

What works for desktop publishing, and what doesn't.

One of the first questions to ask before choosing a program to design your files with is, "Will this work?" If you spend hours preparing your job, you don't want to redo your work (or pay to have it redone) because your chosen layout program isn't supported by your printer or just doesn't work for high-quality printing.

At J.S. McCarthy we did a survey and discovered that, in the last year, we had received source files created in sixteen different programs across both the Mac and PC platforms. We also found that with many of these, additional work had to be done to make them printable.

So what programs work best? Picking the right program can mean the difference between making your deadline on budget or missing one or both.

We've evaluated each program and have given a 1 to 5 star rating on how suitable we've found it for *file preparation*. Many programs that are used for publishing were designed for other purposes, and while Photoshop is a great photo editor, it doesn't work well for layouts.

While we can't tell you which program is *the* best, we'll list some of the the pros and cons of each and leave it to you to pick the program that suits your needs.

As always, if you design it, we'll do our best to work with it and to work with you to solve any problems that may arise.

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Rating Desktop Publishing Programs

Quark Xpress 4 or 5



Older versions of Xpress remain very popular. Many designers subscribe to the, "if it's not broke... don't fix it" school of thought and continue to use older versions of Quark which have the same advantages as Quark 6, but are more stable. Quark is compatible with Mac OS 9 and Windows 98 - XP.

Pros

- Industry standard; very capable, can be used for almost any print project; universally accepted among designers, printers and agencies.
- Familiar interface for design professionals.
- Capabilities can be extended with third-party XTensions.
- Text handling and placement tools are very good.
- Graphic handling is very robust.
- Stable, rarely crashes and generally has few problems printing.

Cons

- Can be confusing to beginners.
- Expensive; Quark customer service has traditionally been poor.
- Interface and feature set are starting to show their age.
- No native support for some newer graphics formats (Acrobat 6, Photoshop, or Illustrator).
- Doesn't run natively on Mac OS X.
- Typographical tools are good, but not quite as advanced as InDesign.

Quark Xpress 6



Quark is the industry standard for high-end publishing work. At the time of this writing version 6 is the latest version but it is still not as popular as versions 4 or 5 because of stability issues, a steep upgrade price and a lack of new features. It is compatible with Mac OS X and Windows 2000 or XP.

Pros

- Same as earlier versions, except much less stable and reliable.
- Can have multiple projects with various page sizes in a single file.
- Can be used to design simple web pages.
- Runs natively on Mac OS X.

Cons

- Buggy; overall it is much less robust than earlier versions.
- Interface can be confusing to beginners; some arbitrary interface changes from earlier versions.
- Can't save back into Quark 4 format.
- Many of the new features are aimed at web design and are of limited use for print designers.
- Legitimate users have had problems with Quark's anti-piracy activation scheme.
- Direct PDF export is unreliable and produces bloated files. Can't place Acrobat 6 files.
- Expensive; Quark customer service has traditionally been poor.
- Doesn't run on older Mac OS 9 or Windows systems.



Word Processing Programs



Microsoft Word, Microsoft Works
AppleWorks, WordPerfect, etc.

There are dozens of excellent programs designed for writers who want to put text on a page, but none of them are very good for professional design and layout. Unfortunately, “creeping feature-itis” has led to the grafting of design features to word processing programs. This hasn’t worked out very well, because the needs of a designer are usually very different from the needs of a writer. Word processing documents usually must be converted into PDF format and edited with Acrobat tools to produce a printable file.

Pros

- Common and cheap.

Cons

- Limited support from professional agencies, designers and printers.
- Text wrap is linked to printer chosen. Moving document from one machine to another can cause text to reflow.
- Page margins are linked to printer chosen. Moving document from one machine to another can cause page margins to change.
- Work in RGB mode only. Can’t print in spot or CMYK colors.
- Resolution issues. In many cases, any high-res graphics are converted into low-res (and RGB).
- Font handling issues. Fonts can easily change and text can rewrap, all without warning.
- Graphic handling issues. Many common formats (PDF, Tiff, EPS) either can’t be placed, or don’t work correctly in word processing programs. Some native word processing formats (WordArt) won’t print reliably.
- Word allows the embedding of Excel tables which don’t print reliably.
- In many cases, jobs prepared using word processing programs will incur extra prepress charges and will require extra preparation time to fix all the issues.
- There are many programs designed for desktop publishing that will do a much better job.

InDesign 2 & CS



InDesign is rapidly gaining marketshare in the publishing field. While early versions were slow and had some interface issues, the latest versions are faster and much more refined. InDesign CS edges out Quark in the features department and has been more stable than Quark 6. InDesign runs on Mac OS 9 (version 2), OS X and Windows.

Pros

- Is widely accepted throughout the publishing industry.
- Has the most advanced typographical engine of any design program.
- Has the most advanced graphics engine of any design program.
- Has Separation Preview and Ink Merging tools.
- Is tightly integrated with other Adobe programs (Acrobat, Photoshop and Illustrator).
- Shares same color engine as Photoshop, allowing for high-quality preview of artwork.
- Has built-in transparency features, giving designers the ability to create complex artwork without leaving the program.

Cons

- Slower on older machines.
- Interface can be confusing.
- InDesign CS cannot save back into earlier versions and doesn’t work under Mac OS 9.
- Built-in transparency features can’t be printed without “flattening,” which can sometimes drastically change its appearance.

PageMaker



PageMaker is the granddaddy of desktop publishing programs. Created in 1985, it launched the desktop publishing revolution. It is still used by many today, although feature-wise it has been surpassed by Quark and InDesign. It is available for the Mac OS 9 and Windows platforms.

Pros

- Easy to learn. Generally reliable.
- Widely supported, especially on the Windows platform.
- Has a full set of basic design tools.

Cons

- Older program, starting to show its age; it is no longer being developed.
- Lacks advanced typographical and graphics handling features of Quark and InDesign.
- Some PageMaker documents have had file corruption issues.
- On-screen preview doesn’t match printed output.
- Doesn’t run natively under Mac OS X.

FrameMaker



FrameMaker is a long-document publishing program; actually it is “the” long-document publishing program, as there aren’t any other serious competitors for creating huge books. It has more limited graphical capabilities than other design programs, but works very well for indexing and building very long documents. It is available for Windows and Mac OS 9.

Pros

- Excellent long-document creation features (indexing, table of content tool, etc.).
- Advanced editorial control (version compare between revisions).
- Advanced XML and variable data publishing features.

Cons

- Limited support among printers and graphics professionals.
- Hard to learn, confusing interface.
- Limited graphical features and tools.
- Has some output issues (graphics become lo-res; PC version converts colors to RGB).
- Output is closely tied to the PPD chosen; switching printer drivers can cause text to reflow.
- Doesn’t run natively under Mac OS X, and it is no longer developed for Mac OS.



Illustrator



Illustrator is primarily a Postscript illustration program, but it is sometimes used to create a source file for smaller jobs. It works very well as an illustration program but is less suited for creating source documents larger than one page. Illustrator works on Mac OS 9 (up to Illustrator 10), OS X (Illustrator 10 and over) and Windows platforms.

Pros

- Is widely accepted throughout the publishing industry.
- Can create very complex graphical effects and designs.
- Is tightly integrated with Adobe design programs (Acrobat, Photoshop and InDesign).
- Shares same color engine as Photoshop, allowing for high-quality preview of artwork.

Cons

- Confusing interface, can be hard to learn.
- Illustrator CS can cause text in files created with earlier versions to reflow.
- Single page files only.
- Versions prior to CS had printing issues. In many cases Illustrator files must be exported in EPS format and printed from another program.
- Has built-in transparency features which can cause printing issues.
- Programs designed for desktop publishing generally work better for design work.

Freehand



Freehand is primarily an illustration program, but it is sometimes used to create a source file for smaller jobs. Like Illustrator, it was designed for and works best as an illustration program. Freehand works on Mac OS 9, OS X (version 10, MX) and Windows platforms.

Pros

- Is widely accepted throughout the publishing industry (but not as common as Illustrator).
- Can create very complex graphical effects and designs.
- Allows multiple page documents with varied page sizes and orientations.

Cons

- Latest versions (10, MX) have been buggy, lately Macromedia has not been aggressive in developing and updating the program.
- Programs designed for desktop publishing generally work better for design work.

CorelDraw



CorelDraw is primarily an illustration program, but it is sometimes used to create source files. While CorelDraw has lost marketshare in the last few years and is much less popular than Illustrator or Freehand, it still has a small, loyal following. It is mostly used on Windows platforms, although some earlier versions did work on Mac OS X.

Pros

- Can create very complex graphical effects and designs.
- Interface can be easier to learn than Freehand or Illustrator.

Cons

- Native files are not widely accepted throughout the publishing industry.
- Has some color and resolution issues when printing.
- Creates poor Postscript code which can lead to printing problems.
- Programs designed for desktop publishing generally work better for design work.
- Mac versions buggy; Mac versions no longer being developed.

Microsoft Excel or Microsoft PowerPoint



Microsoft Excel is designed as a spreadsheet program for manipulating numbers. PowerPoint is designed to produce *on-screen* presentations. Neither program works well for design or layout. These documents usually must be converted into PDF format and worked on with Acrobat editing tools to produce a printable file. Excel and PowerPoint are available for the Mac OS 9, OS X and Windows platforms.

Pros

- Common and cheap, they ship on many Windows machines as part of Microsoft Office.

Cons

- Not accepted at most professional ad agencies, designers and printers.
- Text wrap is linked to printer chosen. Moving document from one machine to another will cause text to reflow.
- Design is not linked to a specific page size. Making changes or moving document from one machine to another can cause page size and margins to change, sometimes drastically.
- Works in RGB mode only, cannot print with spot or CMYK colors.
- Resolution issues. In many cases, any high-res graphics are converted into low-res (and RGB).
- Font handling issues. Fonts can easily change without warning and will often rewrap. No indicators of what fonts are used in file.
- Graphic handling issues. Many common formats (PDF, TIFF, EPS) either can't be placed or don't work correctly in these programs. Some native formats (WordArt) won't print reliably.
- Converting these files into a printable format can be very costly and time consuming.
- There are many programs designed for desktop publishing that will do a much better job.



Acrobat PDF ☆ or ☆☆☆☆☆

The Acrobat PDF format is rapidly becoming an industry standard for the transmission of clean high-res files for print. Many workflows (including ours) are centered around PDFs. However, there are many different types of PDF files, and many different ways to create them, so not all PDF files are printable. Contact us at techsupport@jsmccarthy.com for instructions and information on how to create press-ready PDFs.

Pros

- Standardized format, it is supported by almost all professional designers, publications and printers.
- Combines all images, fonts and source material in one file.
- Properly created PDFs are "locked" and will print exactly as they look on screen.
- Alteration charges can be reduced and the designer can have more control over revisions by sending a new PDF file for any page with corrections.
- Files in non-standard programs can be converted into PDF format for printing.

Cons

- PDF creation and editing can require the full (expensive) version of Acrobat.
- To work, a PDF must be created using the correct procedure from a clean, correct source file. Bad source files will make bad PDFs.
- There are many incorrect methods to create a PDF. A non-standard PDF may use low-res graphics, RGB mode or incorrect fonts.
- Not all printers have the same requirements for PDF creation. Some older workflows will not print PDFs correctly.
- The PDF workflow makes further editing difficult. Generally, the designer will need to make changes and submit a new PDF file.

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Microsoft Publisher ☆☆☆

Microsoft Publisher ships on many Windows machines as part of the Microsoft Office Suite. It is targeted toward beginners or occasional designers. Its "free" (or at least low-cost) price tag has helped lead to its use in many homes and small office environments. Issues with earlier versions have given Publisher a bad rep among printers, but Publisher 2003 fixed many of the issues that made it unsuitable for professional publishing. It runs on the Windows platform only.

Pros

- Easy for most beginners to learn, comes with many pre-designed templates.
- Low-cost (although Publisher 2003 is a little more expensive than earlier versions).
- Publisher 2003 fixes many problems that professional printers had with earlier versions
- Common interface with other Microsoft Office products.

Cons

- Not widely supported by professional ad agencies, designers and printers.
- Versions prior to Publisher 2003 could not print CMYK or spot color correctly.
- Not as many features as Quark, Pagemaker or InDesign
- Print engine produces poorly optimized Postscript which can lead to output problems. Publisher 2003 is better, but still has some printing issues.
- Can have text wrap issues when printer drivers are switched.
- Interface defaults to RGB mode instead of spot or CMYK color mode.
- Additional prepress issues and costs can more than offset the initial low cost of product.

Photoshop ☆☆☆

Photoshop is designed for editing and color correcting photos and web pages, but it is sometimes used to create the source file for smaller jobs. Although it is an excellent program for photo editing it is a poor choice for desktop publishing. It runs on Mac OS 9, OS X and Windows.

Pros

- Has the most powerful photo editing tools available; industry standard (for photo work).
- Can create very complex graphical effects and designs.
- Has a comfortable interface for web designers.
- Is tightly integrated with Adobe design programs (Acrobat, InDesign and Illustrator).
- Has excellent layering features.
- Photoshop CS has improved text handling tools.

Cons

- Extremely powerful program; can be very confusing for beginners.
- Designed for photo editing so it has problems when creating files for print.
- Cumbersome text handling. Photoshop text will be less readable than text set in other programs because of the way it rasterizes text when printing.
- Can only create single page files.
- Once a document is created it can be difficult to change page size or resolution.
- Unless in Bitmap mode, it anti-aliases everything to make it look best on screen. This causes a "halo" from the halftoning process when printed that can blur detail in small text and fine lines.
- Web design requirements (RGB color, 72 dpi) are very different from print requirements (CMYK color, 300+ dpi) which can lead to problems if the designer isn't careful. Files created at a lower resolution can't be upsampled for print.
- It is very difficult to create and edit spot color documents in Photoshop.
- Files created at high-resolution are very large and cumbersome to work with.
- Revisions to a file can be difficult to make once it has been created.
- Other programs will do a much better job for design projects.