Preparing files for print

Alex Holden explains the most common errors made when authors supplying their own files to printers

Many self-publishers choose to undertake the entire production process on their own book, and indeed some online self-publishing services (glorified online print companies really) insist that you supply your own print-ready files. But ensuring that you supply print files that will result in the book that you expect to see can be fraught with difficulties, and getting it wrong can be both time-consuming and costly.

Most printers, whether they be online, large firms or your local printer in town, now expect to receive files for print as Adobe PDF (Portable Digital Format). PDF files can be created by most computer programs nowadays, and there's no reason why you can't prepare files yourself... if you know what you should be preparing!

Printers will want to receive files from you that are ready to print – they don't want to have to go back and forth with you to rectify any problems, and if they do have to do this then most are likely to charge for their time. So getting it right first time can save you a lot of hassle and cost.

What is PDF?

PDF is a fixed file format that presents your typeset file to a printer so that they can set up the printing quickly and easily. A PDF file shows exactly what will be printed by the printer; PDF files generally can't be edited (though they can in some cases) – they are a fixed format that carries your text and pictures, fonts, positioning guides, colour separations and all print information required.

Commercial publishers – and the better self-publishing companies – generally use either QuarkXPress or Adobe InDesign to typeset books in, as these typesetting programs offer a range of very exact typesetting functions, and outout to a number of different formats, PDF included. Both Quark and Adobe's InDesign are dedicated typesetting/layout programs designed specifically for

producing books and complex documents. Programs like Microsoft Word, PagePlus, Microsoft Publisher and MS Works are not designed for typesetting, and generally produce books that look like they've been produced on the cheap. However both Quark and InDesign are expensive to buy, both over £800 each, so unless you intend to publish a lot of books it's likely that you'll have to use whatever program your computer came with.

Even so, PDF can be produced by most programs, and with a bit of knowledge you should be able to output files that are acceptable to your printers.

What do printers need?

Your first port of call is always to check with your own printer what they want you to supply. Most will want roughly the same files, but there may be some variation. Here we shall explain what the most common requirements are, so that you can either prepare files accordingly, or so that you'll know what your printer means when he asks for something different.

Crop marks

Crop marks (also called trim marks) are the marks on a PDF that show where the page is to be trimmed to the final book size. Unless you are using a local printer, most printers will print on a paper that's slightly larger than your final book size, and then cut the book and cover (for a paperback) to the final book size together. This is where the crop marks are important, because without them, the printer has no way of knowing exactly where to trim the pages. This can result in the content of the page being too high or low on the page, or too near to the trimmed margin.

When setting up your typesetting file, make sure that the page size is exactly the same as your final *trimmed* page size (eg. a B-format book should be typeset at 198x127mm as this is the final trimmed size). The crop marks will then appear exactly where the page edge is on your PDF.

When outputting your typesetting file to a PDF format, you'll need to specify crop marks in your program as they aren't usually present on default output.

Bleed

The bleed is any text or pictures that will continue beyond the book's trimmed page edges. You must 'bleed' the picture off the edge of the page if you don't want there to be a white line on the edge after trimming. This means that you will lose about 3mm of your picture on the edge as it is trimmed off when the book is cut to size.

When preparing your PDF, you must specify that the PDF you output will *not* 'Trim to size', ie. you have to retain the bleed on the PDF. This can be seen as the picture continuing beyond the crop marks, which is correct.

Fonts

Different computers will contain different fonts, and although some fonts are common to most systems (like Times and Helvetica), there are many different versions of the same font produced by different font manufacturers. This can result in a document on one computer flowing very differently on another, because the computer will use the version of a font that it has, or if it doesn't have the font, it will use another. Even if you only use common fonts, when your files are transferred to another computer or to the printers, the result may not be what you expect.

So when you output your PDF files you must ensure that the 'Embed all fonts' button is checked in your typesetting program. This results in all the fonts that you have used in typesetting your document being embedded within the PDF itself, so that when the PDF is printed by the printer it will print exactly as you expect it to. If you don't embed fonts then many printers won't accept your files, because they know that they may not print properly.

To check whether you have successfully embedded fonts, in your PDF file, go to File > Properties > Fonts. The fonts that are in your document should all be specified as embedded.

Your whole book!

This might seem obvious, but many computer programs output PDF files and omit any blank pages by default. This can be a disaster if you've deliberately included blanks in your typesetting file. For example, blank pages are often included to force a new chapter to start on a right-hand (odd-numbered) page. If the blank is omitted when a PDF file is generated, then what was a right-hand page will become a left, and so on... the printers won't know that what you've supplied is not correct, they may think that you want page numbering in an odd fashion. You won't find that your book has printed with pages in the wrong place until you get the books – and by then it's too late.

When you output to PDF, make sure that 'Include blank pages' is checked in your typesetting program. Then check the PDF that you've created to make sure everything that you expect to be there is present.

Colour

If your book includes colour – and most books have a colour cover

Make sure that crop marks are present

Check that fonts are embedded in the PDF document

If your pictures or text 'bleeds' off the page, check that there is a bleed present on your PDF, ie. the picture goes beyond the crop marks

Ensure that colour is presented as your printer expects,either in CMYK or RGB

Check that your PDF looks exactly like your typesetting file. If it doesn't then you've done something wrong!

nowadays – then you need to ensure that your PDF presents colour correctly. If your book is being printed lithographically (ie. using printing plates and inks), then it will go through a four-colour print process, where the printers produce four separate plates in Cyan, Magenta, Yellow and Black (CMYK) that make up your complete page. In this case, any colour pictures that you have used within your typesetting file must be CMYK (as opposed to RGB – Red, Green, Blue). You also need to ensure that your PDF is output with CMYK checked, so that the printers have the CMYK information required to make each printiung plate.

If you output a PDF with an RGB colour space, then what is printed may not be what you expect. Converting from RGB to CMYK can result in some colours changing quite significantly, especially greens and purples. The only way to make sure you get the right result is to use CMYK images in the first place.

If your book is being printed digitally, then you can use RGB images and output your PDF with RGB colour space, but check with your printer first.

Use the available resources

Your best ally is your printer. While you shouldn't expect them to work on your files at no expense, most will be happy to offer guidance on preparing files. Some have information on their websites (see www.biddles.co.uk/hh_pdf.htm or www.lightningsource.com/ops/files/pod/LSI_FileCreationGuide.pdf), but remember that this is printer-specific, so check with your own printer what they want.

The process of outputting to PDF will depend on what software you are using, so read the printed or online manual that it came with. If the software can output to PDF it will explain how, and all about what output settings are available. There are also many user forums online, and a quick Google for 'How to output to PDF from xxxxx' will bring up plenty of results.

Taking time to get it right when you prepare your PDF files can save time and expense later on. And remember, if you have accepted a quotation to print your book that includes you supplying print-ready PDF files yet the files you supply are not print-ready, then you should expect to have to pay the printers to put them right!