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Major types of printing methods: which is which?

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The more you know about the print industry, the better you get at buying print. Ordering print can get pretty complex, what with choosing the right artwork, the right type of materials and ink, the right finishing and binding - not to mention choosing the right printer to help you make all these thousands of little decisions.

To make your job a little easier, we've listed some of the major printing methods used by commercial printers. Here, then, are the most common options open to you.

Digital printing

Okay, so this one may not be that common. Many professional printers will admit not knowing very much about digital printing because it's pretty new - digital printing does not use film but digital imaging technology instead. That means that your text and graphics can be sent directly from your computer desktop to the press, eliminating the need for [typesetting](#) and making [plates](#).

While still working its way into the mainstream, digital printing is particularly good for four-color jobs that are short-run (less than 5000 copies) and that need to be turned around in less than two days. However, it tends to be limited in its choices of color and paper.

Electrostatic printing

Using a process where toner sticks to a charged drum and is thermally fused on to a page - similar to photocopying - electrostatic printing is good for very short printing runs.

Embossing

This is a special printing process that makes an impression into thick paper over printed type or a design. The impression may be concave (rounded inward like a bowl) or convex (curved outward, like the exterior of a sphere or circle).

Engraving

This type of printing process produces the sharpest images of all. The image feels indented if you run your fingers over the back of the sheet. It's usually used for fine stationery.

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Flexography

This is the process used to print packaging materials such as plastic bags, grocery bags, gift wrap or can and bottle labels. Flexographic presses use rubber plates with printed areas raised in relief.

Gravure printing

This is an expensive but high quality printing technique that uses direct contact between an etched copper plate and the paper. While the plate has a relatively high cost, this technique is the best way to print high quality, large volume materials such as brochures, magazines, annual reports and mail order catalogues.

Letterpress

This is the original printing process that was introduced way back in the fifteenth century. It uses images on the plate that are slightly raised from the surface (like a rubber stamp). Few printers offer fine letterpress anymore.

Offset lithography

A popular printing method offered by almost every printer. Used to print any variety of different textured materials, this process uses ink economically and requires little time to set up the press.

Screen printing

Also known as silk screening, this process forces ink through a screen, like a stencil pattern. Often used for non-flat goods, this method is best equipped to print on items like mugs, clothing, ring binders, bumper stickers or billboards.

Thermography

This is a print finishing process that produces a raised image. This process dusts a previously printed image with a powder before the image's ink has been allowed to dry. Applying heat makes the powder and the ink fuse and form a raised image. This process is mainly used for stationery.

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