Here is how I made icons for the tabs on the UITabBarController. My icons consisted of only two letters but a similar procedure could be used for symbols or simple shapes.

Open a word processing program (e.g. OpenOffice Text). Microsoft Office Word would work as well. Any program that can make formatted text should work.

Select a simple san-serif font. Avoid a font with small details or wide strokes. "Al Bayan" works pretty well.

Make the font size large, e.g., 96. Black type on white background works fine, which is the default.

Move away from the margin and type the letter(s) you need then click elsewhere so the cursor is not near the letter.

Launch "Grab" from the Applications / Utilities folder.

In Grab choose Capture => Selection (command-shift A).

Drag a square selection around your letter with the letter approximately centered. This takes a little practice. The size doesn't matter so long as it's square. For two-letter icons it was about 150 x 150.

Save the captured image in .tiff format (the only format available in Grab).

In the Finder, double click on the tiff image file and it will open in "Preview". (Or open Preview then open the tiff image from within Preview.)

In Preview, if the "select" tool isn't visible on the toolbar above the image, click on the right-pointing arrows at the right side of the toolbar and select "Show Sidebar" to expand the toolbar.

Click on the "select" tool and select "Instant alpha" from the drop-down menu. The cursor changes to a cross.

Put the cursor anywhere in the background area of your image (the white space around the letter) and drag a short distance. A crawling marque forms around the letter and the outside of the image to denote the background. Press the "delete" keyboard key. The background around the letter changes to a checkerboard pattern to indicate that it is now absent.

Do the same thing to delete the background from any enclosed areas in your image, like the loops in "B", "D", "O", etc..

From the Tools menu select "Adjust Size ...". Set the size to 30 x 30.

From the File menu select "Save As...". Set the format to png, be sure "Alpha" is checked, then Save.

You now should have a png file that will work as a tab bar icon.

-Robert Lummis, 12/8/2010