

Album & Cover Art Design — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into reps on one real project. You will pick a record to design for, mine the music and brief, build a moodboard and a chosen direction, compose and typeset the square, and produce correct print and streaming files plus a pitch. Work one section per module and finish with a complete cover concept, a full set of format-correct files, and a presentation you could send to an artist today.

What a Cover Has to Do

Lock the brief, the format map, and the thumbnail-first mindset before you design anything.

Exercise: Thumbnail Teardown in a Real Feed

Open Spotify or Apple Music on your phone and screenshot a list or playlist of at least fifteen covers in the genre you plan to design for. Judge them only at that thumbnail size, before tapping in. Most covers that look fine large fail here.

- Which three covers are most instantly recognizable in the list, and what single element makes each one pop (a face, one shape, one color, big type)?

- Which three are muddy or forgettable at thumbnail, and what is dragging them down (too much detail, low contrast, thin type)?

- For each of the three weak covers, name the one change that would most improve it at 250 px.

- Before pressing play on any of them, write the genre and mood you would guess purely from the cover, then check whether the music matches.

Worksheet: Project Brief One-Pager

Pick the real or imagined record you will design for in this course and fill every field after listening to it at least twice. Keep this page open for the rest of the workbook; every later decision must trace back to it.

Artist name (exact spelling and capitalization)

Release title and any meaning behind it

Genre and two or three artists it sits next to

Mood and energy in three words (from listening)

Subject direction (artist photo / symbol / object / abstract / type-only)

Existing branding to respect (logo, colours, prior cover look)

Deliverables required (vinyl / CD / streaming / social)

Hard deadline and any pressing-plant date

Worksheet: Format and Spec Map

List the surfaces this cover must live on and note the headline spec for each, so you design the right files from the start. Confirm exact vendor figures later against the actual plant or distributor template.

Vinyl jacket needed? (Y/N) — size with bleed (~12.375 in sq), CMYK, 300 dpi

CD wallet / digipak needed? (Y/N) — ~120 mm sq, CMYK, 300 dpi

Streaming cover — target px (3000 x 3000), colour (sRGB), format (JPG/PNG)

Profile / header images needed? (Y/N) and platform

Canvas / motion frame needed? (Y/N)

Plant or distributor whose template I must download

Checklist: Pre-Design Readiness

- I have listened to the full record at least twice with notes aimed at imagery
- My brief one-pager is filled in completely
- I can state the cover's job in one sentence tied to this specific record
- I have the artist's answers on subject, references they love, and one they hate
- I have collected at least 15 in-genre cover screenshots judged at thumbnail size
- I know every format I must deliver and the resolution and colour mode each needs
- I have confirmed the deadline and any hard pressing date

Genre Conventions and Visual Codes

Read the genre's visual language, then choose a moodboard and one direction on purpose.

Exercise: Decode the Genre by Lever

Choose ten exemplary covers in your genre (mix canonical classics and current playlist toppers). Break each one down by the four levers from the course rather than reacting to the overall vibe.

- For each cover, note the imagery type (photo / illustration / abstract) and recurring subjects.

- Note the dominant palette and saturation level, and the one accent colour if any.

- Note the typeface character (clean sans / serif / distressed / custom) and how readable it is.

- Note the composition (centered or off-kilter, dense or minimal) and how much space the artist gets.

- After all ten, write the three conventions that show up most often: these are the genre signal you will either meet or bend.

Worksheet: Canon vs This Year

Compare the genre's defining older covers with its newest hits to see where the look is heading. This tells you where a small fresh move reads as current rather than dated.

Three canonical covers that defined the genre

Three current covers topping the genre's playlists now

What stayed the same across both eras

What clearly changed (simpler type, bolder colour, different imagery)

One up-to-date move I can make that still reads as in-genre

Worksheet: Moodboard Direction Sheet

Build a tight moodboard (in Milanote, Figma, Pinterest, or slides) clustered into two or three candidate directions, then fill this sheet. Cut any reference that is merely nice but does not serve the brief.

Direction A — imagery, palette swatches (hex), sample typeface, one-line rationale

Direction B — imagery, palette swatches (hex), sample typeface, one-line rationale

Direction C (optional) — imagery, palette, typeface, rationale

Genre cue each direction sends (meets / bends / breaks convention)

My recommended direction and the single reason it best serves the music and artist

Checklist: Direction Lock Gate

- I decoded at least ten in-genre covers by the four levers
- I can name the three strongest conventions of this genre
- My moodboard is curated to a tight set, with weak references cut
- Each candidate direction shows palette and type, not just a vibe
- I have one clear recommendation with a written rationale
- The chosen direction traces directly back to the brief one-pager

Composing and Typesetting the Square

Make one strong square: a single focal point, deliberate type, and a palette that survives grayscale and thumbnail.

Exercise: Squint and Thumbnail Drill

Lay out two or three rough composition options for your chosen direction. Apply a 6 to 10 px Gaussian blur to each (or step well back), and separately shrink each to 250 px and drop it among your competitor screenshots.

- In each blurred draft, what single element survives as dominant — is it your intended focal point, or did the background or logo wrongly win?
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- At 250 px among real competitors, which draft still reads and which muddies or vanishes?
- Where two elements compete, what will you shrink, mute, or move to force one clear focal point?
- Rank your drafts from clearest to weakest hierarchy and write the fix for the weakest one.

Worksheet: Type Hierarchy and Treatment Plan

Decide how the artist name and title are set before fine-tuning the layout. Settle reading order and letterform character first, then the practical legibility checks.

Reading order chosen (artist-first / title-first / image-first / type-only) and why

Typeface family or families (max two) and the genre signal they send

Treatment for the lead words (size, weight, case, custom or modified?)

Contrast device over busy areas (scrim / outline / shadow / clear zone)

Name and title legibility at 250 px confirmed? (Y/N)

Kerning and spacing of display words checked? (Y/N)

Worksheet: Palette and Texture Spec

Define the colour and surface of the cover deliberately, matching the music's mood. Keep the palette tight and test it without colour.

Core palette (2 to 4 colours, hex) plus neutrals

Reserved accent colour and where it appears (hex)

Saturation and contrast level (high / medium / low) and the mood it serves

Texture or surface (film grain / paper / clean digital / gradient) and what era it signals

Grayscale test result — does the cover still read with colour removed? (Y/N)

Where I carved out a clean area so texture or colour does not eat the type

Checklist: Composition Pass

- Exactly one element clearly wins the squint test
- The cover still reads at 250 px among real competitors
- Artist and title are legible at thumbnail (no thin or over-condensed lead type)
- Type-to-background contrast is strong, with a scrim or outline over busy photography
- The palette is limited and holds up in grayscale
- The accent colour appears almost only on the most important moment

[] Texture and colour support legibility rather than fighting it

Production, Delivery, and the Pitch

Build correct print and streaming files, then package and present the work and control revisions.

Exercise: Build the Full File Set

Produce every required format from your finished concept. Do not just resize one image: rebuild print in CMYK with bleed, and export the streaming square in sRGB with no bleed. Use the plant or distributor template where one exists.

- Vinyl jacket: built at the plant's template size with ~3 mm bleed, CMYK, 300 dpi, important elements inside the safe zone — confirm each.

- CD wallet / digipak: built at ~120 mm with bleed, CMYK, 300 dpi, fonts embedded or outlined — confirm each.

- Streaming cover: exported at 3000 x 3000 px, sRGB, JPG or PNG, with no URLs, handles, or pricing on the art — confirm each.

- Spine and any gatefold or tray panels prepared as separate correctly sized artwork — list what you built.

Worksheet: Pitch Deck Plan

Plan how you will present the cover so it shows its real-world strength. Lead with the why, then reveal the art in context, not as a bare square on white.

Opening rationale (restate the brief and the genre signal in two sentences)

Context mockup 1 — Spotify thumbnail in a list

Context mockup 2 — vinyl sleeve render

Context mockup 3 — on a phone screen

Recommended direction shown (and optional single alternative)

Stated next step from yes to final files

Number of revision rounds included and what counts as one round

Worksheet: Revision Log

Track every feedback request so scope stays controlled and vague notes become concrete changes. Start a new row per request.

Round number

Raw feedback as received

What the note is actually trying to achieve

Concrete change I will make (or why I am pushing back, tied to the brief)

Within included scope? (Y/N) — if N, billable

Status (open / done / approved)

Checklist: Delivery and Handoff Gate

- Print files are CMYK, 300 dpi, with correct bleed and safe zones on the plant template
- Streaming cover is sRGB, at least 1400 px (ideally 3000 px), with no banned content on the art
- Print and screen files are clearly separated and named so the right file goes to the right place
- Spine, gatefold, and tray panels (if any) are built correctly, not as an afterthought
- A low-res proof or mockup was approved before any press run
- The pitch shows the cover as a thumbnail and on a sleeve, leading with the rationale
- Final sign-off is confirmed in writing, and a short agreement covers scope, rounds, rights, and fee

Your Action Plan

1. Pick one real record, listen to it twice, and complete the brief one-pager and format map.
2. Tear down at least 15 in-genre covers at thumbnail size and note what wins and what fails.
3. Decode ten exemplary covers by the four levers and name the genre's three strongest conventions.
4. Build a tight moodboard, propose two or three directions, and lock one with a written rationale.
5. Compose two or three square options and pass both the squint test and the 250 px thumbnail test.
6. Set the artist name and title with deliberate hierarchy, genre-true letterforms, and thumbnail legibility.
7. Define a limited palette and a texture that match the mood, and confirm the cover survives grayscale.
8. Build print-ready vinyl and CD files in CMYK at 300 dpi with correct bleed and safe zones.
9. Export a compliant 3000 x 3000 px sRGB streaming cover plus the supporting digital set.
10. Assemble a pitch that shows the cover in context, present it leading with the why, and log revisions against agreed scope.

