Margins and Bleeds explained

A design destined for print requires setting up to certain specifications to ensure that the work is printed correctly by industrial lithographic or digital print firms. This often starts with the initial document upon which the design is to be created by adding the correct bleed area and crop marks. Let's take a look at what crops and bleed actually are, why they are required, and how to set them up in your favorite Adobe program.

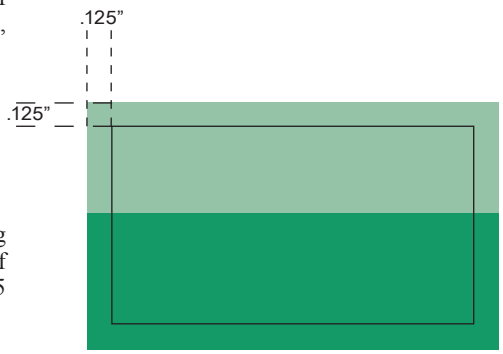
Baffling Bleed

Let's start with the term bleed. This is the area of artwork that is extended beyond the actual dimensions of the document. It is used to avoid strips of white paper showing on the edges of your print should the batch be misaligned when cut to size.

Any objects in your artwork that touch the edges of the document require bleed; for instance a background color or image should spread to cover the entire bleed area, as should any objects that creep in from the side of the page.

In the United States, bleed of .125 inch is commonly required. This .125 inch accounts for each of the four sides of the page, therefore you should add .25 inch to the width and height of the document, for example:

Letter size = 8.5 x 11 inches
8.5 inches + .25 inches = 8.75 inches
11 inches + .25 inches = 11.25 inches
Design size = 8.75 x 11.25 inches



Black border represents finished page edge

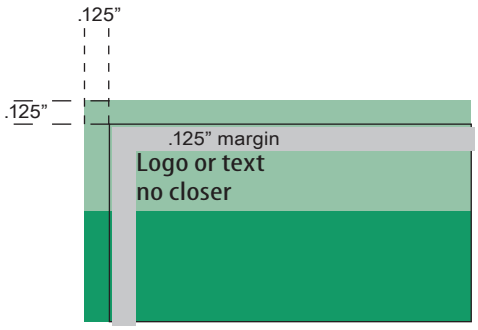
In addition to bleed, you should also add a margin to the edges of the document to avoid having your objects look as if they are about to fall off the page, or even worse, actually get cropped off when the document is trimmed! The amount of margin is personal preference, but .125 inch, .25 inch, or .5 inch is usually used depending on the size of the overall design.

Setting Bleed in Photoshop

When creating your document, simply make the calculations to the artwork size as above and enter them into the "Width" and "Height" boxes.

It is always useful to place in some guides to remind you where the trimmed document size lies. You can do this by going to Select > All, then Select > Transform Selection.

Right click on the W and H options and change the measurements to inches, then enter the normal document size.



Drag guides to the borders of the new selection

Let's not forget to add our margin, in this case we'll say .125 in. per side. Use the same technique to create guides another .25 in. smaller (.125 in. x 2).

Setting Bleed in Illustrator

In Photoshop we altered the overall size of the document to accommodate bleed; however, in Illustrator try and keep the document correct to the desired finish size.

Remember, any objects spanning to the edge of the artboard will require bleed - run these out an extra .125 in. per side. Using a temporary rectangle or margins at the overall bleed size can help align the objects.

Drag margins to the artboard. Right click on the artboard and unlock the guides, select each guide in turn and press the "Enter" key to move it. Enter your desired margin figures into the X and Y boxes to move the guides into position.

Setting Bleed in InDesign

With InDesign being primarily a desktop publishing application, it has the most options for setting up a document for print. Under the "New Document" menu you will notice individual options for Page Size, Margin, and Bleed. Simply enter in your figures and let InDesign setup the document for you. (Be sure when packaging or exporting document to check the box to include bleed settings.)

Confusing Crops

Crop marks are the little lines that sit around the edge of the document showing where the area of bleed ends and the proper document area begins, they work alongside bleed to tell the print worker where the paper needs trimming.

Crop marks are usually hairline or 0.25pt in thickness and are set in Registration Black.

Setting Crops in Illustrator

There are a couple of ways to set crop marks in Illustrator. The first is to go to "Object > Crop Area > Make". This will create a set of uneditable crop marks directly around the document edges.

A second method is to create a rectangle the size of the document, then go to Filter > Create > Crop Marks.

This will create a set of editable crop marks according to the area specified. A benefit of this method is that the crops can then be shortened if needed. Illustrator tends to produce huge crop marks that can sometimes be a little overkill for designs such as small business cards. Editing the size to shorten the crops down to say .125 inch is sometimes a little more efficient.

Another advantage of this type of crop is that multiple areas can be created, particularly useful if you are laying out a sheet of multiple designs.

Setting Crops in InDesign

InDesign automatically adds crops when exporting the document to PDF – under the "Marks and Bleed" settings simply check "printers marks required" in the dialog box.