STRETCHLEARN · WORKBOOK

Sticker Design — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into a finished, print-ready sticker pack. You will pick formats and finishes, build clean vector cut lines with a 1/8 inch offset, set bleed and safe zones, convert colour to CMYK-safe values, simplify art so it reads at 2 inches, and prepare and upload correct files to Redbubble, Sticker Mule, and STIX. Work through one section per module and finish with a coherent pack you could list for sale today.

What a Sticker Actually Is

Choose the right format, finish, and size for a real design, and prove your art still reads at true printed size.

Exercise: Format and Finish Decision Drill

Take three different design ideas (for example a chunky bold mascot, a fine line-art design, and a set of related characters) and decide the right format and finish for each, justifying the call against how a blade and a finish behave.

• For each design, choose die-cut, kiss-cut, or sheet, and explain why in one sentence (think about fragile shapes and peeling).

• Pick a finish (gloss, matte, clear, holographic) for each and note what that finish does to the colours.

• Identify any design that needs a white underbase (clear vinyl) or a backing shape (fragile line art).

• Name which of the three would justify a steel die-cut at high volume and which should stay digital-cut.

Worksheet: Sticker Spec Sheet

Lock the production spec for one sticker before you design it, so every later decision traces back to a real format and size.

Design name / theme

Format (die-cut / kiss-cut / sheet)

Finish (gloss / matte / clear / holographic)

Material (white vinyl / clear vinyl / paper)

Final size on longest edge (inches)

Document size with 1/8 inch bleed (inches)

Resolution (target 300 DPI)

Pixel dimensions needed at size x 300 DPI

Backing shape needed? (yes/no, and why)

Checklist: Print-Size Readiness

[ ] I have set my document to the final sticker size in inches at 300 DPI (or I am working in vector)
[ ] I viewed or printed the design at true size and confirmed the busiest area still reads
[ ] I can read any text and recognise any character at 2 to 3 inches
[ ] I know which format and finish this sticker is for before finalising the art
[ ] I have decided whether the sticker cuts to the art or to a backing shape
[ ] My raster art (if any) was built large at 300 DPI, not upscaled from a small file

Building the Cut Line

Generate a clean contour with the standard offset, set bleed and safe zones, and lay out a single sticker or a kiss-cut sheet correctly.

Exercise: Offset Contour Drill

Take one finished, background-removed design and generate a cut contour. Use Offset Path in Illustrator, the Contour tool in Affinity Designer, or Linked Offset in Inkscape, set to about 1/8 inch. Then clean and stress-test the path.

• Set the offset to 1/8 inch (about 3 to 4 mm) and confirm the white border looks even all the way around.

• Smooth the contour so it does not trace every tiny jag, and confirm it is a single closed path.

• Find any thin necks, sharp interior corners, or floating specks and describe how you fixed each.

• Move the contour to its own layer in a spot colour (e.g. 100% magenta named CutContour) and confirm it reads as a cut line, not artwork.

Worksheet: Bleed and Safe-Zone Plan

Record the three zones for one sticker so the cut is forgiving and nothing important is sliced. Fill the measured values for your specific design.

Final trim size (inches)

Bleed amount past the cut line (target ~1/8 inch)

Cut-line offset from the art (target ~1/8 inch)

Safe-zone inset from the cut line (target ~1/8 inch)

Background extended into bleed? (yes/no)

All faces / text / logos inside the safe zone? (yes/no)

Cut line is a single closed path on its own spot layer? (yes/no)

Exercise: Kiss-Cut Sheet Layout

Lay out a kiss-cut sheet of related stickers on one backing. Use the service's stated sheet size and give each sticker its own contour with even spacing.

• State the sheet size you are using and the bleed you set on the sheet.

• Confirm the gap between stickers (at least ~1/8 to 1/4 inch) so cuts do not collide.

• Confirm each sticker keeps its own safe zone and its contour is on the shared cut layer.

• Judge the sheet as one designed object: is the spacing even and the arrangement intentional?

Checklist: Cut-File Pass

[ ] Cut line is one clean closed path, offset about 1/8 inch, smoothed for a blade
[ ] No thin necks of vinyl that would tear when peeled
[ ] Sharp interior corners rounded and floating specks removed
[ ] Background bleeds about 1/8 inch past the cut line (no white slivers)
[ ] All important content sits inside the safe zone, clear of the blade
[ ] Cut contour is on its own layer in the agreed spot colour
[ ] For a die-cut, the background around the art is genuinely transparent (no white box)

Colour, Detail, and Small-Format Art

Make the printed sticker match the screen and stay legible: CMYK-safe colour, proofing, and simplifying detailed or character art for a tiny canvas.

Exercise: RGB-to-CMYK Colour Audit

Take a colourful design and convert it from RGB to CMYK, then hunt for colours that shifted. Use the out-of-gamut warning in Illustrator or Photoshop and soft proofing to compare before and after.

• List the colours that shifted or dulled after conversion (especially neons and bright blues/greens).

• Pull each out-of-gamut colour back into range and note the corrected CMYK values.

• Decide where you need a rich black mix (e.g. ~60C 40M 40Y 100K) instead of plain K-only black.

• Plan a proof: soft-proof on screen and order a physical sample, and note where you will judge it (daylight).

Worksheet: Character Simplification Worksheet

Reduce one detailed design so it reads at sticker size. Record what you keep and what you cut at each pass.

Design / character name

The silhouette in one phrase (is it instantly recognisable?)

Signature feature to exaggerate (eyes / hat / expression / shape)

Line weight before vs after (thin -> heavier)

Fine details cut (hairs / small props / patterns)

Shading approach (gradients -> flat / cell shading)

Contrast adjustments made (subject vs background)

Reads clearly at 2 to 3 inches after simplifying? (yes/no)

Exercise: Sticker Text Legibility Test

Set any words your sticker needs and stress-test them at print size. Use a bold typeface, keep the message short, and outline the fonts.

• Choose a bold or medium sans-serif / sturdy display font and a generous size; avoid hairline or script.

• Shrink the text to true print size (or print a test strip) and confirm the smallest letters do not fill in.

• Add an outline or solid panel if the background is busy, and confirm strong contrast.

• Convert the text to outlines (Type then Create Outlines) on a copy and confirm it sits inside the safe zone.

Checklist: Colour and Detail Pass

[ ] Document is in CMYK (or RGB converted and audited) with no surprise colour shifts
[ ] No out-of-gamut neons left relying on standard CMYK ink
[ ] Large dark areas use a rich black mix, not weak K-only black
[ ] The design has been shrunk to true size and simplified until it reads bold and clean
[ ] Line work is thick enough to survive small printing; fine detail removed
[ ] Any text is bold, short, high-contrast, outlined, and inside the safe zone
[ ] A physical sample (or soft proof) has been planned or seen before a full run

Exporting and Selling Through Print-on-Demand

Build the exact files each service wants, upload to Redbubble, Sticker Mule, and STIX without rejection, and ship a coherent, mocked-up pack.

Exercise: Export the Print-Ready File

Export one finished sticker as a print-ready file and run a full pre-flight. Match the format to the destination service (transparent PNG for marketplaces, vector PDF/AI/EPS/SVG with a contour for custom printers).

• Confirm size with 1/8 inch bleed, 300 DPI, and the correct colour mode for the service.

• Confirm a genuinely transparent background for die-cut (no leftover white layer).

• Confirm fonts are outlined and the cut contour is a clean closed path on its own spot layer (or absent if the service auto-cuts).

• Reopen the exported file and confirm it looks correct, then note the exact format you exported and why.

Worksheet: Per-Service Upload Plan

Plan the correct file for each platform you will sell on. Fill the file type and colour each service expects from its current help page.

Service name (Redbubble / Sticker Mule / STIX / other)

File type they accept (transparent PNG / vector PDF-AI-EPS-SVG)

Colour mode they expect (RGB sRGB / CMYK)

Resolution / pixel size they request

Who generates the cut (service auto-cut from edge / my contour)

Bleed and safe-margin required (yes/no, amount)

Cut preview / proof checked before ordering? (yes/no)

Exercise: Mock-Up and Pack Coherence

Place each design on a realistic mock-up and review the whole pack as one product. Build reusable mock-up scenes (laptop, water bottle, phone case).

- Put each sticker on at least one real-context mock-up that shows true scale.
- Show the white border and the gloss or matte finish honestly in the mock-up.
- Lay the full pack as a grid and judge whether it reads as one unified collection.
- Note the shared through-line (palette, line weight, theme) and fix any sticker that breaks it.

Checklist: Final Ship Gate

[ ] File is the right size with 1/8 inch bleed at 300 DPI in the correct colour mode
[ ] Background is truly transparent for die-cut; no white box
[ ] All content sits inside the safe zone so the auto-cut or die cannot clip it
[ ] Fonts are outlined and the cut contour is clean (or correctly omitted for auto-cut services)
[ ] File exported in the exact format each service lists, and reopened to confirm
[ ] Cut preview and colour proof checked before ordering on each platform
[ ] Each design shown on a realistic mock-up at true scale
[ ] The pack reads as one coherent collection with a shared style and palette

Your Action Plan

1. Pick one design idea and write its theme, format (die-cut / kiss-cut / sheet), finish, and final size in inches.
2. Set the document to that size at 300 DPI with 1/8 inch bleed, or build it in vector.
3. Finish and background-remove the art, then generate a cut contour offset about 1/8 inch and clean it to one closed path.
4. Set the bleed, cut line, and safe zone, keeping all faces, text, and logos inside the safe margin.
5. Convert colour to CMYK, fix any out-of-gamut shifts, and set a rich black for large dark areas.
6. Shrink the design to true print size and simplify the art and text until it reads bold and clean at 2 to 3 inches.
7. Outline all fonts and confirm a genuinely transparent background for die-cut.
8. Export the print-ready file in the format the target service requires and run a full pre-flight.
9. Upload to Redbubble, Sticker Mule, or STIX following each spec, and check the cut preview and a colour proof before ordering.
10. Mock up each design at true scale, review the pack as one coherent collection, and list it.