EMERSON · CLARKE
PRINTING CORPORATION

CUSTOMER GUIDE

Using AI and Canva to Create Print-Ready Files

How to prepare files that move smoothly through preflight and production.

Emerson Clarke Printing Corporation · Calgary, Alberta

Introduction

AI tools can help you create artwork for print, as long as the final file is assembled and exported to print specifications. This guide shows you how to use AI and Canva so your files pass our preflight check the first time, without delays or extra charges.

The rule to remember: **AI makes the ingredients, and a layout program assembles the print file.** Use AI for images, ideas, and draft copy. Use a layout program such as Adobe InDesign, Adobe Illustrator, Affinity, or Canva (set up for print) to build the page and export the PDF you send us.

If you have questions at any point, contact your account representative before you upload. A five-minute conversation often saves days.

Common problems with AI files

These are the issues we see most often in files made with AI. Each one can delay your job or change how it looks on paper.

Problem	What happens in print	How to avoid it
Low resolution	Images look soft or pixelated	Check pixel sizes against the cheat sheet in this guide
Excessive resolution	Huge files that are slow to upload and process	Downsample images to 300 ppi at their placed size
RGB colour	Bright blues, greens, oranges, and neon tones shift or go dull	Avoid neon colours in prompts and export as CMYK if possible
Wrong proportions	Images don't fit the trim size and leave nothing for bleed	Ask for the right aspect ratio in your prompt
Content at the edges	Faces, products, or text get trimmed off	Keep important content inside the safe area (usually .125" from the edge)
Text inside images	Misspellings and fuzzy type that we cannot correct	Add all text in your layout program
"Vector" files from AI	Messy shapes, gaps, and thousands of points	Use original logo files from the brand owner
AI-made barcodes or QR codes	Codes that look real but don't scan	Use a proper barcode or QR code generator and test it, or ask us to provide you with one
Folded or die-cut pieces	Panels at the wrong width, text across folds	Start from our templates

What to use AI for

Use AI for the creative pieces, and use a layout program for anything that has to be exact.

Good jobs for AI	Jobs for your layout program
Background images and textures	Setting the document size, bleed, and safe area
Illustrations and photo-style images	All headlines, body text, and contact details
Concept sketches and layout ideas	Placing logos from original files
Draft copywriting and proofreading	Barcodes, QR codes, and variable data
Working out sizes and pixel dimensions	Converting colour and exporting the PDF
Checking your file against our specs	Combining pages into one file

Our file specifications

Give these numbers to any AI tool you use, so its suggestions match how we print.

Specification	Our requirement
Bleed	.125″ on all sides
Safe area	Keep text and logos .125″ inside the trim
File format	PDF/X-4
Colour	CMYK, U.S. Web Coated (SWOP) v2 colour profile
Total ink limit	300%
Rich black	C60 M40 Y40 K100 for large areas; 100% K only for small text
Image resolution	300 ppi at placed size; 150 ppi for large format
Minimum line weight	.25 pt
Minimum font size	6 pt; 8 pt for reversed (white) text
Fonts	Embedded 100% or converted to outlines

Templates for folded, die-cut, and bound products are available upon request.

Spot colours (Pantone)

We match spot colours by the Pantone number in the swatch name, so you do not need a Pantone Connect subscription to send us a spot colour job.

1. **Name every spot colour exactly as Pantone does,** including the suffix, for example “PANTONE 286 C.” A spot swatch with the correct name prints correctly even if its on-screen colour is approximate.
2. **Set the swatch to Spot, not Process.** List every Pantone colour on your order form too, so we can confirm the ink count.
3. **Remove unused spot swatches,** and check that the number of spot colours in your file matches your quote. Separations Preview in Acrobat or InDesign shows them.
4. **Choose colours from a current printed Pantone guide.** Screens and AI tools can’t show Pantone colours accurately, and older software libraries are missing many newer colours.
5. **AI images can’t contain spot colours.** A colour that an AI tool calls “Pantone 286” is only an RGB approximation. Apply spot colours to vector shapes and text in your layout program. For Pantone-to-CMYK values, use Pantone’s published values or ask us, since AI chat tools often get them wrong.
6. **CMYK and digital jobs:** We convert Pantone colours to CMYK using our RIP software when printing. Some colours, especially bright oranges, greens, blues, metallics, and fluorescents, can’t be matched in CMYK. If a brand colour is critical, ask for a hard proof (digital) or a press check (offset). Note: there is an additional cost for these.
7. **Effects on spot colours:** Transparency, blending modes, and screens applied to spot colours can print unexpectedly. Tell us if your file uses them, and we’ll check them in preflight.

Image size cheat sheet

A full-bleed image needs at least these pixel dimensions. For images smaller than the full page, multiply the printed width and height in inches by 300.

Product (trim size)	Size with bleed	Pixels needed at 300 ppi
Business card (3.5 × 2 in)	3.75 × 2.25 in	1125 × 675
Postcard (6 × 4 in)	6.25 × 4.25 in	1875 × 1275
Letter flyer (8.5 × 11 in)	8.75 × 11.25 in	2625 × 3375
Tabloid poster (11 × 17 in)	11.25 × 17.25 in	3375 × 5175
Large format poster (24 × 36 in, at 150 ppi)	24.25 × 36.25 in	3638 × 5438

Upscaling: AI upscalers can enlarge images to these sizes, but they sometimes add waxy skin, smeared textures, or invented detail. View upscaled images at 100% before you place them.

Stay near 300 ppi: Images far above 300 ppi make files huge without improving print quality. See the case study on page 10.

Prompt templates

Tell the AI the final print size, bleed, resolution, and colour mode before you create anything. When these details are missing, the AI works at its own default size, and the image later has to be stretched or upscaled to fit the page, which softens detail and adds visible flaws. Starting with the right specifications avoids most of the problems we see in preflight.

Copy these templates and replace the text in square brackets.

Step 1: Set up the project

Start every new project with this prompt, before asking for any images or layouts.

> I'm creating artwork for commercial printing. Please use these specifications for everything in this project:
> - Finished (trim) size: [width × height in inches]
> - Bleed: [0.125 in] on all sides, so the full size with bleed is [width × height in inches]
> - Safe area: keep all important content [0.125 in] inside the trim
> - Resolution: [300 ppi] at final size, which means at least [width × height] pixels
> - Colour mode: CMYK if you can produce it; if not, tell me, and use print-friendly colours with no neon or fluorescent tones
>
> Before you start, tell me which of these you can and can't meet, the largest image size you can produce, and the closest aspect ratio you can create.

If the tool can't produce the full pixel size, choose its largest size and highest quality setting, and match the aspect ratio of the full page with bleed. Contact us before upscaling an image by more than 2×.

Full-bleed background image

> Using the project specifications above, create a [photo-style / flat illustration / watercolour] image of [subject] at the full size with bleed. Keep the main subject inside the safe area. Extend the background naturally to every edge with no borders, frames, or vignettes. Do not include any text, letters, numbers, logos, or watermarks.

Image with room for your text

Using the project specifications above, create [image description]. Leave a clean, simple area in the [top third / left side] for a headline that I will add later. Do not include any text, letters, logos, or watermarks.

Folded pieces

I'm designing a [letter-size roll-fold trifold] for commercial printing. Here are the panel widths from my printer's template: [paste panel widths]. Bleed is [0.125 in] and resolution is [300 ppi]. Tell me which panel is the front cover, back cover, and inside flap, the pixel size needed for each panel's images, and where text must stay clear of the folds.

Checking your file before you upload

Here are my printer's file requirements: [paste our specifications]. Here are my file's details: [page size, bleed, colour mode, image sizes, fonts]. List anything that does not meet the requirements and how to fix it.

Exporting your print PDF

Export with a PDF/X-4 preset. These settings prevent most file problems.

Export settings

1. **Preset:** Choose PDF/X-4. Avoid "Smallest File Size" and "Illustrator Default."
2. **Marks and bleed:** Turn on "Use document bleed settings," or enter 0.125 in on all sides.
3. **Compression:** For colour and greyscale images, choose Bicubic Downsampling to 300 ppi for images above 450 ppi, with JPEG compression at maximum quality.
4. **Colour:** Convert to CMYK using U.S. Web Coated (SWOP) v2.
5. **Fonts:** Make sure all fonts are embedded.
6. **Layers:** Turn on "Create Acrobat Layers" in InDesign, or "Create Acrobat Layers from Top-Level Layers" in Illustrator.
7. **Illustrator only:** Turn off "Preserve Illustrator Editing Capabilities," which adds a second copy of your artwork to the file.

Cropping images

When you crop or mask a large image, the hidden part usually stays in the file. In Illustrator, use **Object > Crop Image** before exporting. In InDesign, turn on Crop Image Data to Frames in the Compression settings when you export.

Combining pages

Combine separate PDFs in Adobe Acrobat (Combine Files) or build all pages in one layout document. AI chat assistants can merge PDFs, but they keep every image exactly as it was and may drop print settings such as bleed boxes. If you do use AI to merge files, check the final file size and page sizes before uploading.

Shrinking an oversized PDF in Acrobat

If a finished PDF is far too large, the PDF Optimizer in Adobe Acrobat can shrink it without changing the layout. Do this as the very last step, because an optimized file is harder to edit. The optimizer reduces file size only. It does not fix colour mode, bleed, page sizes, or missing fonts.

Create the preset (one time)

1. Open the PDF in Acrobat and choose **File > Save As Other > Optimized PDF**.
2. Apply these settings in the PDF Optimizer panel:

Panel	Setting
Images: colour and greyscale	Bicubic Downsampling to 300 ppi for images above 450 ppi; JPEG compression, Maximum quality
Images: monochrome	Bicubic Downsampling to 1200 ppi for images above 1800 ppi; CCITT Group 4 or JBIG2 lossless compression
Images	Tick “Optimize images only if there is a reduction in size”
Fonts	Leave “Fonts to unembed” empty; tick “Subset all embedded fonts”
Transparency	Leave unchanged
Discard Objects	Tick “Discard all alternate images” only
Discard User Data	Leave everything unticked if your file is PDF/X, since discarding metadata removes the PDF/X identification. Otherwise, you can tick “Discard document information and metadata”
Clean Up	Object compression: Compress entire file. Tick every box except “Discard unreferenced named destinations” and “Optimize page content.” Make compatible with: Retain existing

3. Click **Save** at the top of the panel and name the preset something you’ll recognize, such as “Print File Cleanup.”
4. Click **OK** and save the optimized PDF under a new name, so your original stays untouched.

Using Canva for print

Canva works well for many print jobs once its print settings are turned on. Its main limits are colour: Canva works in RGB and can't produce spot colours.

Setting up your design

1. **Set the page to the trim size.** Choose **Create a design** > **Custom size**, set the units to inches, and enter the finished size. For a letter flyer, enter 8.5 × 11 in.
2. **Turn on bleed and margins.** Go to **File** > **Settings** and select **Show print bleed** and **Show margins**. If you don't see Show margins, start from a blank design, since some older templates don't support it.
3. **Design to the guides.** Extend backgrounds and edge-to-edge images all the way into the bleed. Keep text, logos, and important details inside the margins, and move anything Canva highlights in the red "danger zone" near the trim.

Downloading for print

Choose **Share** > **Download** > **PDF Print** and tick **Crop marks and bleed**. If your plan offers a colour profile option, choose **CMYK**.

Colour in Canva

Canva colours are chosen in RGB, even when you download as CMYK. Bright blues, greens, oranges, and neon tones will shift in print.

Spot colours (Pantone) and Canva

Canva can't create or keep spot colours, so every Canva PDF prints in CMYK.

- **Uploaded logos lose their spot colours.** SVG files hold RGB colour only. PDF and .ai files are converted into Canva elements using Canva's RGB colours.
- **If your job needs a Pantone match,** either finish the file in a layout program such as Illustrator, InDesign, or Affinity, or send us your Canva PDF, the original logo file, and the Pantone numbers. Our prepress team can rebuild the spot colour elements. Contact your account representative for more information regarding this service.

Our policies on AI files

- **Tell us when AI was used.** Tick the AI box on the upload form so our prepress team knows what to check.
- **File corrections.** We can fix minor issues. Files with major problems are returned to you for correction, which may change your delivery date.
- **Colour.** Bright RGB colours in AI images will shift when converted to CMYK. Colour shifts visible on an approved proof are not grounds for a reprint.
- **Proofs.** Review your proof carefully for spelling, cropping, and image quality before approving.

Questions? Contact your account representative.

CASE STUDY

A 500 MB training binder

A customer sent us a 24-page training binder file that was over 500 MB. After two changes to the export settings, the same binder was 12 MB and printed identically.

What made the file so large

The pages were designed in a layout program, exported as separate PDFs, and combined into one file with an AI chat assistant. Six photos of staff, each printed about 5 inches wide, made up almost the entire file size.

	Original photo	After fixing
Pixel dimensions	7200 × 4800	1500 × 1000
Effective resolution at 5 in wide	1440 ppi	300 ppi
Compression	ZIP (lossless)	JPEG, maximum quality
Hidden area outside the crop	Kept in the file	Removed
Size in the file, per photo	about 85 MB	about 1 MB

Three things combined:

1. **Too much resolution.** Each photo had about five times the pixels needed for sharp printing.
2. **Lossless compression.** ZIP compression barely shrinks photographs, so each one was stored close to its full size.
3. **Hidden cropped areas.** Each photo was masked down to a small window on the page, but the full image stayed in the file.

The AI assistant joined the PDFs exactly as they were. Merging tools only combine pages, so every image kept its original size and compression.

How it was fixed

The designer cropped each photo in the layout program, then re-exported the pages as PDF/X-4, downsampling images above 450 ppi to 300 ppi with JPEG compression. The pages were combined in Adobe Acrobat. The job passed preflight on the next upload.

Pre-upload checklist

Check every item before you upload. If you can't tick one, contact us first.

Job name: _____ Date: _____

- ☐ Document size equals the trim size plus bleed
- ☐ Backgrounds extend fully into the bleed
- ☐ All text and logos sit inside the safe area
- ☐ Images are close to 300 ppi at their placed size, neither far below nor far above
- ☐ All text was added in a layout program and spell-checked, with none built into AI images
- ☐ Logos come from original files supplied by the brand owner
- ☐ Barcodes and QR codes were made with a proper generator and tested with a phone
- ☐ All pages are the correct size and orientation
- ☐ The PDF was exported as PDF/X-4, with fonts embedded
- ☐ Acrobat layers were included when exporting ("Create Acrobat Layers" turned on)
- ☐ The file size is reasonable for the job
- ☐ You have the rights to every image, logo, font, and character in the file

Questions about your file? Contact your account representative.
Emerson Clarke Printing Corporation · Calgary, Alberta · 403.250.8933 · EmersonClarke.com

EMERSON • CLARKE
PRINTING CORPORATION

Emerson Clarke Printing Corporation

Calgary, Alberta

403.250.8933 · EmersonClarke.com

© 2026 Emerson Clarke Printing Corporation. All rights reserved.

November 2026