

Adding Photos to a Nonfiction Report: An Interview with Sarah Albee

Art plays an important role in nonfiction writing. We often hear illustrators describe their creative process, but what about the photos that appear in many nonfiction books? Where do they come from, and how do they end up in print? To answer these questions and more, I interviewed award-winning author Sarah Albee.

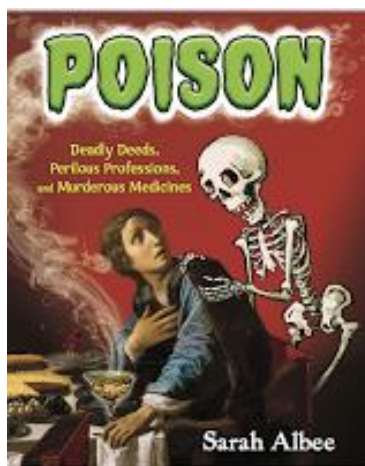
MS: Thanks for taking the time to talk to me about how you find and obtain the images that appear in your books. Do you just cut and paste photos from the internet?

SA: No way! That would be unfair to the photographer, and also illegal. I need to find out who owns the rights to every image I use. Some images are in the public domain. That means they aren't copyrighted and anyone can use them free of charge. Most images published in the U.S. before 1923 are in the public domain. Some more recent images are too, but I have to do some research to find out.

MS: About what percentage of the photos you use are in the public domain?

SA: For both my books and my blog, about 80 percent. That's because I'm writing about history. Many of the images I need are pre-1923. The percentage would be lower if I were writing about science.

MS: If an image isn't in the public domain, what do you do?



SA: Most of the time I buy it from a photo stock house—a company that sells the rights to use images taken by many different photographers. Some of the money goes to the photo stock house and the rest goes to the photographer.

Once in a while, when I see a picture I want online of a hard-to-find image, I track down the photographer myself. For my book *Poison: Deadly Deeds, Perilous Professions, and Murderous Medicines* (Crown, 2017), I needed a picture of a venomous snail

called *Conus magus*. I spotted a photograph of one [in this National Public Radio story](#). But NPR didn't own the rights to the photo, so I tracked down the people credited and emailed them. It took a while, but I finally heard back. The photographers gave me permission and sent me a high-quality version of the image.

MS: Wow, that sounds like a lot of work!

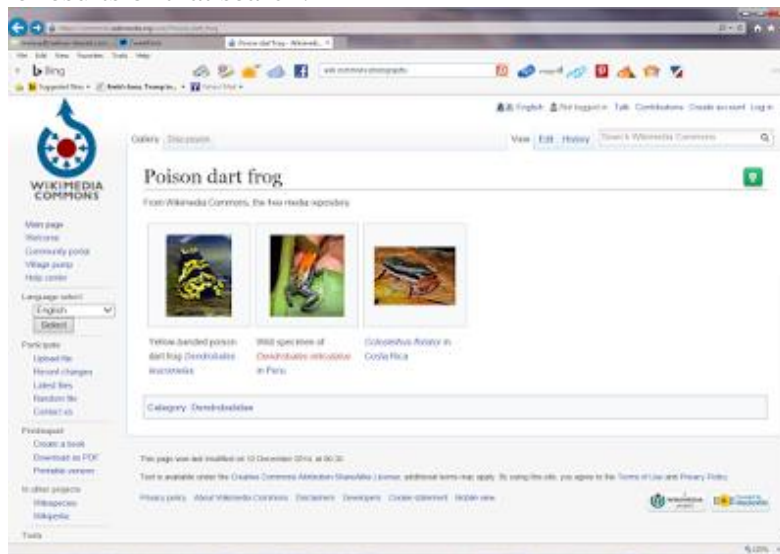
SA: It can be a tedious, time-consuming process, but it's important to me that my books include the best possible photos.

MS: How could teachers have students model your process in the classroom—so that they learn to respect copyright law at an early age?

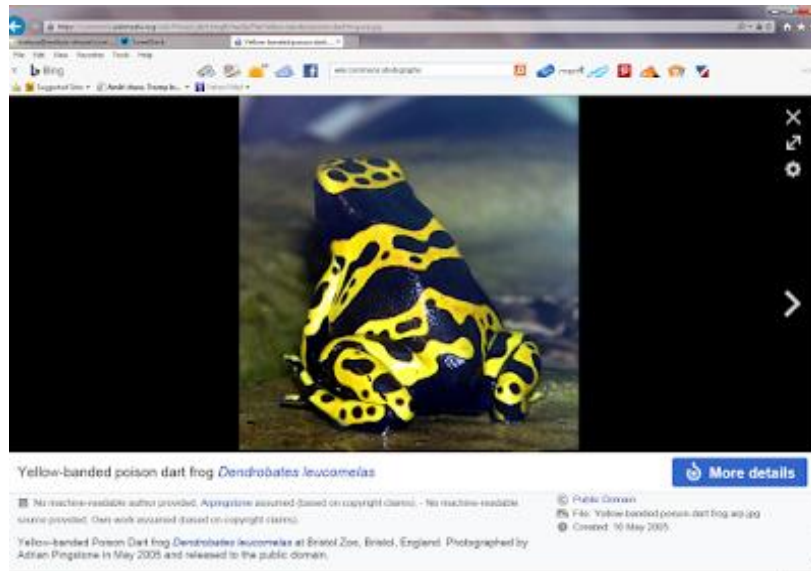
SA: After explaining the importance of using images legally, a teacher could give her class a list of websites with photos that are solidly public domain and recommend that the students use only those sites to find photos. [This list from the edtechteacher website](#) is a good place to start.

MS: Let's say a student is doing a report on frogs and wants to include a photo of a poison dart frog. What would he or she do?

SA: [Wikimedia Commons](#) would be a good source for this kind of image. The student would go to the website and type "poison dart frog" in the search box in the top right corner of the screen. Here are the results of that search:



Then the student would click on the image he or she liked to get more information:



The description at the bottom tells us the name of the frog, where and when the image was taken, and the name of the photographer. It also verifies that the image is in the public domain. Students should give the photographer credit in their report. They can use the photo credit section in any photo-illustrated book as a model.

MS: Thanks for this great information, Sarah. It will really help teachers show their students the right way to choose images.

Disclaimer from Sarah: I am not a copyright attorney. Copyright law is full of ambiguity. The information I've shared is what I believe to be correct. Please feel free to comment if you see something that you think is inaccurate.