HOW TO MAKE YOUR OWN PRINTS – 7 SIMPLE STEPS

Lots of photographers get their prints made by labs and service bureaus.

At some point, many of us eventually give serious consideration to making our own prints.

If you prefer traditional chromogenic prints — those made on light-sensitive photo paper and developed chemically — your best option is to continue outsourcing to a lab.

But if you love inkjet prints — especially for fine art (aka giclée) — making your own prints is easier and less expensive than you might expect. The technology is mature and reliable, the costs are affordable for most photographers and the creative opportunities are phenomenal.

So, still wondering how to make your own prints? Read on for seven simple steps to start the process.

INTRODUCTION: JUMPING IN

Printing yourself has some key advantages over outsourcing:

- you're in complete control of your photographic work
- you have a much wider choice of print media (aka substrates)
- cost per print can be much lower
- you're more free to experiment

Doing your own printing can also make you a better photographer. You learn to see your work in new ways and better understand how the fundamentals of tone and color affect the viewer's response to an image.

And choosing the ideal substrate to print a given image can help the photograph reach its highest potential.

Here's a list of the most important considerations for putting together a good printing workflow.
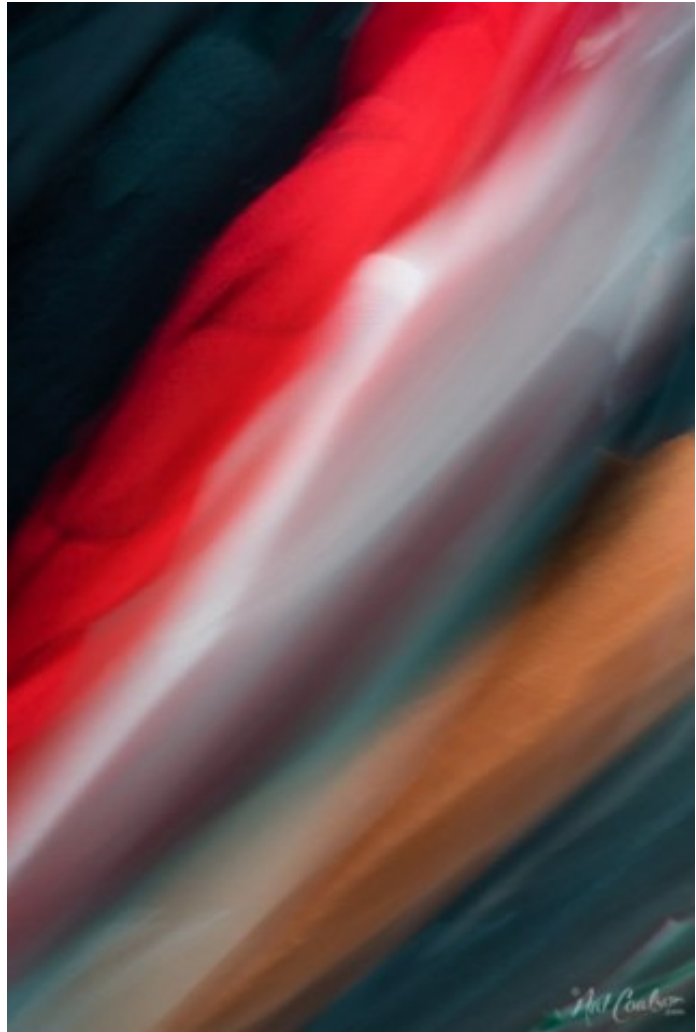
1. Use a good display

Don't expect great prints if you're using a low-grade monitor.

For that matter, using a laptop display won't give you the accuracy you need to adequately evaluate your images before printing.

If you want to print your own images, you must begin with a good desktop display. I recommend the professional displays from NEC and Eizo.

2. Calibrate and profile your display

Whatever monitor you're using, you need to set it up correctly to be sure your computer system is displaying color as accurately as possible. The most important setting is brightness.

By far, the most common problem people encounter when starting to print is that everything's coming out too dark. Most often, this is mainly because the display is simply set too bright. As a starting point, a brightness setting of around 100 cd/m2 will work well.

Using the correct brightness, you then need to calibrate your display and create a custom profile using a good hardware package. The display profiling systems from X-Rite are the only ones I recommend.

3. Use a decent printer

There's an enormous range of printer models made for general home use all the way up to professional quality.

You can't expect great results with a consumer-grade printer, but you also don't need to start at the top end.

[Very] generally speaking, you can expect to spend around $500 USD for a new printer capable of pro results. (But don't rule out buying used… for the same money as a pretty good new printer, you might find an excellent previously-owned model.)

The two main considerations when choosing a printer are the maximum sheet size (or roll width) and the number of inks.

I recommend Epson Stylus and Canon printers. Both can produce exceptional—and nearly indistinguishable—results, and with proper maintenance you can expect to enjoy many years of usable life even from mid-range models.

The main difference between the two brands is that the Epson print heads are designed to survive for the life of the printer whereas the Canon heads are usually expected to be replaced at some point. It's mainly for this reason that Epson printers might appear slightly more expensive for otherwise similar specifications.

WARNING: I suggest only using inks from your printer manufacturer (aka OEM). Using off-brand, third-party inks might seem attractive because of the lower price. Don't be fooled. In all but the rarest (or very specialized) situations, you'll get the best results using manufacturer inks. More importantly, using third-party inks can invalidate your warranty.

4. Use good media

As mentioned in the introduction, the selection of print substrates is one of the most appealing aspects of printing yourself. But not all media are created equal— you really do get what you pay for.

I love the Breathing Color Lyve canvas and use it for every canvas job I produce. For papers, in the past I've gotten great results from Hahnemuhle and Epson media, but Breathing Color has made great progress in fine art papers and photo papers and they show great promise.

5. Use good printer profiles
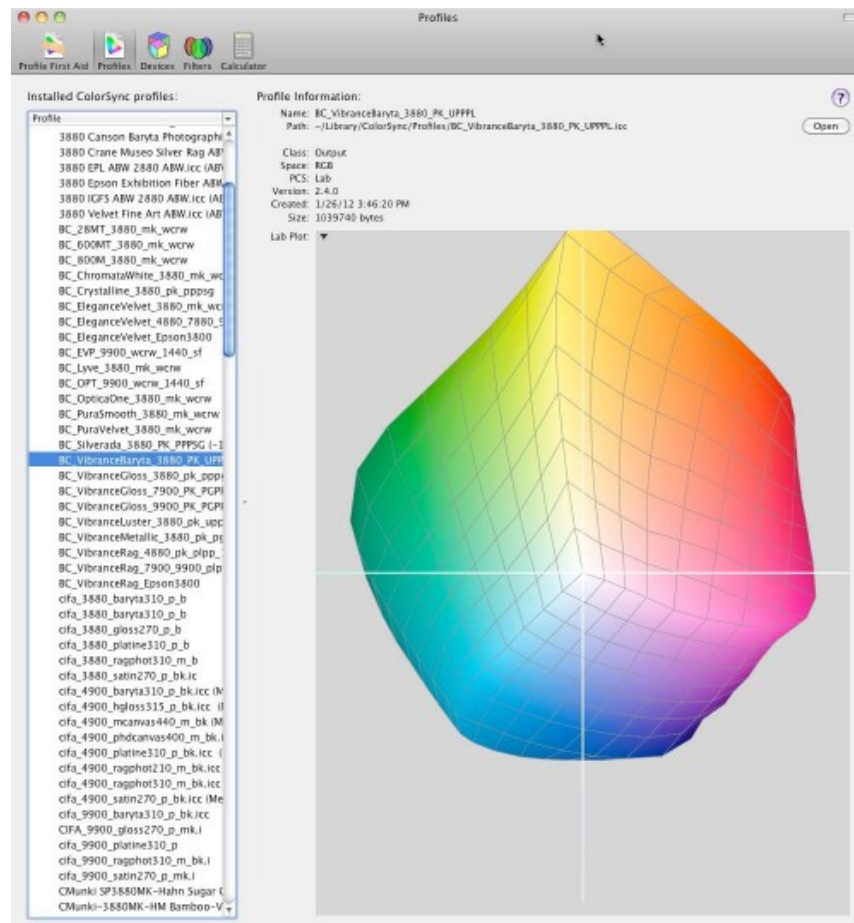
ICC printer profiles are one of the most crucial aspects in the print workflow but are often misunderstood and sometimes neglected.

A printer profile is used to manage the print output based on a specific combination of printer model and selected media.

As a simple example, you could have a printer profile for an Epson 9880 with Breathing Color Lyve canvas. (Printer profiles can also be created for different

rendering intents and even lighting conditions, which we'll look at in other articles.)

Most people begin using the printer profiles provided by the media manufacturer. In other words, if you're using Breathing Color canvas, you'd find the profiles for that material, combined with your printer model, by [clicking here](#).

Not all printer profiles are of equal quality. The accuracy of a profile and its ability to remain accurate across a range of printing conditions is dependent on the system with which it was created.

Again, the [X-Rite profiling systems](#) are the widespread industry standard for creating profiles (but for printer profiling, there are other systems capable of even greater accuracy, albeit at a much higher cost).

Go custom

Something important to consider: any 'canned' (pre-made) profile that you get from a manufacturer, no matter how accurately it was made, was not made using your own printer.

And with so many variables involved in the printing pipeline, it's unlikely that another machine of your same make and model will print exactly like yours.

The solution? Custom printer profiles. You can make your own or have someone else make one for you.

If you want to make your own printer profiles, the [X-Rite ColorMunki Photo](#) is a decent starter system that can also profile displays. (And again, we'll delve further into this topic in future articles.)

6. Soft proof
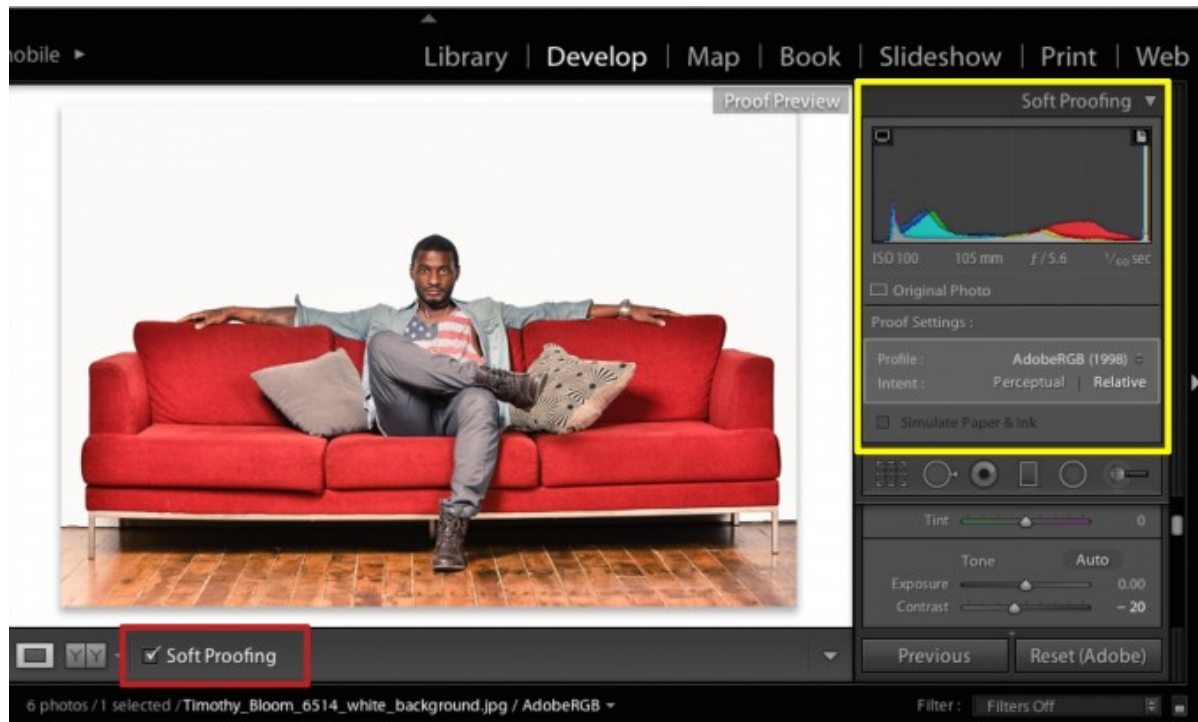
Using decent equipment (display + printer) and good software (Lightroom/Photoshop, profiles, etc.) you can preview a reasonably accurate, on-screen rendition of what an image will look like when it's printed on a specific printer and media.

When you're getting started, I strongly recommend you get in the habit of soft proofing every job before output.

(Since this is such an important topic, I write about it in all my books and teach it in all my classes, and you can read much more about it in future articles here.)

For now, understand that soft proofing can be a crucial part of the professional print workflow and plan to use (and master) it with time.

7. Choose printer settings carefully
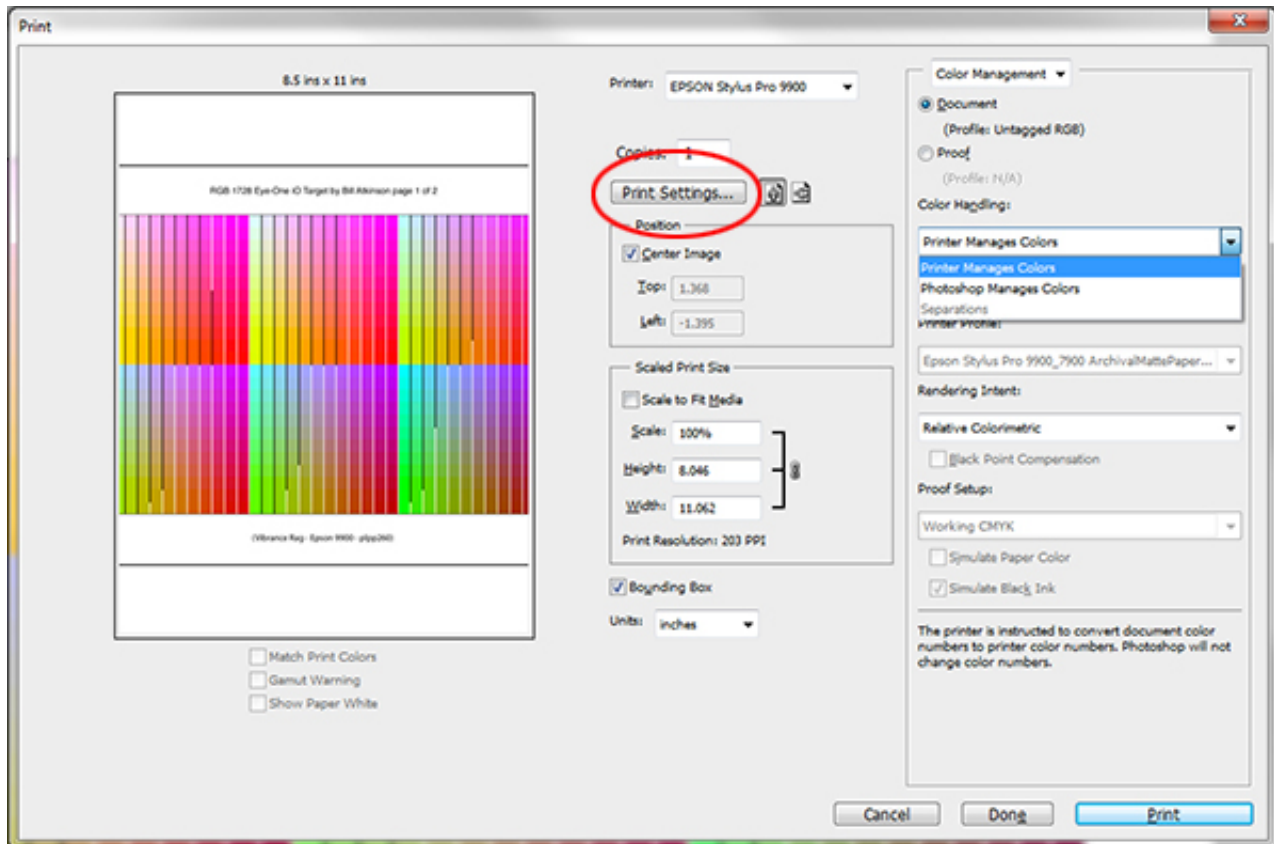
When you're ready to print the job, the choices you make in the printer driver are absolutely crucial in getting the correct output.

High quality media manufacturers always make recommendations for the best printer settings – follow them. In conjunction with a good printer profile, the print settings are what make precise, accurate reproduction possible. Ignore them at your peril (and expense!).

Bonus tip #8: Finish like a pro
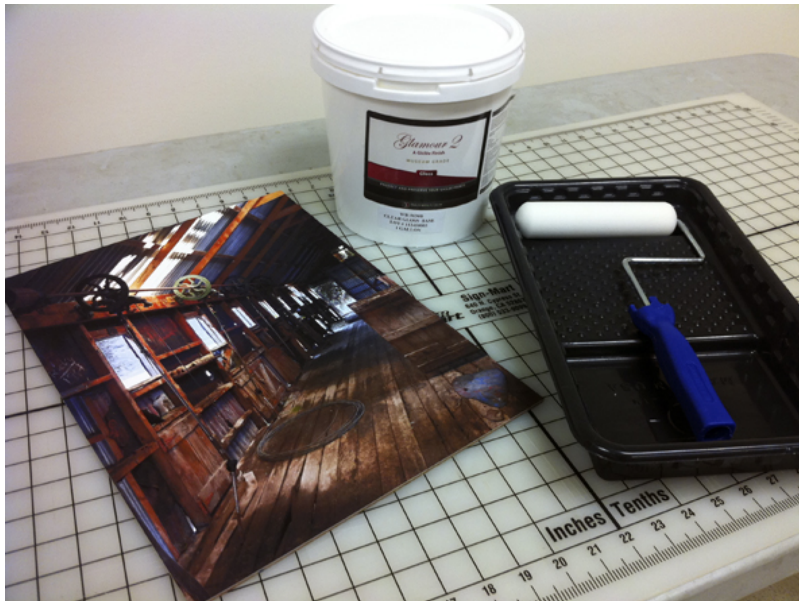
All the previous steps happen prior to the actual printing of the job. But it doesn't end there!

Once the print comes off the printer, you need to handle it very carefully and leave it in a safe, dry place to finish curing. As has been discussed on this blog and elsewhere, the outgassing process is intrinsic to inkjet printing and there are many chemical reactions taking place when the ink goes onto the substrate.

You should always allow a minimum of 24 hours to let the print cure, dry and outgas; some media require even longer. While drying, place a sheet of interleaving paper on top of each print (but don't stack them).

Protective coatings are also essential for inkjet prints. For canvas, use a veneer coating such as Breathing Color Timeless; for prints on paper I always use a lacquer-based spray.

And last but not least, when the print is dry you'll need to decide how to present it. Mounting and framing is where it all comes together (and is a vast topic all unto itself).

CONCLUSION: A NEW WORLD OF ARTISTIC OPPORTUNITY

I've been printing since the early 1990s and absolutely love the creative control it provides. It can be much more exciting and satisfying to make your own prints than to have them made by a lab.

And once you've figured out how to make your own prints, you'll probably print much more of your work. If, like me, you believe a great photograph isn't truly finished until it's printed, this is a great thing.

So if you're inspired to make your own prints but haven't yet started, I encourage you to start putting the pieces together. The Breathing Color web site and blog is a great place to begin learning the process.

Leave your comments and questions below and feel free to drop me a line if there's anything I can do to help.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nathaniel Coalson is an acclaimed photographic artist, instructor, and master printer originally from Colorado and now living in England.

He's the author of several photography books, including the popular series Lightroom: Streamlining Your Digital Photography Process and Nature Photography Photo Workshop.

For more information and to see Nat's travel photography, visit PictorialJourneys.com or see his abstract photography at NatCoalson.com.