

Print-on-Demand Product Design — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into a finished, sellable product line. Working section by section, you will validate three niches, build correctly specced print files, adapt each design across four product types, stage converting mockups, and write keyword-optimized listings. Use the included spreadsheet, listing, and tracker templates so every decision is recorded and repeatable rather than guessed.

How Print-on-Demand Actually Works: Platforms, Economics, and Niches

Pick your model, run the margin math, and validate three niches with real demand and beatable competition before designing anything.

Worksheet: Niche Validation Scorecard

Pick five candidate niches and fill one row each. Search the niche on Redbubble and Etsy, check Google Trends, and read the top listings honestly. Score demand and competition from 1 (low) to 5 (high). Shortlist the three niches with strong demand and weak or generic top designs.

Candidate niche

Buyer (who exactly wears or gifts this?)

Marketplace results count

Are top designs strong or weak/generic?

Google Trends direction (rising / flat / seasonal)

Demand score (1-5)

Competition score (1-5)

Shortlist? (yes/no) and why

Exercise: Mine the Buyer's Own Language

For each shortlisted niche, open Etsy and Redbubble search and type the niche slowly, recording every autocomplete suggestion. These are real buyer queries. Collect at least 15 phrases per niche - you will reuse them as both design prompts and listing keywords later.

- List 15+ autocomplete phrases per niche, marking the 3 most specific long-tail phrases
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- Which exact words and emotions repeat across the phrases (gift, funny, proud, for dad, vintage)?
- Which occasions appear (birthday, graduation, Christmas, retirement) and when must you publish to catch them?
- Write a one-sentence design concept that answers a top phrase better than the current best listing

Worksheet: Model and Pricing Decision

Decide whether you will sell on a marketplace, your own Printful store, or both, then set target prices using comparable listings rather than hope. Fill the base cost from the platform and compute your real margin. Chosen model (marketplace / own store / hybrid)

Primary platform(s)

Product type

Platform base cost

Target retail price (from comparables)

Gross margin (retail minus base)

Fees (royalty cut or store/transaction fees)

Estimated profit per unit

Checklist: Foundation Ready to Design

- Chosen between marketplace and own-store model with eyes open about who supplies traffic
- Three niches shortlisted with demand and competition scored
- 15+ buyer-language phrases captured per niche
- Margin math run on at least three product types
- Confirmed each chosen product leaves a few dollars of real profit per unit

Print-Ready Files: Specs, Color, and Print Methods That Survive Production

Lock the technical specs - resolution, format, color space, and print method - so your art prints clean instead of soft, washed out, or cropped.

Worksheet: Print File Spec Sheet

For each product you plan to make, record the correct file specs before you build. Pull dimensions and safe areas from the platform's own product template, not a guess.

Product (tee / mug / poster / sticker)

Print method (DTG / sublimation / embroidery / vinyl)

Final print size in inches

Pixel dimensions at 300 DPI

File format (transparent PNG / PDF / other)

Color space (sRGB / CMYK)

Safe area / bleed notes from template

Background (transparent / full-bleed)

Exercise: Garment-Color and Soft-Proof Test

Preview each design against several garment colors and, for posters, soft-proof in CMYK. Decide which color options to actually offer and whether you need a separate light-garment and dark-garment version.

- On which garment colors does the design read clearly, and on which does it vanish or muddy?
- Do you need a light version (e.g. white linework) and a dark version (e.g. black linework)? Describe each.
- Which saturated colors shifted dull when soft-proofed in CMYK, and what will you adjust?
- Which garment color options will you remove from the listing because they fail the test?

Checklist: Pre-Export File Check

- Built at full print size x 300 DPI, never upscaled from a small raster
- Apparel art exported as transparent PNG-24, no white box around the design
- Color space correct: sRGB for apparel, CMYK soft-proofed for posters where required
- Design sits inside the template safe area with the guide layer hidden
- No pure-white on white garments or pure-black on black unless the method handles it
- Sample ordered for any design expected to sell in volume

Designing the Product: One Idea Across Apparel, Drinkware, and Wall Art

Build one strong, thumbnail-legible idea and adapt it correctly across a tee, mug, poster, and sticker while holding brand consistency.

Exercise: The Thumbnail and Hook Test

For each of your three design concepts, shrink it to about 300 pixels and judge it cold against the criteria below before investing finished-art hours.

- At 300px, does the core idea or main word still read in under two seconds? If not, what is competing?
- Name the single dominant element - is there exactly one, or are several fighting?
- State the emotional hook in one phrase (identity, humor, pride, belonging, gift sentiment)
- Is the type a licensed/commercial-OK font, well kerned, and bold enough to survive DTG on fabric?

Worksheet: Cross-Product Adaptation Map

For each design, plan how the same idea is recomposed for four product formats. Record the layout change and the target dimensions per product so the line stays coherent.

Design name

Tee layout and dimensions (vertical stack, 3600x4800 px)

Mug layout and dimensions (horizontal band, focal off-center, ~2475x1155 px)

Poster layout and dimensions (added detail/margin, 5400x7200 px)

Sticker layout (strongest single element, cut margin)

Shared brand elements held constant across all four

Master file format (vector / layered raster)

Worksheet: Tool and Template Setup

Confirm your toolset matches your design style and that you have the correct platform template for each product before building.

Design style (vector type/shapes vs painted/illustrated)

Primary tool chosen

Backup / free tool

Commercial font source confirmed

Product templates downloaded (list products)

Master file layer structure (background / main / type / texture)

Checklist: Design Line Complete

- All three concepts passed the thumbnail and hook test before finishing
- Every font is original or commercially licensed for product sale
- Each design built from vector or cleanly layered files for painless resizing
- Each design adapted across at least four product formats from its real template
- Light and dark garment versions created where needed
- Line feels coherent - one idea fitted to many surfaces, not one image stretched

Mockups, Listings, and Launch: Getting the Product Seen and Sold

Stage converting mockups, write keyword-driven listings, clear the legal and quality checks, and adopt a repeatable upload routine.

Worksheet: Mockup Set Plan

Plan the image set for each product. The first image becomes your search thumbnail, so make it clean and in-context. Note the source you will use for each shot.

Product

Lead lifestyle shot (on person / in hand / on wall) and source (Printful / Placeit / Photoshop)

Alternate angle shot

Color variant shots to include

Niche/buyer match notes (model, setting, mood)

First-image thumbnail check (clean and crisp? yes/no)

Worksheet: Keyword Listing Builder

Write the full listing for each product using the buyer-language phrases you captured in Section 1. Lead the title with the primary phrase in natural language, fill every tag slot, and seed the description with the main keywords.

Product and niche

Title (primary phrase + product + niche, natural language)

Primary keyword phrase

Tags (fill every slot: up to 50 Redbubble / 13 Etsy)

Keyword-seeded description paragraph

Keyword variations covered (synonyms, occasions, audience)

Exercise: Legal and IP Clearance

Run each finished design through an intellectual-property review before publishing. When in doubt, make it original - originality both protects you and builds a real brand.

- Is every element original or properly licensed for commercial use, including fonts and graphics?
- Does the design avoid any trademarked names, logos, characters, team marks, or lyrics?
- Could the phrase be a registered trademark for apparel? Note your check (e.g. trademark database search).

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- If any element is risky, what is the original replacement?
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Checklist: Launch and Repeat

- Each listing has a clean lead mockup plus alternate angle and color variants
- Title, tags, and description seeded with real buyer-language keywords, no irrelevant stuffing
- Pre-publish legal and quality checklist passed for every design
- Files, mockups, and listings published across all chosen products
- Set a realistic weekly upload cadence and added it to your calendar
- Performance tracker started to double down on winners and retire losers

Your Action Plan

1. Choose your model (marketplace, own Printful store, or hybrid) and your primary platforms
2. Score five candidate niches and shortlist three with real demand and beatable competition
3. Capture 15+ buyer-language phrases per niche from marketplace autocomplete
4. Run the margin math on each planned product so every one clears real profit
5. Build print-ready master files to spec from the platforms' product templates (300 DPI, transparent PNG, correct color space)
6. Pass each concept through the thumbnail and hook test, then finish the art
7. Adapt each design across at least four product types with correct dimensions and composition
8. Run garment-color and CMYK soft-proof tests and create light/dark versions where needed
9. Stage a converting mockup set per product with a clean lead thumbnail
10. Write keyword-optimized titles, tags, and descriptions, clear the IP/quality checklist, publish, and set a weekly upload cadence with a performance tracker

