The Thumbnail Guide

Why are thumbnails so important?

If you're reading this, it means you're **serious about Youtube**. You've been on the platform long enough to realise how important thumbnails are.

So important, that you could (and probably have) spent hours, days, weeks working on a video that's so perfect, it has to go **viral**. You finally get it done and in the excitement of wanting to show the world your masterpiece, you quickly patch together a mediocre thumbnail and race to the upload button. You sit there nervously, refreshing Youtube Studio waiting for the millions of views to pour in and... *crickets*.

Now, I'm not saying the content itself isn't important, **it's extremely important**, but it's only half the battle. The question you have to ask yourself is how would a viewer get there in the first place?

Both these thumbnails could have exactly the same content behind them, but which one do you think would do better?

They say "don't judge a book by its cover", and I suppose the Gen-Z equivalent might be "don't judge a video by its thumbnail" but regardless, I **completely disagree** with that statement.

And whether you realise it or not, **so do you.**

Every day we go onto Youtube and what do we do?
We quickly scan the videos on the homepage and look for something that gets our **attention** and makes us **curious** enough to watch.

And how do we make that decision?
Granted, there might be a few creators that you're a diehard fan for and would click whatever, but more times than not, you make that decision solely based on the **title and thumbnail.**

Let's think about it from Youtube's perspective (the profit-hungry, suit-wearing, boardroom-sitting perspective). Their goal is to get you, the consumer, watching videos and keep you watching videos for as long as possible. The **more videos** you watch, the **more ads** you see, the **more money** Youtube gets.

How do they do this?

The Algorithm has joined the chat

The algorithm shows you videos that it thinks you're going to watch. Videos on topics you're **interested in** (based on your history), that you're going to **click on** (based on the videos click-through rate), that **keep you watching** (based on the videos retention).

The algorithm only gets so many chances to show you content that hits those 3 markers before you get bored and go and see what **TikTok** has to offer instead (not what Youtube wants).

Hopefully, now you can see, even if you're making videos that viewers can't take their eyes off if people aren't clicking on it in the first place (because of the title and thumbnail), Youtube isn't going to waste sacred real-estate on its platform and push it.
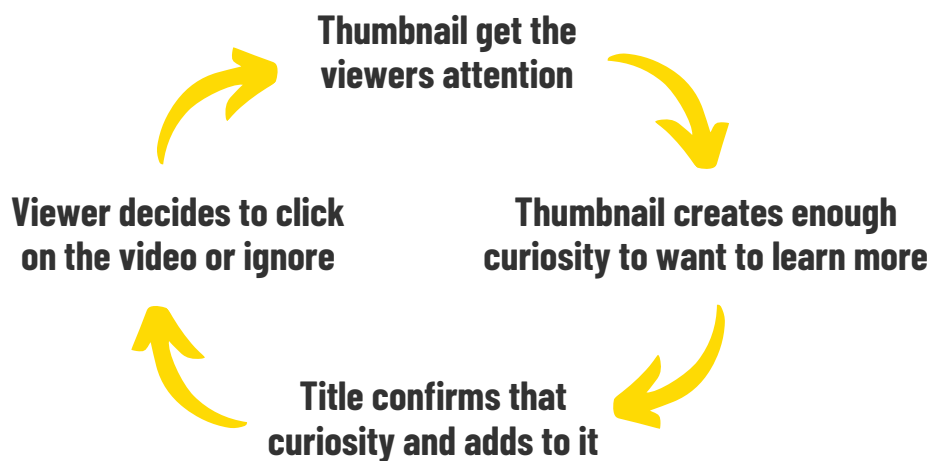
Now, let's start making some thumbnails.

@theJayAlto

Title vs Thumbnails

While this guide is heavily focused on thumbnails, my goal isn't to take anything away from the **importance of titles.**

Titles and thumbnails should be seen as a **powerful combination** that work together to achieve the ultimate goal of getting a viewer to click your video.

The way I see this relationship work is like so;

Thumbnail get the viewers attention

Thumbnail creates enough curiosity to want to learn more

Title confirms that curiosity and adds to it

Viewer decides to click on the video or ignore

So, don't neglect your titles! Create them using the same principles I'm about to explain to create a perfect combination that leaves your viewer with **no choice but to click.**

Paddy Galloway

Youtube Consultant

▶ 240k+ Subscribers

"Thumbnails sell your video to the audience. Simply by changing a thumbnail on a video, I have turned a flop into a trending video with 3 million views. That's how important they are to video performance"

Clickbait

Clickbait thumbnails **overpromise and underdeliver**, and while I might passionately explain the importance of thumbnails, CONTENT IS KING.

While a high click-through rate (CTR) - the measure of a successful thumbnail - is extremely important, watch time is also just as important. Clickbait thumbnails create **false expectations** for your viewers and when your content doesn't deliver, they'll simply click off and your watch time will plummet.

Your thumbnails can only ever be as good as the video itself and I want to help you get more **eyes on your content**, not deceive people into clicking your video.

I couldn't resist

The Aim

There are hundreds of ways to make a great thumbnail and this guide is not intended to give you a step-by-step walkthrough on how to do so. Instead, it aims to give you a framework that allows your **creativity to run wild.**

My goal is to help you create thumbnails that improve your video's performance by **optimising for humans, not the algorithm.**

Focus on creating thumbnails with the best interests of your audience in mind, which will in turn allow you to reach more people and spread your message.

How to create better thumbnails

There are **three key elements** to a great thumbnail:

👀 **Attention**

👫 **Trust**

🧐 **Curiosity**

I'm going to define and **break down** each one, using **real-world examples**, giving you everything you need to achieve all three.

Hopefully, you'll start to notice certain techniques could be in more than one of the elements and that's the beauty of it. These techniques are so fluid and can be used in endless combinations.

Attention 👀

/attention/ *noun*
1. The regarding of someone or something **as interesting or important.**

This seems reasonably self-explanatory, you want a thumbnail that grabs the viewers attention, but let's put it into context to appreciate how we can achieve it.

Let's imagine where your thumbnail is going to be seen. Ultimately, if it's going to be a 'successful' video, it's going to be in one or more of the following places;

- Homepage
- Suggested videos
- Search results

While they all work in different ways, one thing they all have in common is your video is going to be competing with a lot of other videos, all **battling for the viewers' attention.**

Let's take the homepage for example; your potential viewers' journey is pretty straightforward.

- They open up Youtube
- They (quickly) scroll through a list of videos the algorithm has selected for them
- Until one thumbnail gets their attention
- They then inspect further (properly view thumbnail, read title) and decide on whether the video is worth watching
- They choose to watch the video or continue scrolling
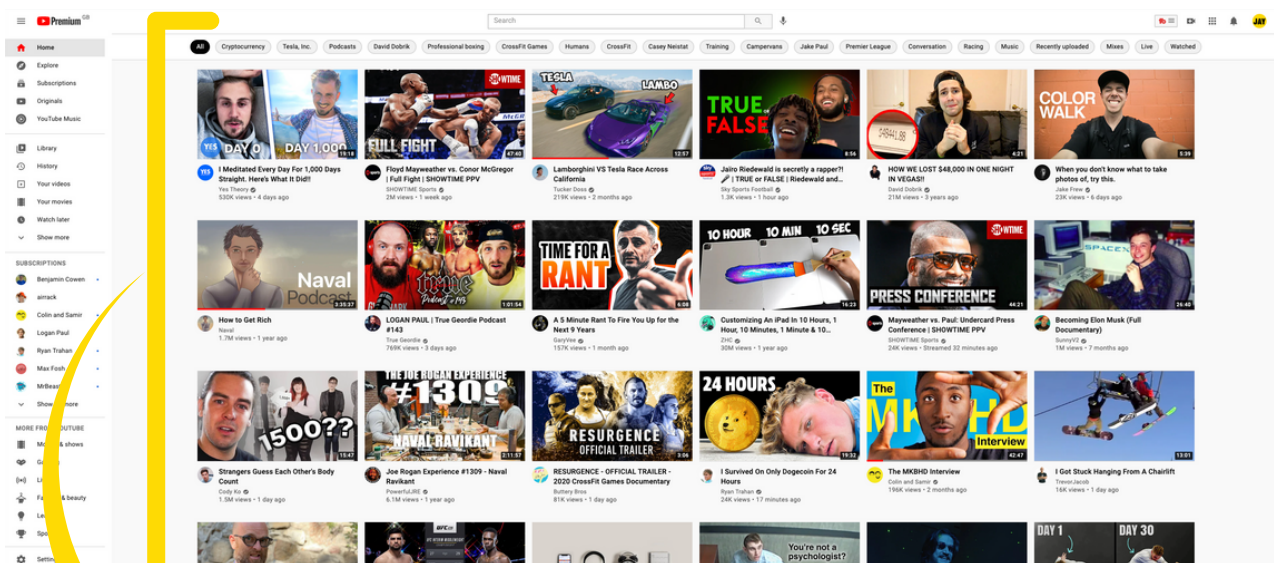
Taking the homepage as an example, your video will be going up against a tonne of other videos all battling for the viewer's attention. Mediocre thumbnails don't stand a chance on such a competitive platform.

From this we can see, the first thing your thumbnail needs to do is grab the potential **viewer's attention**. Here's how you can do it...

1.) Image

Youtube is a visual platform and thumbnails are no different. They are a **one-frame, sales pitch** for your video. That's why you want to try and use the most attention-grabbing image you can find that's related to your video.

💰 The money-shot:

You've seen these types of thumbnails a tonne before. If your video is to do with a crazy adventure, challenge or stunt, the money shot is a **single image** that **captures it perfectly**.

If **Yes Theory** are known for anything, it's crazy adventures, challenges and stunts, and that's why you'll see them using 'the money-shot' thumbnail a lot.

These are perfect examples of how an image can grab a viewer's attention by capturing the craziness of a video in a single shot.

"Overnight on the Most Dangerous Bed in the World!!"

"Travelling to the Happiest Country in the World"

😱 **Break the norm:**

Another way an image can grab the viewer's attention is by using one that's so **unusual**, they have no choice but to stop their scroll.

It's not too dissimilar from the money-shot but it doesn't necessarily have to be a picture hanging from the side of a cliff, it's much more about highlighting the concept.

What better way to demonstrate this than **MrBeast's** most viewed video, 'I Put 100 Million Orbeez In My Friends Backyard', with a whopping 124 million views.

Have you ever seen anything quite like this? It's such an **unusual, crazy picture** that if it doesn't get you at least to consider clicking the video, I don't know what will.

"I Put 100 Million Orbeez In My Friends Backyard"

2.) Colour

Endless studies claim which colour is the most eye-catching but ultimately having any colour can make your thumbnail **stand out**.

🌈 **Colour used in graphic elements:**

While this is often seen as a 'clickbait-tactic', a well-placed graphic element can really help get the **viewers attention** and draw them to the key part of the thumbnail.

MrBeast uses a red arrow and circle to catch the viewer's attention as well as emphasising the point of the video.

"Anything You Can Fit In the Circle I'll Pay For"

💥 **Colour used in an image:**

This is a very effective way of getting the viewers attention but can be dependent on the video itself.

Mark Rober uses an image of one of his colourful experiments in the thumbnail which instantly catches your attention.

"World's Largest Devil's Toothpaste Explosion"

3.) Text

Clear, bold text is a great way to get the viewers attention and allows them to quickly understand what the video is about.

I'd recommend using **three words or less -** any more and viewers won't have time to process them when they're quickly scrolling.

In terms of what words to include, You want to use **keywords** that get the viewer interested in your video.

Airrack uses a clear, bold font, as well as colour, to get the viewers attention.

"How I WON This $100,000 Yacht"

He also uses a large sum of money which is a perfect, concise way of getting the viewers attention and creating a tonne of curiosity. While it might be seen as another clickbait-tactic, if used truthfully it works extremely well.

ZHC also uses text extremely well. He always uses 1-3 words that capture the story and create curiosity.

"I Surprised Addison Rae With A Custom Car!"

"I Spent 100 Hours Locked In My Art Room"

Trust 👫

/trust/ *noun*

1. Firm belief in the <mark>reliability, truth, or ability</mark> of someone or something.

Now you've got someone's attention, they have to make a split decision on whether to click on your video or not. For this to happen the viewer has to trust your video is going to deliver on what they expect.

While real trust with an audience takes much more than a thumbnail, it's the first opportunity you have, and there are several ways you can do it.

Recognition

Having something viewers instantly recognise in a thumbnail is a great way to build trust with your potential audience and work with the algorithm.

Whether your video is on a potential viewers homepage, a suggested video or in the search results it's there because Youtube thinks it's relevant to that individual.

By making sure you include something in your thumbnail that your potential audience can recognise, you can quickly show them your video is about something they are interested in.

1.) Creator Hacking

One of the most effective ways this is done is by using other creators in your thumbnails. The aim is to effectively capture the attention (and trust) of another creator's audience and turn it into your own.

This is without a doubt, an extremely important part of how **Airrack** was able to grow to **1 million subscribers** in less than a year.

"Dropping $100,000 Yacht Into Logan Paul's Pool"

"I Boxed Jake Paul over $90,000 Couches *painful* - Episode 3

He knew that if he could get these thumbnails in front of a fraction of the respective creators' audience, they would **instantly recognise** them and want to click, **leveraging the trust they've built.**

It was then up to Airrack to deliver on the content and convert some of these **viewers into fans.**

2.) Product/Trend Hacking

This also works by using any trend, product or brand in your thumbnails to get the viewers trust.

MKBHD does this very well. Even if you don't know who MKBHD is, his thumbnails leverage the power of big brands and products which enables him to capture an audience who are interested in them, not just his fans.

This thumbnail uses the power of a brand and product the whole world is familiar with and the majority trust.

"iOS 14 Hands-On: Everything New!"

Branding

This may seem more relevant for creators with an audience but it's something that should be done from the start. Turning a viewer into a fan is one of the hardest parts of being a creator and it's all about trust.

The aim of branding is to create thumbnails that viewers can instantly recognise. So, when you keep delivering exceptional content, they'll instantly know when they see one of your thumbnails and want to click.

Yes Theory do this very discreetly and effectively by using their logo in each of their thumbnails. Even something as small as this can help people recognise your thumbnail.
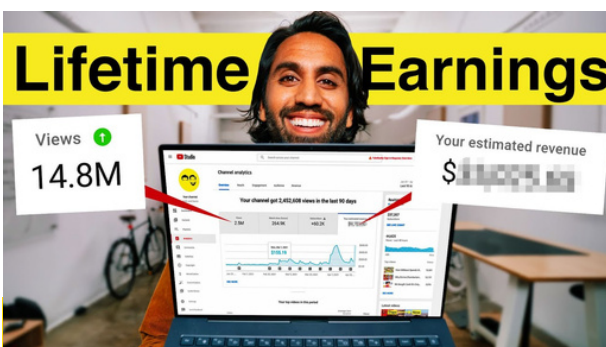

"Travelling to the Least Visited Country in the World"

"We Fooled the Internet w/Fake Justin Bieber Burrito Photo"

Another great example of branding is **Colin and Samir.**

"How Much Youtube Paid Us Since The Beginning (14M Views)"

"How We Sold an NFT for $___"

They consistently use the same yellow and font to make sure that viewers instantly know it's a Colin and Samir video as soon as they see it, leveraging the trust they've built with their audience.

Emma Chamberlain also does this very well. She creates very consistent thumbnails that always include herself and similar text, so her fans know when they see one of her videos.

*"GROCERY SHOPPING CURES BOREDOM"*

"I USED TO EAT THIS!?"
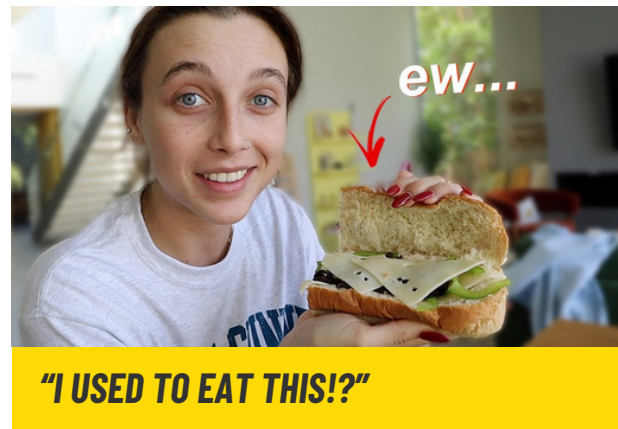
People

One final way you can build trust with your thumbnails is by putting somebody in them, whether it's a recognised person or not.

While some people like to focus on the algorithm ultimately, you are making videos for other humans. We are much more likely to trust the video when we can build an instant connection with another human.

Faces are also the best way to convey emotion, something that's extremely important when trying to capture your video in a single frame (just don't go over the top...).
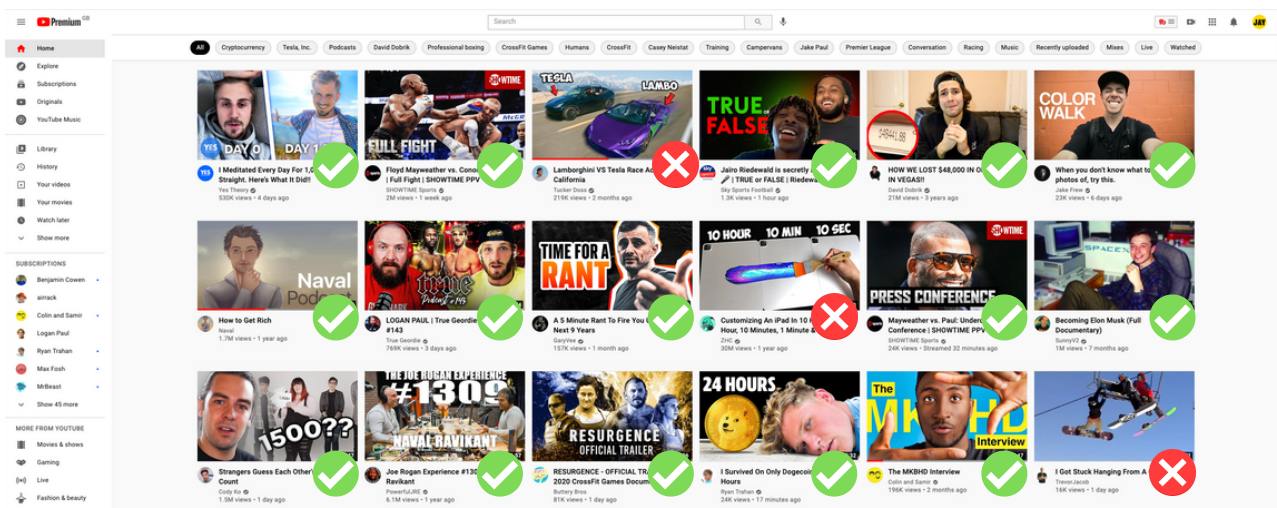
You only have to look at your Youtube homepage to see how many thumbnails clearly include people.

/curiosity/ *noun*
1. a strong desire to know or learn something.

Now we've got the viewers attention and trust, we want to make sure they have **no other option but to click**

🤔 How do we do that? **Curiosity**.

We want to make sure that the thumbnail and title leave the viewer with a strong desire to know or learn something. Create a **craving** that's so great, they have to satisfy it.

Expected pleasure of clicking the video > aversiveness of the curiosity itself

From studying the psychology behind curiosity, I found **4 relevant causes** of curiosity that should be considered when creating a thumbnail;

1.) Posing a question or puzzle

Any thumbnail which can successfully demonstrate **missing information** leaves the potential viewer wanting to find out the answer/solution. This is a great way to set up a clear purpose for the video and give the viewer a reason to click.


This very clearly sets up a question that leaves the viewer wanting to find out the answer. This is currently **Airrack's** best performing video, with over 4 million views.

"What Happens if you Hire 50 Bodyguards?"

2.) A sequence of events with anticipated but unknown resolution

This is all about creating a thumbnail that **teases the story** enough to allow the potential viewer to **predict** what might happen but excludes enough to create some curiosity to find out what actually happens.

This balance is very powerful because it makes the potential viewer want to watch to find out the **outcome**, while also seeing if their **prediction was correct.**
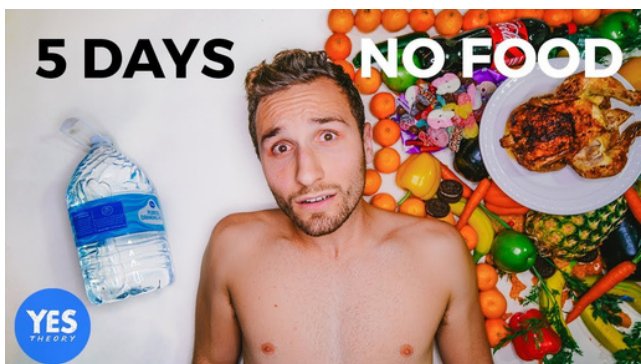
Yes Theory

**"I didn't eat anything for 5 days...
This is what happened"**

The Unlazy way

**What happens if you don't eat for
10 days? | WATER FAST RESULTS**

Any sort of before and after, or time-based thumbnail is a great way to create curiosity.

In both of these examples, some form of transformation is shown and we instantly make a prediction of what has happened, but also really want to see it play out.

3.) Violation of expectation

These are thumbnails that are so **out of the ordinary**, they instantly trigger us to want an explanation.

Someone who does this better than anyone is **MrBeast**. I know you're probably thinking 'it's easy to make an amazing thumbnail when you have an infinite budget to create crazy videos' and I agree, but there's a reason MrBeast is so successful and trying to learn from him, particularly his thumbnails, is a great way to understand what works.

MrBeast

"I Spent 50 Hours Buried Alive"

MrBeast

"Last To Leave Pool Of $20,0000 Keeps It"

MrBeast

"I Built The World's Largest Lego Tower"

All three of these thumbnails demonstrate such **unusual situations**, we can't help but want an explanation.

3.) Possession of information by somebody else

This is particularly useful (but not limited) to people making **educational content.**

It's all about creating a thumbnail that demonstrates what information the video is going to provide, which triggers the realisation of a gap in the potential viewer's knowledge and creates the urge to fill it.

Paddy Galloway

"Here's why MrBeast is a Genius - How he grew his Youtube channel"

Graham Stephan

"The Millionaire Investing Advice for Teenagers"

Colin and Samir

"What's wrong with Apple?"

These thumbnails all demonstrate what information the video might **reveal** and if it's something you're interested in, you'll have a real **urge** to want to find out what it is.

👀 Attention

What's in your thumbnail that's going to stop people from scrolling?

_____

_____

☐ **Image** - a breathtaking image that stands out amongst other videos

☐ **Colour** - the use of colour in the imagery or graphic elements

☐ **Text** - 1-3 words that easily catch the eye of the potential viewer

👫 Trust

What's in your thumbnail that a viewer can relate to and identify with?

_____

_____

☐ **Creator-hacking** - including a well-known creator or person

☐ **Product/trend-hacking** - including a well-known product, trend or brand

☐ **Branding** - using consistent elements that are unique to your channel

☐ **People** - include somebody

🧐 Curiosity

What's in your thumbnail that gives the viewer a strong desire to know or learn something?

_____

_____

☐ **Posing a question or puzzle**

☐ **Sequence of events with anticipated but unknown resolution**

☐ **Violation of expectations**

☐ **Possession of information by somebody else**

🐦 **@theJayAlto**

Practical Tips

Here are some practical tips on how to effectively use the above principles to create great thumbnails.

Maximum file size: **2MB**

16:9
aspect
ratio

720 pixels

1280 pixels
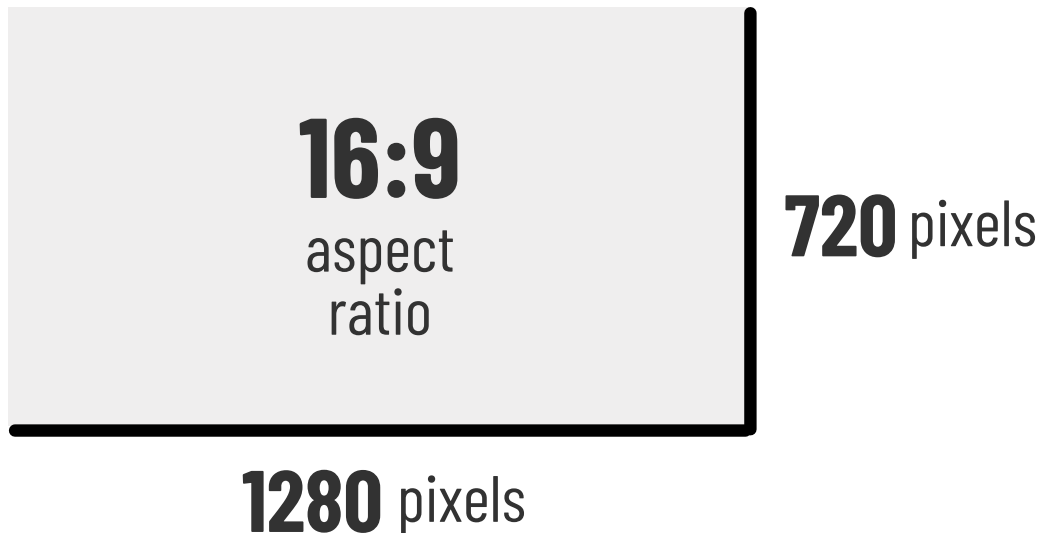
Design Considerations

If you're creating a thumbnail in full screen, on a laptop, it's going to look completely different when it's a **(smaller) thumbnail on Youtube.**

Final sizing is something you have to consider to make sure you don't end up with text viewers can't read or faces they can't see, always review your thumbnail as a smaller image.

You can do this by zooming out of whatever you're creating the thumbnail in (potentially even designing it in this view), or export the file and add it to a Youtube homepage or search results mockup for reference.

Software

Software is no excuse for not creating great thumbnails. There are so many options out there and making great thumbnails is all about the **principles you use** to create them, not the tools you have.

Advanced programs like Photoshop can often be overkill for a thumbnail. Focus on the **core elements** of what makes a great thumbnail and you'll realise that pretty much any software can do what you need.

Here are some recommendations:

Canva

- Very simple and intuitive software
- Great place to start if you're looking to level up your thumbnails
- Has a free plan (which includes a lot) and a relatively inexpensive paid plan which unlocks a load of useful elements you can use.

Photoshop

- Advanced software with more tools and features
- Very powerful but can be confusing to get started
- Slightly more expensive with less generous monthly/annual plans
- Worth it if you're looking to go into more detail within the edits

Lightroom

- Great software for enhancing images
- Similar to Photoshop, slightly more expensive with less generous plans
- Does have a powerful mobile app
- Great for getting the most out of image-based thumbnails

Luminar AI

- Extremely powerful tool that uses AI to make advanced tools and features super easy to use
- At the time of writing, it has a one-off cost of around $80
- Great for being able to easily manipulate images

Thank you

I hope you have found this guide useful!

If you have any **thumbnail-related questions,** please get in touch:

@theJayAlto

jay@thumbnail.guide

Any feedback will be greatly appreciated and I do also have some availability for **consulting calls** and other **thumbnail-related services,** get in touch!

Thanks again for the support,

Jay Alto