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Head & Shoulders - Because We're Worth It!

Supplying A Usable Author Photo

Congratulations! You've had a book published. Or perhaps you've self-published one. Or perhaps you write articles and short stories. It doesn't matter. Either way, whatever you've written, when you've had something published readers want to know what you look like. This involves getting an author photo.

I hate having my photo taken. Many writers do. It's why we became writers rather than fashion models, actors or politicians.

What makes a great author photo is up for debate. Should you dress up? Should you pose awkwardly? Should you ignore your background so readers think you have a Victorian streetlamp growing out of the top of your head? The choice is yours. A good idea is to relax, smile and try not to look like a criminal suspect who's about to be interrogated by the police. Act natural. (Oh, if only writers knew how to act natural.)

If you want to hire a professional photographer, that's fine. If you want your next door neighbour's cat to take your photo on your smartphone, that's fine too. Having an author photo is better than having no photo at all.

Do some research. Look at other authors' photos. Open books and turn to the inside flaps of jackets where photos often hide. Browse authors' websites to see what they do. Check out the This Month's Contributor sections of magazines. Often what you'll see is a head and shoulders shot. Well, who's interested in an writer's feet, anyway? It's not as if we write with them, is it? (Although, if you do write with your feet then perhaps you should include them in your photo.)

A head and shoulders shot is generally all that is required, because all readers want to see is your **face**. Some even want to see you smile.

The great thing about today's cameras and smartphones is that they're all capable of taking a decent, high quality, publishable photo. So if you want to get a friend or relative to take your photo on their smartphone, or their compact camera, you can. I took my own photo. I set up my camera's ten-second timer delay, pressed the button and then hurried into position and waited ... and waited ... and waited. Ten seconds can be a flipping long time when you're waiting. But it captured something half decent. (I'm talking about the photo itself, rather than the subject model.)



And now you know what I look like. So the next time you pass me in the street you'll recognise me and be able to walk up and ask me to sign whichever one of my books you've just bought. (Although, please, don't just limit yourself to one book. Feel free to buy the lot.)

Once you have your author photo then you have something to send out when agencies, magazines, and publicity departments ask to see what you look like. Article writers and short story writers are frequently required to provide a photo and short biography to appear at the end of their feature or short story in magazines these days. I'm always asking writers for their photo when I interview them for my articles. However, I'm always a little apprehensive about what I may receive, and it has nothing to do with the photographic model.

Most author photos are intended for two markets: the **Internet**, and **print media**. Each have different requirements.

Print Media

Magazines print everything (words, as well as photos) at 300dpi (dots per inch). Why 300? Well, apparently, when you print tiny dots at that size and density our eyes can't see the individual dots. (My eyesight is worse than that. Did you spot the glasses in my author photo?) So for every inch across the page there are 300 dots, and for every inch down the page there are 300 dots. If you go back to your maths lessons at school, you may remember that to find out the area of a square you multiply the horizontal length by the vertical length. So, if a photo is used in a magazine at a size of one inch square it's going to take 90,000 dots (300 x 300) to create it.

Internet

Many images you see on the Internet use fewer dots, because the dots produced by computer display screens are larger than those used in producing print material. If you were mad enough to get so close to your computer screen that you could touch it with your nose, you might be able to see the individual pixels your computer screen uses to create the words and pictures. (This is changing. Manufacturers are now producing screens that have the same resolution as print material. Ever watched High Definition

TV? It just uses more dots. More dots, means more detail and information ... including all those crows feet the newsreaders hoped we'd never see.)

Currently, many images used on the Internet have a resolution of 72dpi (dots per inch). Therefore, a one-inch square photo on a website is made up of 5,184 dots (72 dots x 72 dots).

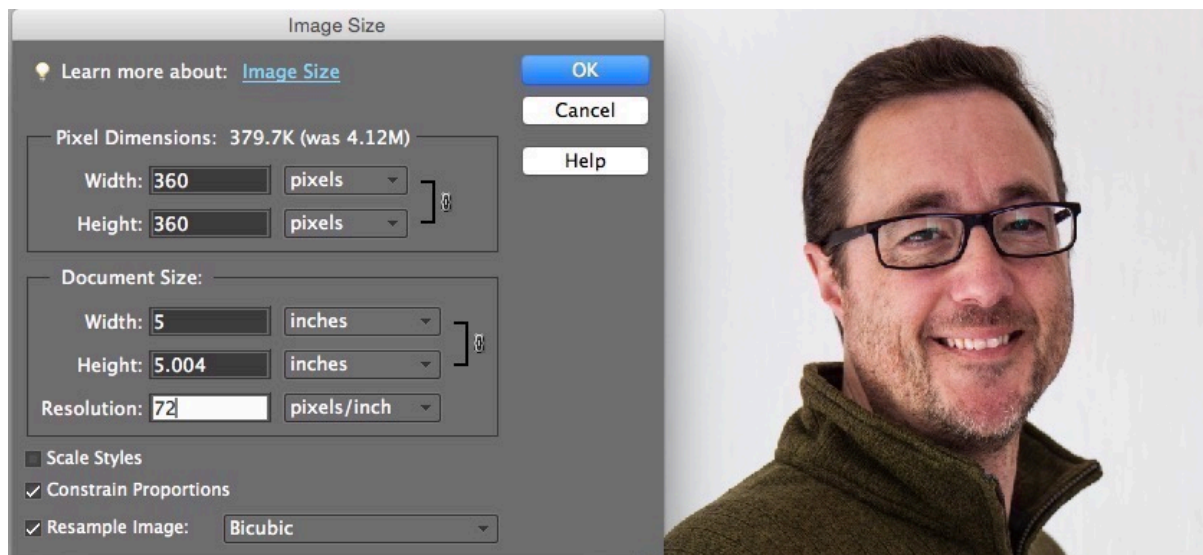
So, to display a one-inch square photo on the Internet takes 5,184 dots, but to publish a one-inch square photo in a magazine takes 90,000 dots.

Why have I told you this? Not because I want to baffle you with numbers, but because I think it helps to explain why when a magazine asks for an author photo they often ask for a **high resolution** image. A high resolution image has lots more information, so it is capable of producing lots of dots to make up that final print image. The more information it has, the more dots it can produce, so the bigger the photo can be used in the publication. This makes it more useful to the print media. Big photos offer editors flexibility. A large photo can always be made smaller, but a small photo can't be made bigger.

Images for the Internet are often known as **low resolution images**.

All photos can be used at different resolutions. However, changing the resolution affects the size the image can be used at.

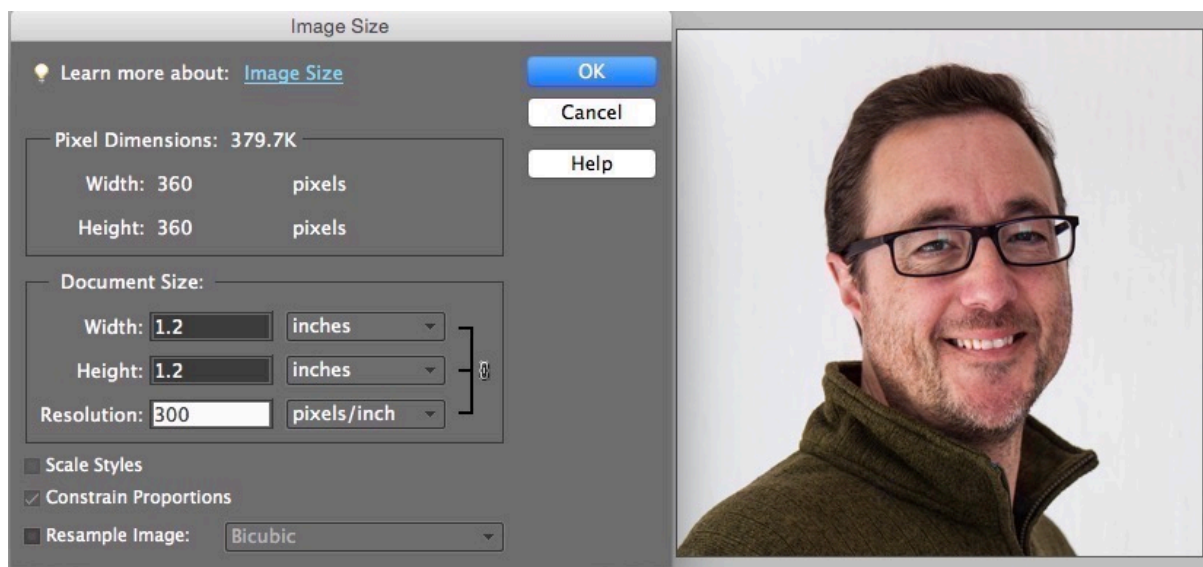
Here's a screen print from the Adobe Photoshop image processing software, showing the details of my Internet Author Photo image:



On the left hand side, near the bottom of the box above, can you see where it says **Resolution: 72 pixels/inch?**

Above this are the **Width** and **Height** sizes. This shows that at 72 dots per inch, this will produce an image that is five inches wide by just over five inches high. On a computer screen, that will look quite big.

Now, if a magazine was going to print this image, it would need to print it a resolution of 300 dots per inch. Look what happens to the document size when we change the resolution from 72dpi to 300dpi:





Whoa! Notice now, that to obtain the required 300 dots per inch resolution our image can now only be printed a 1.2 inches wide and 1.2 inches tall. We've had to shrink our Internet image by more than 4 times in order to be able to print it at the right resolution.

File Size

There are many software programmes you can use to check a photo's resolution: Adobe Photoshop, GIMP, Pixelmator, Paint, Preview, to name a few. However, if these all seem rather complicated and you'd rather not go fiddling around with a photo's resolution there is a simpler way of assessing whether your photo is of a high enough resolution. A high resolution image will have a larger file size than a low resolution image because it contains more *dot information*. (Photo files have file sizes just like our manuscript documents.)

Here's a screen print showing the file sizes of my two images: the 72dpi Internet image and the 300dpi high resolution image.

Name	Size	Kind	Date Modified
 Simon Whaley at 72dpi.jpg	109 KB	JPEG image	Today 17:51
 Simon Whaley at 300dpi.jpg	1.3 MB	JPEG image	Today 17:54

Both of these files produce an image that is 5 inches wide by 5 inches tall: one at 300 dots per inch for print purposes, and the other for the Internet at 72 dots per inch. See how the 300dpi image has a file size of 1.3Mb (Megabytes), whereas the Internet file has a size of 109Kb (Kilobytes). One megabyte has 1,024 kilobytes, so the 300dpi photo is a much bigger file size than the Internet version file.

So, a good rule of thumb to remember is: THE BIGGER THE FILE SIZE, THE BETTER! A file size of at least 1Mb (one megabyte) will produce a good-sized, usable photo for publishing in print media.

If your author photo has a file size of between 500kb and 1Mb, that's still usable, although your image won't be very big. A file size greater than 1Mb will be much more

useful. If your photo has a file size bigger than 2Mb then the editor will be wetting themselves with excitement. And if your photo is bigger than 4Mb you may even make the front cover.

Take Care When Emailing Your Author Photo

A problem can arise with our computers when they try to be more clever than us. For example, sometimes you can right-click on an image and select an option, such as *Email this Image*. Great! That's just what I'm after, you might think. But some computer programmes will run a little programme in the background that shrinks the file size of the image before it turns it into an email attachment, to make emailing it easier and quicker. (Smaller files are easier to send, and are less likely to overload the recipient's inbox.) So you might *think* you're sending a good quality photo, but your computer has just created a low resolution copy which, as we've just seen, is the last thing the editor wants.

If I send a photo by email from my iPhone, or iPad, I get offered four different size options for the photo: Small, Medium, Large or Actual Size. I ALWAYS send the ACTUAL SIZE photo, because that will send the biggest file size.

Similarly, some photo editing programmes often give you the option of saving a photo ready for website use, or for emailing. These frequently shrink the file size of the photo making it of little use for print use. DO NOT USE THIS OPTION.

The best way to email a photo is to start a new message in your email software and then use the paperclip attachment option to attach the photo to the email. Browse as you would normally to attach a manuscript to an email, and select your photo. This should prevent your computer from reducing the image file size for the purposes of emails.

Again, things are changing. Email programmes are getting smarter in that when you select your chosen file the email software will upload it to a temporary online storage folder and create an Internet link, like a website address. It's this link that gets emailed to your recipient and when they click on it their email software will download the file.

This is fine, because the recipient is still getting a copy of your original high resolution file.

There's nothing stopping you doing something similar. Services from www.dropbox.com or www.box.com allow you to create a folder and upload files to that folder. Then you can 'share' access to the folder. This creates a website link that you can email to anyone, and they'll be able to access that folder and download the file. The beauty of this is you only need to create the folder once and upload your author photo to it once, and it's there permanently (or until you delete it or close your account). Both www.dropbox.com and www.box.com allow you to create a free account with several gigabytes of free storage space (which is more than ample).

To see how this works, click on the following link: <https://app.box.com/s/714kha3xn6b7xz6gnbi8> (Admittedly, it's not a sexy, easy-to-remember website address, but when you're cutting and pasting it into an email message, and the editor is clicking on the link, it's not a major problem.)

This link takes you to a folder I've created on Box.com where I've uploaded high resolution photos of all of my book front cover images. This is what I send to editors when they ask for images of my books.

So, the next time someone asks you for a high resolution author photo, don't panic. If you already have a photo sitting on your computer check out its file size. If it's bigger than 1Mb in size then chances are the editor will be happy with it. If it's smaller than that, then why not take a new one? After all, we all need a little updating from time to time, don't we?

Seven Top Tips For A Professional Author Photo

1. Think head and shoulders. Readers are more interested in your face, not your belly button.

2. Smile! Not everyone finds this easy, but try. A Mona Lisa-style grin is better than a sneer.
3. Avoid props. Anything connected with writing (pen and notepad, laptop, chocolate) detracts from your face. Despite my comments about large file sizes, sometimes author photos are used quite small. When this happens the photo's extra contents get lost and difficult to see.
4. Let your head and shoulders fill the frame. (If your image is used at a small size your face will still be recognisable.)
5. Go for plain backgrounds. Filling the frame with your head and shoulders leaves little space for anything else. That's one reason for keeping your background plain and simple. The other reason is who wants the Eiffel Tower, or some other famous landmark appearing to grow out of the top of your head?
6. Make the effort to take a photo. Don't use a photo someone else took of you while you were on holiday (like the one of you holding three pints of beer, or downing six shots, or wearing angel wings on that last stag or hen do you went on). And cropping yourself from a larger group photo often leaves some unknown person's arm draped around your neck. (That's assuming people can work out it's someone's arm and not something else.)
7. Don't hold up your latest book. Not only does this detract from your face, but when you have another book to promote this photo is useless!

About Simon Whaley

Simon Whaley is a writer and photographer. He's the author of thirteen books, including three for writers: *The Positively Productive Writer*, *Photography for Writers*, and *The Complete Article Writer*. <http://www.simonwhaley.co.uk/books-for-writers/>