

FREELANCING & BUSINESS SKILLS

Print-on-Demand Design

How to sell AI-assisted designs through print-on-demand - platforms, niches, AI design workflows, print-ready files, copyright and trademark safety, listing SEO, pricing, and a 30-day plan to your first live listings.

10 Chapters

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CHAPTER 1: THE OPPORTUNITY

Print-on-Demand Design

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · The Opportunity

Print-on-demand means exactly what it sounds like: nothing gets printed or manufactured until a customer actually orders it. You upload a design once; a third-party printer produces and ships each individual item as orders come in. This chapter covers how that changes the economics compared to a traditional merch business, and sets realistic expectations before the rest of the course gets into the mechanics.

\$0

START-UP COST

Hours

TO FIRST LISTING

3+

MAJOR POD PLATFORMS

\$0

UNSOLD INVENTORY RISK

How the Fulfillment Model Actually Works

1

You upload a design

A design file goes onto one or more product types (a t-shirt, a mug, a poster) on your chosen platform. No product exists yet — it's just a listing.

2

A customer places an order

The order is placed and paid for through the platform, exactly like any other online purchase.

3

A print partner manufactures that one item

Only now does the physical product get printed — one unit, specifically for that order, by the platform's own print partner.

4

It ships directly to the customer

You never see, handle, or store the physical product. Shipping is handled entirely by the print partner.

5

You receive your margin or royalty

Chapter 9 covers exactly how this is calculated — it varies significantly by platform.

Why This Changes the Economics

Traditional Merch Business

- Buy inventory in bulk upfront
- Pay for storage and manage shipping yourself
- Real risk of unsold stock tying up money
- Higher margin per unit, but real upfront capital needed

Print-on-Demand

- Zero upfront cost — nothing is printed until it sells
- No storage, no shipping logistics on your end
- No unsold inventory risk at all
- Lower margin per unit, since the fulfillment cost is baked into every sale

Who Actually Buys Print-on-Demand Products

Niche hobbyists & professions

Buyers looking for something specific to their exact interest or job that a mass retailer wouldn't stock.

Gift buyers

Personalized or niche-specific gifts for a particular occasion, relationship, or interest.

Event & holiday shoppers

Seasonal demand spikes around specific holidays and occasions.

Fandom & interest-based buyers

A real, large market — but one that carries genuine copyright/trademark risk, covered

honestly in Chapter 7 before you design anything in this space.

SET EXPECTATIONS HONESTLY

Like the other courses in this subject, print-on-demand income is genuinely long-tail: most individual designs sell only a handful of units, and success comes from volume across many designs and niches (Chapter 4) rather than any single design going viral. The near-zero cost of listing a design is exactly what makes that volume approach viable — there's no real cost to a design that doesn't sell.

A note on platform-specific figures

Platform fees, royalty structures, and available product types all change over time and vary between platforms. Treat the numbers in this chapter, and the rest of this course, as a realistic starting reference, and re-verify current terms directly on whichever platform you choose before listing anything.

Coming up next

Chapter 2 compares the three major POD platforms in real depth — Etsy paired with a POD integration, Redbubble, and Merch by Amazon — on control, built-in audience, and fees.

CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING THE POD PLATFORMS

Print-on-Demand Design

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · Understanding the POD Platforms

The three major routes into print-on-demand work in genuinely different ways — one is a marketplace you plug a separate fulfillment service into, and two are all-in-one platforms that handle everything themselves. Picking the right one shapes almost everything else in this course.

At a Glance

PLATFORM	CONTROL	BUILT-IN AUDIENCE	BARRIER TO ENTRY
Etsy + POD integration	High — your own storefront, branding, pricing	Strong, for handmade/niche-goods shoppers specifically	Low — open signup
Redbubble	Low — fixed catalog, limited pricing control	Built-in, but shared with a huge number of other sellers	Lowest — upload and go
Merch by Amazon	Moderate — tier-gated product access	Amazon's own massive, high buyer-intent traffic	Highest — application/approval required

The Three Platforms, In Detail

Etsy + a POD Integration (Printify, Printful)

Etsy itself doesn't fulfill print-on-demand orders — you connect a separate service like Printify or Printful, which handles printing and shipping while your listing lives on Etsy's own storefront. This gives you real control over branding and pricing, and Etsy's own audience specifically shops for unique/handmade goods rather than mass-market items.

The tradeoff: you're paying Etsy's own listing and transaction fees on top of whatever the POD partner charges for the product itself.

Redbubble

A genuine all-in-one marketplace: upload a design, and Redbubble handles the entire product catalog, fulfillment, and customer service itself. This is the fastest and lowest-friction way to get a design live. In exchange, you have very little control — Redbubble sets the base cost per product, and you can only set a markup within its own limits. The marketplace is also large and genuinely crowded, making individual designs harder to stand out in.

Merch by Amazon

Amazon's own POD program, and structurally different from the other two: it's gated behind an application/approval process, and new sellers typically start with a limited number of product slots that unlock further as designs sell. In exchange, it leverages Amazon's own massive, high-intent buyer traffic — people already there specifically to buy something. Pricing works through royalty tiers based on the price you set, rather than a flat markup.

THESE PLATFORMS AREN'T EXCLUSIVE

Unlike Chapter 8's KU-exclusivity tradeoff for e-books, print-on-demand platforms generally don't require exclusivity — the same or a similar design can be listed on Etsy, Redbubble, and Merch by Amazon (once accepted) all at once. Many sellers do exactly this once a design proves it sells anywhere.

Application processes and tiers change

Merch by Amazon's own approval process and tier structure, and each platform's specific fee schedule, are set and adjusted by the platforms directly. Check current requirements before applying or listing anything.

Coming up next

Chapter 3 covers what actually sells — the main product types and which design styles genuinely perform across these platforms.

CHAPTER 3: WHAT SELLS: PRODUCT TYPES AND DESIGN STYLES

Print-on-Demand Design

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · What Sells: Product Types & Design Styles

Every platform from Chapter 2 offers a wide range of physical products, but they don't all sell the same way, at the same price, or to the same buyer. Understanding the differences upfront helps you avoid spreading a handful of designs thin across every possible product.

Main Product Types

PRODUCT	PRICE POINT	BEST FOR
Apparel (t-shirts, hoodies)	Mid-range	The largest, most competitive category — broad appeal, but hardest to stand out in
Mugs	Low–mid	Steady, gift-oriented buying — office/profession humor, occasions
Wall art / posters	Higher	Home-decor buyers, more design/aesthetic investment expected
Phone cases	Mid-range	Personalization-focused buyers — needs many device-model variants per design
Stickers	Low	Cheapest way to test whether a design resonates before investing more design time
Tote bags	Low–mid	Practical gift buyers, often eco-conscious shoppers

Design Styles That Genuinely Perform

- Typography-based quotes & puns
- Minimalist line art

One of the largest categories — original wording is essential here, since copying an existing quote or song lyric crosses directly into Chapter 7's copyright territory.

Broad appeal, works cleanly across almost every product type without needing product-specific rework.

Niche-specific illustration

Icons or imagery tied to a specific profession, hobby, or interest — the same niche-specificity principle Chapter 4 covers for finding demand.

Retro / vintage aesthetic

Distressed-text and faded-print effects remain consistently popular across many different niches and product types.

START NARROW, NOT WIDE

A new design doesn't need to go on every product type at once. Different products have genuinely different technical file requirements (Chapter 6), so picking one or two product types per design — and expanding only once it shows real demand — is far more sustainable than preparing every design for every product from day one.

Coming up next

Chapter 4 covers finding a profitable niche within these product types and styles — and avoiding the ones that are already saturated.

CHAPTER 4: FINDING A PROFITABLE NICHE

Print-on-Demand Design

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · Finding a Profitable Niche

"Funny t-shirts" isn't a niche — it's a description of the entire market. The sellers who consistently do well pick something specific enough to actually rank for, using the real demand signals each platform exposes.

Reading Demand Signals

Etsy's own search/trend tools

Etsy surfaces trending searches directly; third-party tools built for Etsy sellers go further for systematic keyword research.

Merch by Amazon's bestseller lists

Browsing the Merch storefront's own bestseller rankings within a category shows genuinely proven demand, not just guesses.

Pinterest & general trend research

Pinterest is a major discovery channel for gift and design ideas specifically — genuinely useful for spotting rising niche interest early.

Redbubble's trending tags

Redbubble surfaces its own popular/trending tags, useful for gauging what's actively being searched right now.

The Sub-Niche Strategy

A well-known, genuinely effective approach: intersect two niches instead of targeting one broad one. A single broad niche is almost always oversaturated; the intersection of two is far less crowded and easier to actually rank in.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Dog Mom

+

Golden Retriever

→

"Golden Retriever Mom" designs

The same intersection pattern works broadly: a profession plus a specific specialty (teacher + kindergarten), a hobby plus a specific style (gardening + succulents), a relationship plus a specific interest (grandma + fishing).

Signs a Niche Is Oversaturated

Searching a broad niche keyword and returning thousands of nearly identical, generic-looking listings (a common pattern with high-volume "mill" sellers who mass-produce many near-identical designs per day) is the clearest warning sign. A sub-niche intersection, per the example above, is the direct way around it.

- Can I name the specific intersection of interests this design targets, not just one broad category?
- When I search this exact niche, is the result count reasonable rather than overwhelming?
- Are the current top listings dominated by obvious high-volume mill sellers, or by designs I could realistically compete with?

SEASONAL NICHEs NEED REAL LEAD TIME

A holiday or event-based design needs to be listed weeks before the actual date — ranking and discoverability take real time to build, and a design uploaded the week of the event has already missed most of its own selling window.

Coming up next

Chapter 5 covers actually creating designs with AI tools once a niche is chosen — concepts, vectorization, and mockup generation.

CHAPTER 5: CREATING DESIGNS WITH AI TOOLS

Print-on-Demand Design

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · Creating Designs with AI Tools

AI image generation is genuinely useful for print-on-demand — but a raw AI-generated image is rarely a finished, sellable design file on its own. This chapter covers where AI actually helps, and the real technical gap between "a cool AI image" and something a print partner can actually produce well.

The Production Workflow

1**Generate concept art with AI**

Use an AI image tool to explore visual concepts and illustration elements quickly — treat the output as a starting concept, not a finished asset.

2**Vectorize the artwork**

Trace the raster AI output into clean vector paths using a tool built for this (Illustrator's Image Trace, or a dedicated vectorizer) so it prints cleanly at any size, without the artifacts or resolution limits of the raw AI file.

3**Set typography manually, not with AI**

Add any text using real fonts in a design tool, entirely separate from the AI-generated imagery — covered in detail below.

4**Compose the final print file**

Combine the cleaned vector artwork and manually-set type into one final design file, ready for Chapter 6's technical requirements.

5**Generate mockups for your listing**

Use a mockup tool or generator to show the finished design realistically on the actual product (a t-shirt on a model, a mug on a table) — this is for the listing photos, entirely separate from the print file itself.

Why Typography Needs Its Own Step

AI-Rendered Text in an Image

- Frequently garbled, misspelled, or distorted
- No control over a specific font or exact wording
- Unreliable to the point of being unusable for a sellable product

Manually-Set Type

- Real fonts, perfectly legible and exactly as written
- Full control over wording — also what keeps phrasing genuinely original (Chapter 7)
- Standard practice for the typography-based designs Chapter 3 identified as one of the largest categories

Don't rely on AI to render your text

Current AI image models are still notoriously unreliable at rendering clean, accurate text directly in an image. For any typography-based design, treat the wording as something you set yourself with a real font, not something you ask an AI image generator to draw.

VECTORIZATION IS THE SINGLE BIGGEST BEGINNER GAP

A cool-looking AI image and a genuinely sellable print file are not the same thing. The step most new sellers skip — cleaning up and vectorizing the raw AI output — is exactly what Chapter 6 explains platforms actually need, and skipping it is the most common reason a design gets technically rejected or prints poorly.

Coming up next

Chapter 6 covers the actual print-ready file requirements — resolution, color modes, transparency, and why designs get technically rejected.

CHAPTER 6: PRINT-READY FILE REQUIREMENTS

Print-on-Demand Design

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Print-Ready File Requirements

A design that looks perfect as a small preview on screen can look genuinely broken once printed at actual product size. This chapter covers the specific technical requirements that separate a print-ready file from one that gets rejected or comes out looking wrong.

The Core Requirements

Resolution

Print generally needs much higher resolution than screen display — a design that looks sharp small can be far too low-res once scaled to a full print area. Vector files (Chapter 5) sidestep this entirely, since they scale infinitely without losing quality.

Color mode

Different print methods have different color-mode expectations (some workflows use RGB, others expect CMYK). Check the specific print method your platform actually uses rather than assuming one universal rule.

Transparent backgrounds

Apparel designs need a genuinely transparent background (not a white box) so the design sits directly on the garment's own color. Other products vary depending on whether the print wraps the full product or sits on one flat area.

File format

PNG with transparency is the most common upload format; some platforms accept vector formats directly. Print files are often flattened to a final high-resolution raster at the print stage even when the source design was built as a vector.

Common Rejection Reasons

- Resolution too low for the actual print size, not just for the preview thumbnail

- Wrong color mode for the specific print method
- A solid background where transparency was required
- Design elements placed too close to the product edge, cut off by the required safety margin
- A corrupted file or one saved in a format the platform doesn't accept

REQUIREMENTS VARY BY PLATFORM, PRODUCT, AND PRINT METHOD

There's no single universal specification that covers every platform and every product type — a mug's print area works differently from a t-shirt's, and each platform documents its own exact requirements. Always check the current specification for the specific product on the specific platform before finalizing a design, rather than assuming a spec that worked for one product applies everywhere.

Exact specifications change

Minimum resolution, accepted formats, and safety margins are set by each platform and print partner directly, and do get updated over time. Verify current requirements before finalizing artwork.

Coming up next

Chapter 7 covers copyright and trademark safety — the single most important practical risk in this business, and one that deserves real attention before you design anything close to an existing brand or fandom.

CHAPTER 7: COPYRIGHT AND TRADEMARK SAFETY

Print-on-Demand Design

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Copyright & Trademark Safety

This is the single most important chapter in this course. Print-on-demand sits at a genuine intersection of temptation and risk: some of the highest-demand niches (fandoms, sports teams, pop culture references) are exactly the ones most likely to get a design — and potentially an entire seller account — taken down. Getting this wrong is far more common, and far more consequential, than any mistake covered in the previous six chapters.

Two Different Protections, Often Both in Play

Copyright

Protects original creative works: song lyrics, book and movie quotes, character artwork and likeness, illustrations, and specific written phrases from copyrighted media.

Trademark

Protects brand identifiers used in commerce: company and product names, logos, sports team names and logos, and certain slogans a brand has specifically registered.

The two often overlap on the same subject — a cartoon character can be copyrighted as a creative work *and* trademarked as a brand identity at the same time, meaning a single design can trigger both kinds of protection at once.

Common Beginner Mistakes

Recognizable character likeness or fandom imagery. "I'm a [franchise] fan" designs that depict or clearly evoke a specific copyrighted character.

Quoting song lyrics or movie/TV lines verbatim. These are protected creative works, not free-to-use text.

Sports team names, logos, or color-scheme-plus-name combinations that read as unofficial team merchandise.

Font or logo lookalikes. Mimicking a famous brand's own distinctive script or logo style closely enough to be recognizable, even without using the brand's actual name.

A real person's name or likeness without permission — a related but legally distinct concern from copyright and trademark.

Generally Safer vs. Genuinely Risky

Generally Safer

- Wording you wrote yourself, per Chapter 5
- A generic interpretation of a broad interest, not a specific licensed character
- Genuinely verified public domain works

Genuinely Risky

- Direct quotes, character likenesses, or brand logos
- "Parody" used as an assumed blanket shield — it's a real but narrow and fact-specific legal concept, not a reliable loophole
- Anything you'd recognize instantly as belonging to a specific existing brand or franchise

Platform enforcement targets the whole account

Print-on-demand platforms actively monitor for IP violations and enforce against them, and repeated or serious violations can suspend or terminate an entire seller account — every listing, not just the one design involved. This is a genuinely

higher-stakes risk than a single rejected listing, and it's specific to this business in a way none of the sibling courses in this subject face at the same scale.

- Would a reasonable person instantly recognize this as belonging to a specific existing brand, character, or franchise?
- Is the wording genuinely my own, or a quote/lyric/line from somewhere else?
- Am I relying on "parody" as a legal shield without actually understanding whether it applies here?
- If I'm genuinely unsure, am I choosing not to publish it rather than hoping it goes unnoticed?

This isn't legal advice

Copyright, trademark, and right-of-publicity law vary by jurisdiction and turn on genuinely fact-specific details. This chapter is a practical orientation to the risk, not a substitute for professional legal advice on any specific design you're unsure about. When in doubt, the safest choice is simply not to publish it.

Coming up next

Chapter 8 returns to lower-stakes territory — listing optimization and SEO for the designs you've confirmed are genuinely your own.

CHAPTER 8: LISTING OPTIMIZATION AND SEO

Print-on-Demand Design

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · Listing Optimization & SEO

A genuinely original, safe design (Chapter 7) still needs to actually be found. Each platform surfaces listings a little differently, but they share more in common than it first appears.

Platform Search Mechanics

Etsy

Etsy listings use a limited number of tags plus title text, weighed by relevance alongside listing "quality" signals — favorites, click-through, and actual conversion rate all feed into how prominently a listing is shown. Multi-word tag phrases that match how a real buyer searches consistently outperform single generic words.

Merch by Amazon

Similar in spirit to KDP's own backend keyword slots (Selling E-books on Amazon, Chapter 7) — a small number of dedicated keyword fields, plus the title and bullet points, are all indexed by Amazon's search.

Redbubble

Also tag-based, working conceptually the same way as Etsy — specific, relevant tags matched to real buyer search terms outperform broad, generic ones.

Mockups That Actually Convert

A flat image of just the design rarely converts as well as a realistic mockup showing it on the actual product — on a model for apparel, in a genuine lifestyle context for other

products (a mug on a desk with coffee, rather than a plain white background). Where relevant, showing multiple colorways or angles gives a buyer more confidence in what they're actually purchasing.

- Does my title include the specific niche phrase a real buyer would search, not just a generic category word?
- Are my tags/keywords full phrases matched to real search intent, not single disconnected words?
- Does my main listing image show the product realistically, not just the flat design on its own?
- Have I checked what my chosen niche's current top listings actually look like, and how mine compares?

THE SAME PRINCIPLE KEEPS SHOWING UP ACROSS THIS SUBJECT

Etsy tags, Merch by Amazon keywords, and Redbubble tags all reward the same thing this subject's other two courses already found for their own keyword systems: a specific, multi-word phrase matched to real buyer intent consistently outperforms a single generic word, regardless of which platform's own mechanics you're working within.

Coming up next

Chapter 9 covers pricing and royalties — how each platform's own margin structure actually works, and how they genuinely differ from each other.

CHAPTER 9: PRICING, ROYALTIES AND PLATFORM FEES

Print-on-Demand Design

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Pricing, Royalties & Platform Fees

Each platform from Chapter 2 calculates what you actually earn per sale in a genuinely different way. Knowing which model you're working within matters more than any single price number.

Three Different Margin Models

PLATFORM	WHO SETS PRICE	HOW MARGIN IS CALCULATED
Etsy + POD integration	You	Your retail price, minus the POD partner's base product cost, minus Etsy's own listing and transaction fees
Redbubble	You, within limits	Redbubble sets a base cost per product; you add a markup on top within its allowed range
Merch by Amazon	You, within limits	Amazon pays a royalty based on the price tier you select, rather than you separately calculating cost plus markup

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE — A T-SHIRT PRICED AROUND \$20

Etsy + POD integration: roughly \$20 retail, minus the base product cost, minus Etsy's listing fee and a percentage transaction fee — several separate deductions to track

Redbubble: roughly \$20 retail, where your markup above Redbubble's own set base cost is your earnings — one number to think about

Merch by Amazon: roughly \$20 retail lands in a specific royalty tier — Amazon tells you the royalty directly rather than you computing it from separate costs

These figures are illustrative only — treat the shape of each calculation as the takeaway, not the exact numbers.

CONTROL AND SIMPLICITY TRADE OFF AGAINST EACH OTHER

Etsy gives the most pricing control but requires actively tracking the most separate fee line items. Redbubble gives the least control but is the simplest to reason about — one markup number. Merch by Amazon sits in between, with Amazon effectively telling you the royalty rather than you calculating a margin yourself.

Exact fees and royalty formulas change

Listing fees, transaction fee percentages, base product costs, and royalty tier thresholds are all set by the platforms directly and do get updated. Check current figures on each platform before pricing anything, rather than relying on previously known numbers.

Coming up next

Chapter 10 — the final chapter — turns everything from Chapters 1–9 into a concrete 30-day plan from platform and niche selection to your first live listings.

CHAPTER 10: YOUR 30-DAY ACTION PLAN

Print-on-Demand Design

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · Your 30-Day Action Plan

Everything from Chapters 1–9 comes together here as one sequence, from choosing where to sell through to live listings. Note upfront: if you plan to apply for Merch by Amazon, its own approval process (Chapter 2) can take longer than this plan's own 30 days — apply early and treat Etsy or Redbubble as your faster route to a first live listing in the meantime.

Days 1–5

Choose your platform(s) and niche

Pick a starting platform (or platforms — they're not exclusive, per Chapter 2) using Chapter 2's comparison, then research a specific sub-niche using Chapter 4's demand signals and intersection strategy. If applying to Merch by Amazon, submit that application now.

Days 6–12

Create and safety-check your first designs

Generate concepts with AI, vectorize, and set any typography manually per Chapter 5's workflow. Before finalizing anything, run every design through Chapter 7's copyright and trademark checklist — this step is not optional.

Days 13–16

Prepare print-ready files

Choose your initial product types per Chapter 3, and prepare each design to Chapter 6's technical requirements — resolution, color mode, and transparency for each specific product.

Days 17–20

Write listings and set pricing

Build titles, tags, and keywords using Chapter 8's specific-phrase approach, and price each listing according to your chosen platform's own margin model from Chapter 9.

Days 21–
24

Generate mockups and publish

Create realistic product mockups per Chapter 8, and publish your first listings — on every platform you're set up on at once, since exclusivity isn't required here.

Days 25–
30

Review and expand

Check early performance on your first designs, and use what you learn to build 1–2 more designs in your strongest-performing niche or a related sub-niche — the same volume-driven approach Chapter 1's own honest income expectations described from the start.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO DO TODAY

Pick one specific sub-niche using Chapter 4's intersection strategy today, and run one design idea through Chapter 7's safety checklist before doing anything else with it. Confirming a design is genuinely safe to make is worth doing before investing any real time in creating it.

Course complete

That closes all ten chapters — the opportunity and fulfillment model (Ch.1), the three platforms compared (Ch.2), product types and design styles (Ch.3), niche research (Ch.4), the AI design workflow (Ch.5), print-ready file requirements (Ch.6), copyright and trademark safety (Ch.7), listing optimization (Ch.8), pricing and fees (Ch.9), and this 30-day plan tying it all together. A combined, portable PDF of the full course is available for offline reference.

This course is intended for educational and exploration purposes, and Chapter 7 in particular is not legal advice. Platform fees, royalty structures, approval processes, and content policies represent typical mechanics at the time

of writing and are set and changed by each platform directly. Always verify current terms and consult a professional for any specific legal question before publishing.