

Print Design & Pre-Press — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into a working production system you apply to one real piece. Pick a job you actually need this week, a double-sided business card, an A5 flyer, a tri-fold brochure, or a poster, and carry it through every exercise so you finish with a genuinely press-ready file and a vendor brief you could send today. Each section maps to one course module, moving from how print works through document setup, colour and assets, and a pre-flight to proofing pipeline.

How Physical Print Actually Works

Choose your piece, pick the right print method and stock, and learn how the press will treat your file.

Exercise: Choose and Scope Your Print Piece

Select one real piece you need printed and define its production parameters now. You will apply every later exercise to this same job, so choose something with a genuine deadline and quantity, not a hypothetical.

- What piece are you producing, and what is its final flat trim size and (if folded) folded size?

- What quantity do you actually need, and does that point toward digital (short run) or offset (long run)?

- Where and how far away will it be viewed, and what does that imply for resolution?

- What is the deadline, and does it allow time for a physical proof before the full run?

Worksheet: Print Method and Stock Decision

Decide the method and substrate deliberately rather than by default. Request the vendor's paper sample book before finalising, and judge colour on the actual stock, not on screen.

Print method chosen (offset, digital, large-format) and the reason

Quantity and how it influenced the method choice

Stock weight in gsm (e.g. 350 gsm for cards, 130 gsm for a flyer)

Finish (coated gloss, coated matte/silk, or uncoated) and the look it gives

Expected dot gain concern (higher on uncoated) and any colour adjustment needed

Special finishes wanted (lamination, spot UV, foil, die-cut) and where they apply

Sample stock ordered or sample book requested (yes/no)

Checklist: Production Reality Check

- Confirmed which print method the vendor will use for this job
- Matched resolution expectation to viewing distance (300 ppi close, lower for signage)
- Selected a standard page size where possible to reduce paper waste and cost
- Requested or ordered the actual stock as a blank sample to judge feel and colour
- Identified any special finish that will need its own spot-colour artwork layer
- Noted that the press prints the file literally, not your intent

Document Setup, Bleed, and Trim

Build the artwork on correct geometry: trim size, 3 mm bleed, safe margins, and accurate fold panels.

Worksheet: Document Geometry Plan

Define the three boundary zones before you open the New Document dialog. The page must be the trim size, with bleed added outside it, never baked into the page dimensions.

Trim (final) size in millimetres or inches

Bleed amount per edge (standard 3 mm or 0.125 in; confirm if large-format)

Safe margin inside the trim for critical content (3 to 5 mm)

Slug area needed for notes or marks (yes/no, and size)

Intent set to Print so colour mode defaults to CMYK (confirm)

Facing Pages required for a folded or bound piece (yes/no)

Document preset name saved for reuse

Exercise: Set Up the File in InDesign

Create the document with the correct settings and read the on-screen guides as you place content. The red line is the bleed edge (extend art to here), the margin line is the safe zone (keep content inside), and the black line is the trim.

- Did you enter the trim size as the page size and add 3 mm bleed in the dialog (not build at bleed size)?
 - Do all full-bleed backgrounds and images reach the red bleed line on every edge?
 - Is every piece of important text, the logo, and any barcode kept inside the safe margin?
 - If the piece folds, did you confirm Facing Pages and that spreads read correctly across the fold?
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Worksheet: Fold and Panel Map

For any folded piece, map each panel to its position and width before designing content. Remember the inward-folding panel must be 1 to 2 mm narrower so it folds cleanly. Fold a paper dummy to confirm.

Fold type (tri-fold/roll, gate, Z-fold, half-fold)

Number of panels and what content each panel holds

Width of each panel (note the narrower inward-folding panel)

Position of every fold line measured from the edge

Content kept 5 mm or more clear of each fold (confirm)

Reading order across panels when opened

Paper dummy folded at final size and checked (yes/no)

Checklist: Setup and Geometry Check

- Page size equals trim size; 3 mm bleed added outside it
- Intent set to Print and transparency blend space set to CMYK
- Full-bleed art extends to the bleed line on all four edges
- Critical content sits inside the 3 to 5 mm safe margin
- Saddle-stitched booklet page count is a multiple of four (if applicable)
- Fold panels set at exact positions with the inward panel narrowed
- Folded a physical paper dummy to verify the layout reads correctly

Colour, Images, and Type for Press

Control the three things that shift between screen and paper: colour mode, image resolution, and fonts.

Worksheet: Colour and ICC Profile Setup

Set up colour deliberately using the printer's profile rather than letting conversion happen by accident. Ask the vendor which ICC profile they target and build to it.

Target ICC profile from the printer (e.g. GRACoL 2013, FOGRA39, PSO Coated v3)

Document and image working space set to CMYK with that profile (confirm)

RGB images converted with Convert to Profile, not a blind mode change (confirm)

Out-of-gamut colours identified with Gamut Warning (list the risky brand colours)

Rich black recipe for large solid areas (e.g. C60 M40 Y40 K100)

Total ink coverage kept within the profile limit (about 280 to 300 percent)

Any colour that must be exact flagged for a Pantone spot instead

Exercise: Spot Colour, Overprint, and Separations Check

If the job uses a brand colour that must be exact, or a special finish, define it as a spot. Then open Separations Preview (Window then Output then Separations Preview) and inspect the file one plate at a time, the way the press sees it.

- Which colours, if any, are defined as Pantone spot swatches, and why (exact brand colour, metallic, or finish)?

- Are your spot swatches named consistently so two near-identical blues do not become two plates?

- Is small black text and are fine rules set to overprint to avoid white halos from misregistration?

- Does Separations Preview reveal any white object accidentally set to overprint (which would vanish on press)?

Worksheet: Image and Font Audit

Audit every placed image for effective resolution after scaling, and remove all font risk before export. Check the Links panel for the real ppi at placed size, not the file's native number.

Each image's effective ppi at its placed size (target ~300 for close-viewed print)

Any image scaled up beyond its resolution and needing replacement (list)

Logos and icons confirmed as vector, not low-res raster (confirm)

Images placed (linked), not pasted, so full-resolution data packages (confirm)

Fonts to embed via PDF/X (list any unusual or free fonts)

Display text or logo type converted to outlines where supplied to an unknown vendor

Effective resolution rechecked after any final scaling

Checklist: Colour, Image, and Type Check

- Working in CMYK with the printer's ICC profile applied
- Vivid blues, greens, oranges, and any neon checked for gamut shift
- Large solid blacks built as rich black within the ink limit
- Spot colours defined as Spot swatches from the correct Pantone library
- Small black text and rules set to overprint; no white set to overprint
- Every photo meets the ppi target at final placed size
- All fonts will embed in the PDF/X, with display type outlined where needed

Pre-Flight, Proofing, and Working with Printers

Pre-flight and package, export a compliant PDF/X, proof against a standard, and brief the vendor clearly.

Checklist: Pre-Flight and Package

- InDesign Preflight panel reads zero errors with a print-ready profile loaded
- All links present, current, and high-resolution in the Links panel
- No stray RGB or unintended spot colours (verified in Separations Preview)
- No overset text and all fonts available
- Full-bleed elements reach the bleed line; nothing critical in the safe margin
- File then Package run to collect document, links, and fonts into one folder
- Human pre-flight done: copy proofread, numbers and URLs verified, approved version confirmed
- Trim size, page count, and finishes match the vendor quote

Worksheet: PDF/X Export Settings

Export a compliant PDF/X with the right standard, bleed, marks, and colour. Then open and inspect the actual exported PDF, not the InDesign document, before sending.

PDF/X standard chosen (PDF/X-4 or PDF/X-1a) per the printer's requirement

Crop marks on and document bleed included (3 mm) with marks offset clear of bleed

Output colour set to the printer's CMYK profile; intended spots preserved

Image downsampling settings kept above the target ppi for the method

Transparency handling understood (flattened for X-1a, live for X-4)

Exported PDF inspected in Acrobat Output Preview (separations, ink limit, overprint)

Export preset saved for consistent future PDFs

Exercise: Read and Approve the Proof

Soft-proof on a calibrated screen with the printer's profile, and for colour-critical work order a physical contract proof. View hard proofs under neutral D50 (5000K) light before signing off.

- What did the soft proof reveal about out-of-gamut colours shifting versus your screen design?

- Did you request a hard contract proof, and under what lighting did you judge it?

- Checking against Pantone chips or your soft proof, is colour acceptable and is registration tight (no fringe on black text)?

- After a final proofread on the proof itself, are you confident enough to sign off, knowing your signature is an approval?

Worksheet: Print Specification and Vendor Brief

Write a one-page spec stating everything the printer needs to quote and produce the job accurately. Send it up front and request their guidelines and ICC profile in return.

Quantity

Final flat size and folded size

Number of pages

Stock: weight in gsm and finish

Colours (e.g. 4+4 process, or 4+1 with PANTONE 286 C)

Finishing (lamination, spot UV, foil, folding, binding, die-cut)

Proof required (soft or hard contract proof)

File format supplied (PDF/X-4) and delivery date and address

Your Action Plan

1. Choose one real piece and lock its trim size, folded size, quantity, and deadline
2. Select the print method and stock deliberately, ordering a blank sample of the actual paper
3. Set up the InDesign document at trim size with 3 mm bleed and safe margins, and fold a paper dummy to confirm panels before designing
4. Work in CMYK with the printer's ICC profile and check vivid colours for gamut shift
5. Define any exact brand colour or finish as a Pantone spot and verify plates in Separations Preview
6. Audit every image for effective resolution at placed size and ensure all fonts will embed
7. Pre-flight to zero errors, run File then Package, and proofread every word by eye
8. Export a PDF/X with bleed and marks, then inspect it in Acrobat Output Preview before sending
9. Soft-proof, order a hard contract proof for colour-critical work, and sign off only when satisfied
10. Write a one-page print spec and email a real vendor for a quote against it

