



Print Specifications Guide

Getting a design from your screen to a physical printed piece can feel like magic—but it's actually just strict math and rules. This guide breaks down the essential print specifications in plain English so your designer (or you!) can get it right the first time, avoiding costly reprints and blurry surprises.

1. Bleed: The "Extra Wallpaper"

What it is: Bleed is the extra artwork that extends beyond the final trimmed edge of the paper.

Why it matters: Printing presses and cutting machines have tiny, unavoidable mechanical shifts (up to 1–2mm). If your design stops exactly at the edge, this shift can leave a thin, ugly white sliver on the final product. Bleed ensures the color goes all the way to the edge.

The Rule:

Standard documents (business cards, flyers, brochures): Add 0.125 inches (3mm) of bleed on all four sides.

Large format (posters, banners): Add 0.25 inches (6mm) or as specified by the printer.

Plain English tip: Think of bleed like hanging wallpaper. You hang it slightly past the edge of the wall, then trim the excess for a perfect, seamless edge.

2. Resolution: The "No Pixelation" Rule

What it is: Resolution is the amount of detail in an image, measured in DPI (Dots Per Inch) or PPI (Pixels Per Inch).

Why it matters: Screens display images at a low resolution (usually 72 DPI) because you view them from a distance and they emit light. Print reflects light and requires much more data to look sharp.

The Rule:

All images must be 300 DPI minimum at their final printed size.

Plain English tip: An image that looks crisp on your monitor might look like a blurry mosaic when printed. Always check the image size after placing it in your design layout. If you have to stretch a small image to fit, it will lose quality.

3. Color Mode: CMYK vs. RGB

What it is: RGB (Red, Green, Blue) is how screens create color using light. It has a massive, vibrant color range.

CMYK (Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, Key/Black) is how printers create color using physical ink. It has a smaller, more muted color range.

Why it matters: If you design in RGB, the printer has to guess how to translate those glowing screen colors into dull ink. Neon greens and bright blues will turn muddy.

The Rule:

Set your document color mode to CMYK from the very beginning.

Black Text Rule: Small black text should be 100% K only (C:0, M:0, Y:0, K:100). Do not use "Rich Black" (e.g., C:60, M:40, Y:40, K:100) for small text, as slight misalignments in the printing press will make the text look fuzzy or have colored halos.

Tip: Convert RGB to CMYK early so you can adjust any colors that shift unexpectedly.

4. Margins & Safe Zone: The "Don't Cut My Logo" Area

What it is: The "Safe Zone" is the inner area of your document where all critical text, logos, and important design elements must live.

Why it matters: Just as the cutter might shift outward (hence the bleed), it might also shift inward. If your text is too close to the edge, it could get chopped off or look awkwardly cramped.

The Rule:

Keep all critical elements at least 0.125 to 0.25 inches (3–6mm) inside the final trim line.

Plain English tip: Imagine a picture frame. You wouldn't put someone's face right against the glass edge; you give it breathing room. Do the same with your text and logos.

5. File Preparation Checklist

Before you send the file to the printer, ensure it passes this checklist:

File Format: Export as a Print-Ready PDF (PDF/X-1a or PDF/X-4 are the industry gold standards).

Avoid sending native files (like .INDD or .PSD) unless specifically requested.

Fonts: Either outline/convert all text to shapes OR ensure all fonts are fully embedded in the PDF. This prevents the printer's computer from substituting your beautiful font with a default one.

Images: All images must be embedded or linked correctly (if sending a packaged InDesign file). No missing links.

Color Profile: Include the correct ICC color profile (e.g., U.S. Web Coated SWOP v2 for standard US commercial printing, or FOGRA39 for Europe).

No Hidden Layers: Delete or flatten any hidden layers, stray marks, or unused design alternatives.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

Using Word or PowerPoint for print design. These programs do not support bleed, CMYK, or proper PDF export for print. Use Adobe InDesign, Illustrator, or Affinity Publisher.

Pulling images straight from Google. They are almost always RGB, 72 DPI, and copyrighted. Use licensed stock photo sites or original photography.

Designing in RGB and converting at the last second. Always design in CMYK so you see the color shifts before it goes to print.

Forgetting to outline fonts. If the printer doesn't have your exact font installed, the design will break.

Quick Copy-Paste Brief for Us

Feel free to copy and paste this into your next project brief:

Print Specifications for this Project:

Final Trim Size: [e.g., 8.5" x 11"]

Bleed: 0.125" (3mm) on all sides

Safe Zone: 0.25" (6mm) from the trim edge

Color Mode: CMYK only (100% K for small black text)

Resolution: 300 DPI minimum for all images at final size

Delivery Format: Print-ready PDF (PDF/X-1a or PDF/X-4) with fonts outlined/embedded and bleed marks included.

Special Finishes: [e.g., None, Matte Lamination, Spot UV, Foil Stamping – specify if applicable]

Pro Tip : Always ask us for exact template or spec sheet before finalizing the design. While these rules cover 95% of commercial printing, some specialized printers (or large-format shops) may have slight variations.