

Label & Sticker Design — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into a finished label and a finished die-cut sticker you can actually send to a printer. Each section maps to one course module, moving from print-method decisions and dieline setup through substrate and compliance to color separation, cut layout, and a press-ready export. Work through it with a real product in mind and you will end with two converter-ready files plus the spec sheets that go with them.

Small-Format Print Foundations

Lock in the print method and build a correctly bounded document with a labeled dieline before any design begins.

Exercise: Choose Your Print Method and Format

Pick one real product you will design a label or sticker for. Answer each prompt in a sentence or two, naming a specific method and format, so every later decision has a foundation.

- What is the product, and will it be applied by machine on a filling line (roll) or by hand (sheet or single)?

- Which print method fits the run size and look: digital (short run, fine detail), flexographic (long roll run), or screen (thick durable outdoor ink)?

- What minimum text size and color count does that method impose, and does your design fit inside those limits?

- Name a likely converter or service (for example StickerApp, Sticker Mule, Avery WePrint, or a local flexo shop) and one reason it suits this job.

Worksheet: Document Setup Sheet

Fill in the exact numbers for your piece, then build the Illustrator document to match. Use millimeters and CMYK throughout.

Finished trim size (width x height, or diameter)

Shape (rectangle, rounded rectangle, circle, custom)

Bleed per side (default 3 mm)

Artboard size including bleed (trim plus 3 mm each side)

Safe-zone inset from trim (default 3 mm)

Color mode (CMYK)

Layers created (Dieline, Artwork, White/Varnish as needed)

Checklist: Dieline Build Checklist

- Trim shape drawn at exact finished size on its own locked layer
- Bleed boundary offset 3 mm outward and background art extended to it
- Safe zone offset 3 mm inward with all critical content inside
- Cut path is one closed vector, stroke only, no fill
- Cut path uses a spot swatch named Dieline or CutContour, set to overprint
- Corners have at least a ~1.5 mm radius so the blade can turn them
- Dieline sits on its own named layer above the artwork

Materials, Substrates, and Adhesives

Match face stock, adhesive, laminate, and any special finish to the product's real environment using vendor data.

Worksheet: Substrate and Adhesive Selection Sheet

Answer the environment questions first, then choose materials to fit. Confirm each material against the supplier's Technical Data Sheet and record the source.

Container surface (glass, HDPE, PET, PP, corrugated, other)

Application condition (warm-filled, room temp, cold and wet)

Service environment (freezer, fridge, ambient shelf, outdoor)

Face stock chosen (uncoated paper, semi-gloss paper, clear BOPP, white BOPP, PET, vinyl)

Adhesive class (permanent, removable, freezer/cold-temp, high-tack LSE)

Laminate or overcoat (gloss, matte, soft-touch, UV varnish, none)

Supplier and data sheet reference (e.g. Avery Dennison / UPM Raflatac TDS code)

Exercise: Stress-Test the Material Choice

Pressure-test your selection against the ways labels fail in the real world. Write a short answer to each.

- Is the container a low-surface-energy plastic (squeezable HDPE, PP tub)? If so, did you specify a high-tack or LSE adhesive?
 - Will the label be applied to a cold or condensation-covered surface? If so, is the adhesive rated for application below freezing, not just storage?
 - Does the product meet oils, water, or repeated handling, and have you protected the print with a laminate or varnish?
 - If the brand markets itself as eco, does your stock back the claim (recyclable mono-material, recycled-content, or compostable) with a documented source?
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Checklist: Special Finish Layer Checklist

- Each effect (foil, spot varnish, emboss) is a separate named spot layer, not an on-screen effect
- Foil and varnish layers drawn as solid 100 percent spot, set to overprint
- Fine foil details kept above roughly 1 pt so the die can form them
- Slight choke applied to foil where it must register inside printed art
- Soft-touch or textured finish recorded on the spec sheet rather than drawn
- Any eco substrate documented with supplier and recyclability claim

Layout, Typography, and Compliance

Build a clear three-tier hierarchy, set legible small-format type, and fit every piece of mandatory copy.

Worksheet: Hierarchy and Type Plan

Define the three tiers and the type system before laying out, so the label reads at a two-second glance and reproduces cleanly.

Primary tier element (product name or brand mark)

Secondary tier element (variant, scent, flavor, or net quantity)

Tertiary tier content (ingredients, directions, warnings, legal)

Display typeface (for brand/product name)

Text typeface (for everything else)

Smallest text size used (\geq converter minimum, ~5-7 pt)

Text/background contrast ratio (target \geq 4.5:1)

Curved container? Front-facing visible band width if so

Exercise: Map the Mandatory Copy

List the legally required information for your product category and decide where each piece lives. Verify wording with the client or a compliance advisor for the destination market.

- What goes on the Principal Display Panel (front): product identity and net quantity?

- What goes on the information panel (side or back): ingredients in descending order, allergens or INCI names, nutrition or facts panel, manufacturer name and address?

- Have you reserved a sized, legible block for the dense legal copy before designing the front?

- Where does the barcode sit, and does it have its quiet zones, high contrast, and minimum size inside the safe zone?

Checklist: Legibility and Compliance Checklist

- Primary and secondary tiers sit in the central visible band on curved containers
- Positive body text at or above ~5 pt; reversed text at or above ~6-7 pt
- Fine text set in 100 percent of one channel (usually 100 percent K) for crisp registration

- Legal copy meets any category minimum x-height (e.g. ~1.2 mm where required)
- All required copy present: identity, net quantity, ingredients, allergens/INCI, nutrition, manufacturer
- Barcode has quiet zones, dark-on-light contrast, and adequate size
- Fonts outlined or embedded

Color, Cutting, and Press-Ready Output

Separate color deliberately, choose and lay out the cut, then preflight and export a converter-ready file.

Worksheet: Color Separation and Cut Plan

Decide the fate of every color and the cut format for your piece, then record the gang layout that controls cost. Colors as process (CMYK build): list

Colors as named Pantone spots (exact brand colors): list

Total ink coverage on heaviest area (target < ~300 percent)

White-ink layer needed? Areas it backs (full flood vs logo/text only)

Cut type (die-cut single, kiss-cut single, kiss-cut sheet)

Outline offset from artwork (2-3 mm uniform)

Converter sheet/web width and minimum gutter

Number of pieces ganged per sheet

Exercise: Plan the White and the Proof

Work through the two color steps beginners most often miss. Answer each prompt.

- Is the substrate clear or metallic? If so, what does the White layer cover to get the opacity you want, and is it a named spot set to overprint?

- Do you want a label-on-clear look (white flood) or a true no-label transparent look (white only behind logo and text)?

- Which Pantone spots must match exactly across every run, and have you named them in the file and spec sheet?

- How will you confirm color: a physical proof on the actual substrate, or a calibrated soft proof against the converter's profile?

Checklist: Preflight and Export Checklist

- Bleed present on all sides and background extended into it
- Document CMYK; spots named; no stray RGB objects or images
- All raster images 300 ppi or higher at final size
- All fonts embedded or outlined
- Dieline, white, varnish, and foil on named spot layers set to overprint
- Safe zone respected; barcode quiet zones intact
- Separations Preview confirms each plate lands correctly

[] Exported as PDF/X-4 (or converter-specified) with bleed and crop marks

[] One-page spec sheet attached

Your Action Plan

1. Pick one real product and lock the print method and format (roll vs sheet, digital vs flexo vs screen).
2. Set up the Illustrator document at trim size in CMYK with 3 mm bleed and a 3 mm safe zone.
3. Build the dieline as a named spot-color closed path on its own layer, set to overprint.
4. Choose face stock, adhesive, and laminate from supplier data sheets to match the product's environment.
5. Lay out the three-tier hierarchy and fit every piece of mandatory copy at a legible size.
6. Plan the barcode with quiet zones and contrast inside the safe zone.
7. Separate color: assign process vs Pantone spots and build a white-ink layer if the substrate is clear or metallic.
8. Choose the cut type and gang the pieces to fit the converter's printable width and gutter.
9. Run preflight, fix every flagged item, and check Separations Preview.
10. Export PDF/X-4 with bleed and marks, and send it with a completed one-page spec sheet.

