

The complete print artwork handbook

A practical route from first brief to approved PDF

This guide helps you prepare a clearer brief and a more reliable production file. Use the agreed job specification for final dimensions, finishing and colour targets.

| Start with the finished item

Decide the finished size, orientation, quantity, number of versions, substrate, finishing and where the item will be used. Ask whether it will be read at arm's length, from across a room or from the roadside. Set the approval date separately from the event or delivery date. A clear brief prevents layout work being redone after the print route has been chosen.

| Trim, bleed and safe area

Trim is the intended final edge. Bleed is artwork extending beyond that edge so a slight cut variation does not leave a white sliver. A common starting point for small-format work is 3 mm on every side; for a 210 × 297 mm A4 leaflet that makes the artwork extent 216 × 303 mm. Keep text, logos and other important details inside a separate safe area. A 3 mm safe margin is a minimum starting point for simple flat items; binding, folding, eyelets and large-format finishing need more. Confirm the actual job specification before export.

| Resolution at final size

Check effective resolution after placing or enlarging images, not only the image's metadata. For close-viewed small print, 300 pixels per inch at final size is a useful target. A 148 × 210 mm A5 image at 300 ppi needs about 1748 × 2480 pixels before bleed. Large displays are usually viewed farther away and may be produced at lower effective resolution; assess at the intended viewing distance. Keep logos and small type as vectors where possible.

| Colour and profiles

Keep source image profiles embedded. Ask which output condition applies to the chosen paper and process, then export with the agreed output intent. A screen glows and paper reflects light, so a bright RGB colour can shift in print. Do not assign an arbitrary CMYK profile just because the file is for print. For critical brand colours, request a controlled proof on the intended or a representative stock and agree whether a spot ink is required.

| **Type, lines and contrast**

Embed fonts in the PDF or outline only where requested. Read small text at 100% on the final print size; avoid relying on a desktop zoom view. Test fine reversed-out type, pale grey copy and hairline rules on the selected stock. QR codes need enough physical size, quiet space and a destination that works on a phone. Keep a copy of the editable artwork, because outlined text is harder to correct later.

| **Folds, binding and panels**

A folded leaflet needs a panel plan, not only a flat page. The inward panel may need to be narrower so it folds cleanly. A stapled booklet normally needs a total page count divisible by four, including covers. Supply single pages in reading order unless the printer requests imposed spreads. Perfect binding needs an agreed spine width after paper and page count are fixed. Leave generous space near a fold or bound edge.

| **Finishing and special layers**

Eyelets, hems, lamination, spot UV, white ink and contours need production-specific allowances. Put a cut path or special finish on a clearly named separate layer when requested. Do not assume a visual mockup tells the finishing team where to cut. Include a separate reference view of the intended result and confirm whether marks should appear in the final production PDF.

| **Export a production PDF**

Export the finished size with the agreed bleed and a suitable print PDF preset, often PDF/X-4 where the workflow supports it. Preserve live transparency and embedded profiles according to the agreed output route. Use single pages for multi-page work unless asked otherwise. Reopen the exported PDF and inspect page boxes, bleed, fonts, image detail and the actual number and order of pages. A PDF extension alone does not make a file print ready.

| **Proof content and version**

Check every date, price, URL, postcode, phone number, name and legal line against the approved source. Put a revision code and date in the job correspondence. Have one named person sign off the final copy and visual proof. A digital proof checks content and layout; a physical or contract proof is appropriate where paper feel or colour match is consequential.

| **Hand over the job**

Send the final production PDF, a clear filename, quantity per version, size, finish, delivery address and deadline. Identify any fonts, linked files or special inks if the printer requests them. Avoid sending several files called final, final2 and final-really-final. Keep the signed-off PDF and proof with the order record for repeat work.

Brief worksheet: the information to collect

Record the item name; audience; viewing distance; final size; orientation; number of versions; quantity per version; printed sides; paper or material; finish; delivery method; installation or mailing needs; event date; target proof date; named content approver; and named purchase approver. Attach any previous approved sample. If one field is uncertain, mark it for confirmation rather than silently guessing. This worksheet helps an estimator choose a practical process and prevents mismatched assumptions across teams.

Page-box maths and common sizes

The general flat-work calculation is full artwork width = finished width + twice the agreed bleed, and the same for height. With 3 mm bleed: A4 210 × 297 mm becomes 216 × 303 mm; A5 148 × 210 mm becomes 154 × 216 mm; A6 105 × 148 mm becomes 111 × 154 mm; an 85 × 55 mm card becomes 91 × 61 mm. The trim box still describes the finished size. A useful safe-area calculation subtracts twice the inside margin from each finished dimension. Do not apply these simple numbers to a folded panel, a bound spine or a banner cassette without the product template.

PDF/X, output intent and transparency

PDF/X is a family of exchange standards that constrains PDF behaviour for print. PDF/X-4 can preserve live transparency and colour-managed content, which is useful when the receiving RIP supports it. The output intent communicates an expected print condition, but it does not make an unsuitable source image correct. Check the chosen preset with the production route, make sure every font embeds correctly, and inspect flattened or transparent effects on the final exported PDF. A logo that looks correct in the design application can still change if overprint or blending settings are wrong.

Vector artwork, raster images and line detail

A vector logo or diagram scales cleanly because it is defined by paths; a raster photo is defined by pixels. Keep brand marks, QR codes, type and fine diagrams in a vector format if possible. A screenshot may look sharp on a phone but become soft when enlarged for a brochure. Check the effective resolution of each placed image at its printed size. Avoid placing tiny raster text inside a large image. If a line is essential to understanding a diagram, proof it at actual size and on the intended paper.

Spot colours, white ink and overprint

A named spot colour is a separate production instruction, not simply a bright screen swatch. White ink on clear or coloured material also needs a deliberate plate or layer; otherwise the substrate may show through. Overprint can make one colour combine with another instead of knocking it out. Review these settings in a separation preview, label special plates exactly as requested and include a visual reference showing the intended finish. Ask whether a brand colour should be simulated in process CMYK or produced as a spot colour.

Supplying many versions without confusion

If a campaign has different stores, dates, languages or people, make a version matrix. One row should identify version name, quantity, delivery point, language and approved file. Lock the template before variable details are merged. Check at least the first and last record and samples at each change of version. Never assume a mail merge or variable-data preview proves that every line fits; inspect the longest names and addresses. Keep the final matrix with the order.

Proof types and what they confirm

An on-screen content proof is fast for wording, layout and page order, but an uncalibrated monitor is not a contract colour reference. A printed dummy tests folding, pagination and physical size. A material sample tests feel and finish. A controlled hard proof is appropriate for colour-critical work. Decide what each proof is meant to approve, write that down, and avoid treating a low-resolution email preview as approval for every print characteristic.

Accessible printed communication

Use plain language and visible hierarchy. Check that type size, line length and contrast suit the audience and lighting, especially for older readers or a reception environment. Do not rely only on colour to distinguish steps on a form or map. Put a clear phone number or alternative contact method on critical public information. A QR code is a supplement; test it from the actual viewing distance and make sure the destination page works without special software.

Mailing and privacy handover

Only send the data needed for the job. Agree a secure transfer method, file format, address-field mapping, suppression rules, test record and retention date before a mailing begins. Separate live personal data from design proofs where possible. Check the visible window position and address block with a physical sample. Reconcile input record count to produced pieces and rejected records. Confirm who will resolve undeliverable addresses and who will approve deletion after fulfilment.

Troubleshooting before sending

If a PDF has a thin white edge, inspect whether the background truly extends through bleed. If a photograph looks soft, calculate effective pixels per inch at the finished size. If a colour appears unexpectedly dull, confirm source profile, output intent and the actual stock. If text reflows, check font embedding and whether the final PDF was exported from the correct revision. If a booklet appears out of order, verify single-page reading order rather than manually imposing pages. Escalate unresolved file warnings before the order is released.

Naming and version control

A useful filename includes the project, item, size, version and date, such as Campaign_A5-leaflet_v03_2026-10-01.pdf. Keep working files, review proofs and final production files in separate folders. Retire superseded finals, but retain the approved version and the sign-off correspondence. For a reorder, compare new text and images to the approved master rather than assuming the file is unchanged. Note any change to stock, device, profile or finish because the appearance can differ even with identical artwork.

Ten-minute final handover

Open the production PDF; check every page at 100%; verify trim, bleed, page count, image clarity, fonts, critical colour and finishing layers; scan all QR codes; read every date, price and contact line; compare the quantity matrix to files; confirm the named approver; and send one clearly identified final package. State the delivery address and the time by which the finished job is needed. Keep a copy of the exact submitted file and approval. The production team can then check a known version against a known specification.

Need a specification for your job?

Tell us the finished size, quantity, use and deadline. Call 01925 632717 or visit theprintcentrewarrington.co.uk/contact.