Print pre-flight checklist: 12 checks before you send a file

Work through it with the exported PDF open, not the design file. Export settings drop bleed, fonts and image data without telling you. If an item fails, the file is not ready.

1. **3 mm bleed, all round.** Every background, photo and colour block must run 3 mm past the trim on all four cut edges. Without it the guillotine lands on bare paper and the finished piece shows a thin white sliver down one side. Large format is a different job, so ask your printer what bleed they want on that.
2. **300 ppi at final size.** Images need 300 ppi at the size they are placed, not the size they came out of the camera. A 300 ppi image scaled to 200% in the layout reaches press at 150 ppi and prints soft. Posters and banners viewed from a distance can go lower: ask your printer, typical is 150 ppi.
3. **CMYK, never RGB.** Convert every image and colour swatch to CMYK before export, using the profile your printer names. RGB greens and oranges sit outside the CMYK gamut and come back dull or shifted, and nobody sees it until the sheets are running.
4. **Total ink under 300%.** Keep combined C, M, Y and K in dark areas at or under 300%, or whatever limit your printer gives you, and set small text and fine lines in 100% K only. Builds over the limit will not dry, they set off onto the sheet below and block in the stack.
5. **Fonts embedded or outlined.** Every font must be embedded in the PDF or converted to outlines. A missing font gets substituted by the RIP, so your headline reflows, drops a line or changes width, and the first person to notice is the customer holding the box.
6. **No missing images.** Check every placed image is embedded or linked and present, with no grey placeholder frames and no 72 ppi pictures lifted off a website. A broken link exports as a blank box and the job goes on press with a hole in it.
7. **Page size and crop marks.** Set the page to the finished size plus 3 mm on each edge, so a 210 x 297 mm A4 job is built at 216 x 303 mm, and put crop marks 3 mm outside the trim. A page built at trim size leaves the bleed nowhere to live.
8. **5 mm safe area.** Keep all text, logos, page numbers and QR codes at least 5 mm inside the trim. Normal cut variation is a millimetre or two either way, and a phone number with its last digit shaved off is a reprint, not a trim.
9. **PDF/X-1a, flattened.** Export as PDF/X-1a, which flattens transparency, embeds fonts and locks colour to CMYK, or PDF/X-4 if your printer asks. A plain PDF, JPEG or screenshot carries RGB, live transparency and unembedded fonts, and the RIP resolves all three differently from what you saw on screen.
10. **Spot colours and overprint.** Check the spot colour list and the overprint preview before you send. A stray Pantone in a CMYK job adds a fifth plate the printer is not running, and an accidental overprint makes white text disappear into whatever sits behind it.
11. **Named file, one version.** Name the file with the job and a version number, for example menu-a5-v4.pdf, and send one final file with one named approver. Two attachments called final and final2 is how the wrong version ends up on press.
12. **Proof it at 100%.** Open the exported PDF, not the design file, and read every page at actual size, including phone numbers, prices, dates, QR links and the legal line. Approve that proof before plates are made, because every fault above costs minutes now and a full reprint once the ink is down.

The five that get rejected most

- No bleed, or bleed on two edges and nothing on the other two.
- Images at 72 to 150 ppi because they were pulled off a website.
- An RGB file sent to a CMYK press, with the bright greens and oranges already lost.
- Fonts not embedded, so the headline reflows at the RIP.
- Page size set at trim, leaving nowhere for the bleed to sit.

If the file is already rejected, HELYI can rebuild it

Send the file and I return it to spec: 3 mm bleed, CMYK, fonts outlined, 300 ppi images and a PDF/X-1a the printer will accept. Flyer artwork £120. Menu artwork £150. Extra pages £40 each. You get the print-ready file back, not a list of things to fix yourself.

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