

Question: What is Desktop Publishing?

Desktop publishing is a term coined after the development of a specific type of software. Before the invention of desktop publishing software the tasks involved in desktop publishing were done manually, by a variety of people and involved both graphic design and prepress tasks which sometimes leads to confusion about what desktop publishing is and how it is done.

Answer: Although the definition, below, is still valid see [Desktop Publishing in the 21st Century](#) for a detailed explanation of this new definition:

Desktop publishing is the use of the computer and software to create visual displays of ideas and information. Desktop publishing documents may be for desktop or commercial printing or electronic distribution including PDF, slide shows, email newsletters, and the Web.

OLD / TRADITIONAL DEFINITION: Desktop publishing is the use of the computer and specialized software to create documents for desktop or commercial printing. Desktop publishing refers to the process of using the computer to produce documents such as newsletters, brochures, books, and other publications that were once created manually using a variety of non-computer techniques along with large complex phototypesetting machines. Today desktop publishing software does it all - almost. But before PageMaker and other desktop publishing software there were e-scales, paste-up, and other non-desktop computer ways of putting together a design for printing.

Properly speaking, desktop publishing is the technical assembly of digital files in the proper format for printing. In practical use, much of the "graphic design" process is also accomplished using desktop publishing and graphics software and is sometimes included in the definition of desktop publishing. Comparison between desktop publishing and graphic design:

- **What is Desktop Publishing** - It is the process of using the computer and specific types of software to combine text and graphics to produce documents such as newsletters, brochures, books, etc.
- **What is Graphic Design** - It is the process and art of combining text and graphics and communicating an effective message in the design of logos, graphics, brochures, newsletters, posters, signs, and any other type of visual communication.

Desktop publishing software is a tool for graphic designers and non-designers to create visual communications.

Desktop publishing is a term coined in the 1980s after the development of a specific type of software for creating materials for print; however, today desktop publishing encompasses more than just print communication and utilizes many different types of software. The basic goal of desktop publishing remains the same: a process for creating materials for visual communication.

Original Definition of Desktop Publishing

For the past dozen years I've used this [definition of desktop publishing](#) to inform and develop most of the content on my site:

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Properly speaking, desktop publishing is the technical assembly of digital files in the proper format for printing. In practical use, much of the "graphic design" process is also accomplished using desktop publishing and graphics software and is sometimes included in the definition of desktop publishing.

Although still technically correct and based on the history of desktop publishing, this definition puts desktop publishing squarely in the realm of print design. It also refers almost exclusively to work created using page layout software, with perhaps some word processing and graphics software uses as well.

But it's been over 20 years since [desktop publishing was invented](#). It's time to redefine what it means.

New Definition of Desktop Publishing

Coming up with a new, more current and complete definition for desktop publishing means looking at the way people -- all kinds of people -- use desktop publishing software as well as looking at all the different kinds of software used to do desktop publishing tasks. It boils down to this:

Desktop publishing is the use of the computer and software to create visual displays of ideas and information. Desktop publishing documents may be for desktop or commercial printing or electronic distribution including PDF, slide shows, email newsletters, and the Web.

Desktop Publishing Documents

Desktop publishing is for producing documents such as newsletters, brochures, books, ads, business cards, posters, and other publications that were once created manually using a variety of non-computer techniques along with large complex phototypesetting machines. Desktop publishing is also for producing Web pages and PDF documents to disseminate information, including re-purposing or reformatting print materials for on-screen presentation or online display. Desktop publishing principles apply to many types of business and non-business documents created using the computer including greeting cards, digital scrapbooks, email newsletters, Web sites, blogs, eBooks, and computer crafts.

Software for Desktop Publishing

Today's [desktop publishing software](#) does it all - almost. Before PageMaker and other desktop publishing software programs there were e-scales, paste-up, and other non-desktop computer ways of putting together a design for printing. Since PageMaker, individuals and businesses have adopted many types of software to do desktop publishing.

Some desktop publishing software is best suited to print publishing. Some software is more suited to on-screen or electronic distribution. Many of the traditional software programs used for desktop publishing combine all these tasks into one package or one suite of tools, such as the Adobe Creative Suite.

Professional designers tend to use certain high-end software for desktop publishing tasks, such as InDesign, QuarkXPress, Photoshop, and Dreamweaver. Businesses and individuals may use these same programs or choose from a great variety of programs geared more to business documents or creative printing projects or that offer more ease-of-use for casual users.

Desktop Publishing Tasks

Desktop publishing is the aesthetic arrangement of text and graphics and the technical assembly of digital files in the proper format for printing or electronic publishing including PDF, on-screen, and online presentation. Desktop publishing involves the use of a variety of software tools, using the tool most suitable for the job whether it be word processing, page layout, graphics, Web, or presentation software. Desktop publishing draws from many disciplines including traditional principles of graphic design, Web design, typography, and the graphic arts.

It is difficult to create a linear outline of the [tasks involved in desktop publishing](#). Depending on who is doing the work and how it will be used, some of the tasks set out here may be omitted, rearranged, or combined. This is a very basic outline:

- **Design:** Research / Brainstorming / Planning
- **Create:** Document Setup / Text Acquisition / Image Acquisition / Page Composition
- **Digital Prep:** Proofs / Prepress & Preflight / File Preparation
- **Publish:** Printing and/or On-Screen / Electronic Distribution

People Using Desktop Publishing

Desktop publishing is the process [used by individuals with or without formal design training](#) - including graphic designers, Web designers, journalists for large and small publications, self-publishers, businesses of all sizes, and ordinary citizens with something to say -- to visually communicate information in print, on-screen, and online. Desktop publishing is found in [offices and homes](#).

Among a certain segment of the graphic design community, the term desktop publishing is looked at with derision, associating it with amateur design. Desktop publishing is merely a means to an end. Designers and non-designers alike use many of the same tools and create many of the same documents. However, how well each one does it can differ greatly. Desktop publishing isn't the villain. It's simply a visual communication process that some people do better than others.