Free Online Graphic Design Software
Canva versus Adobe Express
Jess Barth

Library staff are often required to wear many hats during daily operations. One of these many hats is to make flyers, posters, or any number of marketing materials to better showcase the many services they can provide. For those without any artistic capabilities, financial support for expensive software, or free time, creating such materials can often be difficult. Thus, some online graphic design programs have come to prominence to assist with devising appealing marketing materials that better inform our users. Many library staff have their own preferred web-based design program. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses, and which is chosen depends on many factors. The two stand-out free programs based on overlapping features and variety of templates are Canva and Adobe Express. In many cases these two programs are extremely similar, which makes the few differences really stand out. Looking at the base free accounts for both, the few differences in approach to AI, features, and feel-to-use are the biggest differences between the two.

For more than a decade, [Canva](#) has been the online graphic design program of choice for amateur designers, helping them to create everything from flyers to research posters, presentations to videos, and anything else in between. The broad variety of creative possibilities, massive number of editable templates, and ease of use to manipulate assets to craft the perfect product sets Canva apart from any other online graphic design program. Canva has always stood apart when it comes to making good graphic design easy, practical, and free for a majority of its features.

By comparison, [Adobe Creative Cloud](#) is known to have an extensive suite of professional graphical software applications, each with a specific purpose and integrated within the software suite to build and enhance a project. But the steep learning curve and high cost made it hard for the casual designer to experiment with the software. As a result, in 2016 Adobe launched Adobe Spark to help inexperienced creators with three specific things: video, websites, and graphics.[1] Spark's debut did not inspire much use while Canva's popularity grew. With a consolidation and rebrand in 2022, [Adobe Express](#) launched, by putting its own spin on many of Canva's features.

In the three years since its launch, Adobe Express has undergone many evolutions, including adding more features, modifying layout of tools, and tweaks to how the program works. Each update to the program often means new features, but Adobe Express' frequent changes require taking a few minutes to refamiliarize oneself with the program after each update. This inconsistency between uses can lead to frustration, leading users to seek out a more consistent program like Canva.

However, Adobe's frequent modifications to Adobe Express can bring simplified versions of its software to this free web-based program. The best example of this is being able to animate a character based on your voice in [Adobe Express](#), which is essentially a simplified version of [Adobe](#)

About the Author

Jess Barth (jbarthud@udel.edu) is Emerging Multimedia Technologies Librarian, University of Delaware. © 2025.

Character Animator. In this way, it appears that Adobe is using Adobe Express as a testing ground and getting users familiar with the many other creative software options in the Adobe ecosystem, which may convert them into future paying customers for their other products.

The major difference between Canva and Adobe Express is how artificial intelligence (AI) is incorporated into each service. AI is often a bad word in many creative fields but, depending on what the tools are and how the learning models are created, can really set two relatively similar services apart. Both programs have AI features, such as creating an image or template, removing backgrounds from images, and manipulating an image with the use of AI. The difference is how much you can do with a basic free account. On Canva's default home screen, a text box with an option of using "Canva AI" is front and center. Selecting that will give a user four basic options of using AI to generate: a design, an image, a document, or code. These are all available with a free account. However, if you want to manipulate an image by removing the background or a particular object or adding a new object with the use of AI in Canva's Magic Studio Photo Editor (found under the "+ Create" menu on the left side), you quickly find that these features all have a crown icon, indicating these are paid features. This means that if you want to use AI to help create a flyer, the free version of Canva can do that by assembling a template, but if you need to remove a background from an image for that flyer, then you will have to pay to do that, which makes it harder to incorporate your own images into designs.

Canva makes learning about its AI terms of service somewhat easy since it is found close to its AI-generation features. While fairly generic, these terms cover all the basic concerns. However, if you want to learn about how many images you can generate or any other specifics about the program, that terms of service page gives only vague answers. To find the answer to how many images you can generate, you must look at the pricing plan for Canva Pro to learn about the different features available for each membership level. Some AI features are not available or extremely limited for the basic free user compared to a Canva Pro plan. As of August 2025, the free account allows for 20 credits per month where the pro account allows for 500 credits per month using Canva Dream Lab image generator. Or with a pro account, 5 credits per month are given toward generating video using Google Veo 3 where a free account does not allow this option at all. Moreover, if you want to learn about where Canva sources its AI features, this information is not as easily found. While not listed in its terms of service, Canva announced in 2024 that it would acquire Leonardo-AI, an AI image generating program which seems like most other image-generating programs.[2] The reliance on many third-party AI programs could lead to privacy and ethical concerns, making Canva the same as other similar programs: no better and no worse. So far, Canva AI programs have not been caught doing anything questionable that we know of.

By contrast, Adobe Express with a basic account allows you to generate an image or template, remove background objects and images, put objects into an image, and generate some video. This easily gives Adobe Express users significantly more access to AI features, for free, than Canva. All of these AI options are prominently displayed on the homepage, which almost begs for them to be tried out. Quick image manipulation—for example, something as simple as removing the background of an image to then use in a design—can be done in Adobe Express without any cost to the user, thus allowing for more variety for designs.

Adobe's AI terms of service are a bit more hidden compared to Canva's; it is all the way at the bottom of the "Generate AI" page. But, within these terms of service, it explicitly states that you may not use any images generated by Adobe products for data gathering purposes, and if you find that your personal intellectual property was used by another party, Adobe gives you proper

channels to remedy this violation. The AI image generation is created using Adobe's own Firefly software. [Adobe Firefly](#) uses Adobe's library of stock and public domain images to train their image-generation products. Thus, on its basic terms of service page, Adobe tries to take an ethical stance on AI image generation by stating outright what they use to create learning models and incorporating creator-first language that focuses artists' interests, even as AI becomes more prevalent.[3] This is at the forefront of a lot of Adobe's marketing of its AI products.[4] As AI is increasingly incorporated into our daily lives, the best way Adobe can remain the gold standard in all creative fields is to create and partner with ethical AI services to protect the rights of intellectual property owners. Whether Adobe is staying true to its ethical policy is up for debate.[5]

Adobe uses a "credit" system to track how often the AI-generation feature can be used, and this system is confusingly explained in [Adobe's Credit FAQ](#). Adobe reserves the right to change the number of credits offered each month to users. Two years ago, a free account allowed for 25 credits that renewed every month; however, starting in July 2025, a free account only receives 10 credits, still renewed every month. Adobe freely gives just enough credits to try out each feature to generate interest, but most users will quickly reach the monthly limit. Regardless of how complex the Adobe credit system is, Adobe Express gives the greatest opportunity to try out basic AI features.

Shifting away from AI, my absolute favorite (though very niche) feature in Adobe Express is the fact that it has a QR code generator built into the application. There is no limit to the number of QR codes you can generate. No need to go to a questionable site to generate QR codes: everything you need to create an advertisement is available within Adobe Express itself. This simple but unique feature also helps it stand out from Canva.

While it's nice to have unique additional features that set a program apart from its competitors, this does not matter if actually using the software tool (editing and creating resources) is difficult, complex, and frustrating. At first glance, each program's basic free account has similar creative possibilities, including making presentations, posters, flyers, social media posts, videos, and websites. The major differences between the two programs are in how the various design features actually work.

When opening both Canva and Adobe Express and comparing their respective default home screens, one notices that many of the layout features are surprisingly similar. Both applications have a left-side tool bar where you can find previous projects, new templates for designs, add-ons, and a plus button with additional features. What order they appear in differs, but both essentially function the same way.

As a concrete example, creating an 8.5x11-inch flyer is much the same in both software systems. Each has different pre-made templates that can be a starting point for any design and then adjusted to meet specific design needs. In a side-by-side comparison in July 2025, there are so many similar features that, in many ways, they are interchangeable. Importing and manipulating text is relatively similar in both, for instance. Editing designs in Canva feels fairly intuitive and easy, though that could be partially due to the fact that I've been using Canva for nearly a decade. The interface hasn't changed much over that time and has overall felt quite consistent through the years. Even trying to manipulate where an object is placed on a flyer and shifting its position in relation to other objects is doable, though it can occasionally feel counter intuitive. Meanwhile, Adobe Express took inspiration from Adobe's many other photo-manipulation programs and implemented an object layer viewer, so you can see where a specific object is placed in relation to

other objects. If an object has many components, like text and a graphic, each component is treated like a typical layer with the option to expand to view each sublayer to the grouped object. This makes moving objects around much simpler than in Canva.

These kinds of differences are best seen when looking at a unique text block that needs to be adjusted. In Canva, you must click on the specific object you want to adjust and manually use arrows to adjust its placement in relation to other objects, because everything is grouped and linked together. However, in Adobe Express, you can select that grouped text object and then open each individual layer to easily manipulate small details within.

These same editing principles are applied to each format being created. Therefore, a lot of the time spent editing in each program comes down to user preference with respect to responsiveness and feeling. For many, including myself, Canva still feels easier to use compared to Adobe Express, especially when designing flyers. And ultimately, how easy it is to use will be the most important factor in determining which application is chosen. Adobe Express has introduced many changes to make it "feel" more like Canva, but there are still some indescribable issues that just make it less fun to use outside of some special cases.

Since the launch of Adobe Express, I've watched as it has changed and morphed into a clone of Canva, with fewer differences separating the two programs over time. The consistency of Canva over the years still makes it my preferred graphic design program. At the same time, I recognize that there are certain things that Adobe Express simply does better than Canva. As of now, one program is not inherently better than the other, since there are few practical differences. It really is starting to come down to whether the few differences are something that will push one over the other in the public's mind. While Adobe Express took what Canva did and replicated it by putting an Adobe flare on it, it looks like, with [Canva's purchase of Affinity](#), Canva may be developing a similar creative suite as Adobe, making the two even more similar in the upcoming years. If you have never tried either program, Canva is a great starting point. If you are familiar with other Adobe products or you want to try something new, Adobe Express is fun to try. Regardless of which program you chose, we can all agree that no one should go back to Microsoft Word flyers with clip art.

ENDNOTES

[1] Sarah Perez, "Adobe Debuts Spark, a Suite of Mobile and Web Tools That Lets Anyone Create Visual Content," *Tech Crunch*, May 19, 2016, https://techcrunch.com/2016/05/19/adobe-debuts-spark-a-suite-of-mobile-and-web-tools-that-lets-anyone-create-visual-content/.

[2] Cameron Adams, "Welcome to Canva, Leonardo!", July 29, 2024. https://www.canva.com/newsroom/news/leonardo-ai/.

[3] "Our approach to generative AI with Adobe Firefly." https://www.adobe.com/ai/overview/firefly/gen-ai-approach.html

[4] Grace Yee, "Reflecting on our Five-year Journey with our AI Ethics Principles," October 14, 2024, https://blog.adobe.com/en/publish/2024/10/14/reflecting-our-five-year-journey-with-our-ai-ethics-principles.

[5] Rachel Metz and Brody Ford, "Adobe's 'Ethical' Firefly AI Was Trained on Midjourney Images," April 12, 2024, https://finance.yahoo.com/news/adobe-ethical-firefly-ai-trained-123004288.html.