spelling, or change the tone of existing text (for example making it more formal or more fun)
- **Intermediate**: the Design and Create Image tools within Canva AI (see below)
- **Ultra** (heaviest usage): AI video generation, which Evan advised avoiding, especially on the free plan, since it can consume an entire month's credit allowance in a single generation

Within the Canva AI section (left hand menu), two main features were demonstrated:

Design: choose what you want generated (logo, social media post, presentation, and so on), then type or dictate a description. Evan's example asked for a logo for a fictional boutique, specifying the business name and that the name should appear in the design. The AI does not automatically generate several options; Evan had to explicitly ask for four distinct versions to choose from, since one option alone does not give a real choice. Once a result looks right, individual elements (for example a typo or unwanted apostrophe) can still be edited by hand, and the finished logo can be saved directly into your Brand Kit or downloaded as normal.

Create Image: choose an aspect ratio (9x16 for stories, 16x9 for landscape, 1x1 for square) and a style such as Stock Photo, then write a detailed description of the image you want. You can also attach one of your own images (for example a product photo) and ask the AI to build a new scene around it. Evan's example uploaded a photo of a handbag and asked for an image of a specific type of model carrying that exact handbag in a described setting, and the resulting image kept the real handbag intact while generating a plausible model and background around it.

Ask Canva: when editing any existing design (whether built from scratch or from a template), clicking on it now shows an "Ask Canva" option alongside the usual formatting menu. This acts as a design assistant that can be asked to make broad changes in plain language, for example to make the design look more modern, to make a headline easier to read while keeping the same layout, or to resize the whole design for a different platform. Evan's favourite use, and one he recommended attendees try, is asking it to "give me three alternative versions of this design using different layouts, but keep the same text and branding," which produces genuinely different creative directions to choose between rather than minor tweaks.

Closing advice

Evan's suggested order for practising after the course: first design a few things from scratch using the exercises in the notes to build real familiarity with the tools, then move on to experimenting with templates, and only after that start exploring AI, since it is easy to burn through credits quickly (particularly on the free plan) without yet knowing what you actually want it to produce.

This was created with the help of one of our AI colleagues 😊