Tips for New Print Competition Entrants

This is a brief guide, written at short notice, intended to provide a little help to anyone considering entering a print competition for the first time.

There is something compelling about making a physical print that can be touched, and felt and displayed on a wall. It feels closer to the craft of photography with a stronger connection to traditional art and the real world.

There is a bit more involved in making a physical print and it can look a bit challenging, but it is not that hard to get started, and if you enjoy it there is significant scope to improve your range and technique.

I hope this short guide will help you get started.

Paper

One of the first decisions you should make is what paper you want to print on. For a competition entry you should look at printing on A4 (or 12 inches by 8 inches) or larger if you want to.

You don't need to spend lots of money on expensive papers when first starting out, but do avoid 'office paper' - you want photo quality paper which is a bit heavier.

Roughly speaking, there are three different paper finishes you can choose from:

- Glossy - gives a more vibrant look - deeper blacks, shinier colours
- Semi-gloss (aka lustre, baryta)
- Matt - non-reflective surface - sometimes textured - better for softer, tonal or arty images

You can print any image on any of them - so many people will compromise and use semi-gloss - getting more vibrant colours than matt but also making a decent fist of images that are softer and more delicate.

Personally I use matt paper because I don't like being distracted by reflections of lights when I look at a print. But bear in mind, I'm almost always printing monochrome.

Printing Service or Print Your Own

Having decided on paper, your next big decision is whether to use a printing service or your own printer.

When starting out, using a printing service is a good approach. They have good quality photo printers and they can be price competitive with printing your own because they can buy ink and paper in bulk. They will also handle some of the colour management problems that can be vexing.

This is not a *recommendation*, but I do know that at least one experienced print worker uses Keynsham Photo Centre (https://www.keynshamphoto.co.uk/). Your favourite web search engine will help you find others. Keynsham Photo Centre provide colour profiles you can download under the 'contact us' tab - see the next section.

Colour Management

One of the common issues with prints is that colours don't look exactly like they did on the screen when you pressed the *print* button. This is just a fact of life. Different devices render colours slightly differently. The paper you print on can also affect the colours. Even two different versions of the same model of printer using paper from the same batch can print colours slightly differently.

One of the skills that experienced print workers acquire is the ability to get the printed colours to appear as they want them. When first starting out you want to make sure you avoid major colour casts, but I wouldn't fret too much about getting the colours exactly the same as on the monitor.

An *ICC colour profile* is a file that you can install in Photoshop and Lightroom and other printing software to tell the software how to adjust the colours in an image so that they print more accurately for the particular combination of printer and paper you are using.

I'd suggest trying to use a printer profile if you can. It is fairly straight forward if you are using a printing service, and you can have several tries if you don't get it right first time with your own printer.

You can also profile your monitor to correct its colours too. That's a step you can skip when getting started, but you might want to come back to that if you get more serious about printing.

If you are using a printing service, they will provide colour profiles you can download and install and use to convert your image before sending it to them. Keynsham Photo Centre, for example, provide decent instructions for how to do this for PhotoShop - see 'colour profiles' under the 'contact us' menu.

If you are using your own printer, the paper manufacturer will provide profiles for their paper for common printers.

Personally, I use the paper sold by my printer manufacturer because the printer has those profiles built in.

Using Your Own Printer

You can use your own printer if you prefer. You should use a printer designed for printing photographs rather than an office printer designed for printing text, graphs and charts. Photo printers will usually have more than one black cartridge for example which enables them to create a more subtle range of tones.

I suggest you use a colour profile for your printer/paper combination if you can. In my case this is easy because I use the paper sold by my printer manufacturer and the printer has a built in profile for that paper.

One thing that can go wrong and lead to skewiff colours is when both your printing software and your printer try to apply a colour profile and you get double colour correction. So EITHER set your printer device settings to do colour correction and set your software settings to *managed by printer* OR tell your software use the colour correction profile and set your printer device settings to leave the colours alone.

Perhaps it is a legacy of my nights in the darkroom, but I normally print a *test strip* of a print. A test strip is a row of very small copies of a print at different exposure or other settings so that I can select the settings that work best from an actual, if small print.   I can try 3 or 4 different settings in a strip on an A4 sheet of paper and I can do several strips one sheet at different times by using the print layout features in Lightroom and running the same sheet through the printer several times.

One of the tricks I picked up from a book was keeping those test strips in a notebook along with notes - a bit like I used to do in the darkroom.

Monochrome

When printing 'black and white' you can give your prints a slight colour tone. I personally usually warm mine up slightly. For digital display I tone them in lightroom or photoshop with a hue of 47 and saturation between 3 and 10 according to taste. It is not uncommon to give prints of cold subjects (snow, frost) a slightly blue tone.

Epson printers have a built in *advanced monochrome* printing mode which I use for my monochrome prints. You can set it to print warmed toned prints - I normally set it to half warm - but that's just how I like them.

Links

Your favourite search engine is your friend. There is a lot of stuff out there - maybe a bit too much when you are just looking to get started. I had a look on YouTube and found a couple of videos that might help. I haven't necessarily watched all of these - they just looked like the might be helpful:

- [Learn how to get better home photographic prints from an expert](#) - Practical Photography video featuring PermaJet
- [Tutorial - ICC Profile Installation & Printer Settings In Lightroom](#) - or search for ICC profiles and the software you are using
- [Ross McKelvey on his Photoshop print settings](#) (thanks to Andy Gillingham for this one)
- [CAMERA to PRINT | A Simple Colour Management Tutorial](#) - a bit techy
- [Intro to Fine Art Digital Printing](#) - a fairly extensive and long intro to printing sponsored by a paper manufacturer

If you come across a good link email intcomp.thornburycameraclub@gmail.com and I'll update this list.