

About Microsoft Publisher

People often ask me what program they should use to design flyers, business cards, and other documents that combine text and graphics. While there are some great professional tools out there, they generally go beyond the budget of a household or small business, and they sometimes have pretty steep learning curves, too. So for most people, the answer is Microsoft Publisher.

Microsoft Publisher comes with many versions of Microsoft Office, but can also be bought as a stand-alone program. It comes with dozens of blank design templates, as well as hundreds of pre-designed templates. Add in the template library that Microsoft has at its website, and the ability to apply color schemes, and right off the bat you've got half your design work done.

The learning curve for Microsoft Publisher is a fairly easy one, too. Most things are pretty intuitive, and help is never more than a click away. But there are some pitfalls in moving from a Publisher document to professional looking print output. They can be overcome, but it's not always obvious how. I'm going to cover the two most important issues.

Fonts

First let's talk about fonts. Windows comes with a set of fonts. Microsoft Office comes with a set of fonts. Any number of programs can come with more fonts. You can download fonts, too. Once you've had your computer for more than a few months, the odds that you might have a font that I don't have starts going up quickly. By default, Publisher does not save fonts with your document. It only saves the name of the font. So if you choose to use one of those fonts that I don't have, your file will look great when you open it on your computer, but it'll be all wrong when I open it on mine because I won't have the right font named in your document.

There are a few ways you can work around this problem. For example, if you convert your document to a PDF, and then share the PDF, the PDF file should look correct on any computer. But the file may not be able to be edited again. There is a better way.

With your file open in Publisher, go to the Tools menu. Choose Commercial Printing, and then Fonts. There is a checkbox there to embed your fonts into your file. Check that box, and uncheck the boxes below it. Your file may now be larger -- perhaps too large to e-mail -- but in most cases it should look the same on my computer as on yours. (There may be a problem if you are using a font that you bought, and the licensing on it does not allow sharing. This is usually not the case for home or small business users.)

Colors

Color is a complex subject, but I'll try to just hit the important parts. When you look at your monitor, the colors you see are created essentially by blending color lights of red, green and blue, or RGB. When you turn-up each color to its maximum, you get white. When you look at a piece of paper, the color is formed by combining inks of cyan, magenta and yellow, or CMY. Blend all three together at their maximum, and you get a muddy black. (Printers actually add black ink, K, to sharpen the blacks, so you get CMYK.)

Publisher, by default, operates in RGB mode. If you just simply send a job to a printer, the printer driver will convert RGB to CMYK. Here's the problem. Not all colors that exist in RGB exist in CMYK. Colors with lots of fluorescence, like neon green, exist in RGB, but not CMYK. If you leave the conversion up to the printer driver, you might be surprised by the results.

A better way is to work in CMYK mode from the beginning. The conversion that has to be done to display it on your monitor will still introduce some errors, but generally you will see something far closer to what will actually be printed, depending on how well your monitor is calibrated. If you need some very exact colors, it's best to find out what the CMYK values of the colors you need are, and enter those values into the color picker, rather than depend on eye-balling it on screen.

How bright (or dull) your paper may be, whether or not the paper has a finish and certain aspects of the toner or ink used, as well as the color of the light reflecting on the paper when you look at it will also effect the color you perceive, but frankly, that's going beyond our practical limits. Going into CMYK mode while creating the document is usually as much as anyone really needs to do.

To get Publisher into CMYK mode, go again to the Tools menu, then Commercial Printing. Choose Color Printing, and then choose Process Colors (CMYK).

With your fonts embedded, and your colors in CMYK mode, your file is ready to share with us. We will still be able to correct typos, stretch graphics that need to be stretched, and move things that are too close to the edge away from the edge, as well as any other minor changes that need to be made before printing.

Bleeds

When something intentionally goes all the way to the edge of a page, it really needs to go beyond the edge of the page to allow for cutting tolerances. That means they need to bleed off the edge. By default, Publisher allows you to have objects bleeding over the edge, but if you design in Publisher, and then convert to PDF before submitting the file to us, your conversion settings may result in us losing the over-bleed. That means your whole file may need to be stretched, which may put other elements too close to the edges.

Professional designers know about all these issues, and more. When a professional designer submits a file to us, it is usually a print-ready PDF. But I prefer non-professionals to submit Publisher files, and if they are using non-standard fonts, with fonts embedded. A Publisher file that comes to me already in CMYK mode gives me even more confidence that the output will be what is expected. When a non-professional submits a PDF that isn't sized correctly, doesn't have correct bleeding, doesn't have cut lines, and isn't in CMYK, I may have to send that file back for even minor fixes before printing.