



# Choosing the Right Paper

Palm Creek Computer Club



# Introduction

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- Once upon a time (and yes, it is something of a fairy tale) futurologists and technology journalists confidently predicted that the arrival of the paperless office was both inevitable and imminent. What with e-mail and the Internet, the inexorable denouement and impending extinction of newspapers and magazines, plus the rise of emerging technologies like e-books and electronic tablets, there would be no compelling reason to continue using expensive, ephemeral, forest-devouring paper.
- Alas, the reality has been quite different, because the ubiquitousness of computers and electronic communications hasn't dented or diminished the use of paper one iota. In fact, we're consuming more paper than ever. Instead of typing a letter or a report one page at a time, now we hit the "print" button and generate two, 10, or 200 copies without hesitation. And we print out Web pages to read on the train home, generating all those extra pages of ads and menus that we throw right away
- But the big problem most people face is not whether or not to print to paper, but what is the best kind of printer paper to use. The answer is... *it all depends.*



# The Paper Basics

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- There are many different kinds and types of printer paper, and one size does not fit all. In fact, a specific grade of paper that might be absolutely perfect for a particular task or purpose may be wildly inappropriate for another.
- Paper destined to be output on a desktop printer is generally divided into two distinct categories: photo paper, and everything else. In this article, we'll talk about non-photo, general-purpose paper only.
- Every kind of paper is graded according to four different criteria.



# Brightness

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- Brightness is how white, or reflective, a paper is. A low brightness in cheap commercial paper (or expensive specialized stationery) means you'll see diminished contrast between the paper and the ink or toner. In other words, the whites will look off-white, and the blacks look not as deep or as dark as they could.
- Brightness is rated according to a scale of 1 to 100, with 80 being the lowest commercial grade and 100 the highest. However, not all paper manufacturers use the same ISO scale, so while the numbers may not be directly comparable from paper maker to paper maker, the rule-of-thumb is, the higher the number, the brighter (better) the paper.
- The average brightness for photocopy paper is 92, while premium paper may have a rating of 96 or 97. Although most paper sold lists a brightness figure right on the packaging, other paper manufacturers eschew the numerical scale and instead describe their paper with monikers such as UltraBright or SuperBright.



# Opacity

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- Opacity is the degree to which light passes through the paper. Most paper exhibits a certain degree of translucency, so if you hold it up to the light, you can see what's on the other side. With some cheap paper, the opacity is so low that whatever's printed on the other side will bleed through, whether or not you hold it up to a light source.
- For this reason, low-opacity paper is highly unsuitable for double-sided printing. As with brightness, the general rule-of-thumb: The better (more expensive) the paper grade, the higher its opacity. There's no specific opacity grading scheme, though many manufacturers will describe their products as low-, medium-, or high-opacity paper.



# Weight

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- Weight is how heavy or thick a paper is. Thick paper has a look and feel about it that denotes quality and importance, while thin paper has greater translucency, may impart a sense of cheapness (or the lack of importance of a document), and can be harder to handle (though it's less expensive, and more can be stored in the same amount of space).
- Paper weight is rated in pounds. The measurement reference harks back to the weight of 500 sheets of uncut printing-press paper.
- A 20-pound rating is the average weight for plain paper, 24 pounds is typical of a better-grade stock, and 32 pounds is generally considered stationery-grade. Report covers are 68 pounds, and postcard stock weighs in at 110 pounds.



# Texture

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Texture, also known as surface or smoothness, refers to how the paper looks and feels. Depending upon a number of factors (such as how it's manufactured, if it's coated or uncoated, the percentage of rag to cellulose, if any recycled materials are being used), paper can be smooth or slick, grained or pebbled, matte or silk.

Texture affects how ink or toner is deposited and spread onto the paper. The rule of thumb is that smooth papers work better on inkjet and laser printers, while textured papers are more suited for handwritten notes and special-occasion use, such as wedding invitations and birth announcements.



# Everyday Use: Photocopy Paper

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- The best all-around paper for everyday, disposable text printing on desktop inkjet and laser printers is photocopy paper. Also called dual-purpose, multipurpose, copier, plain, or Xerox paper, most photocopy paper is uncoated, and it has a weight of 20 pounds and a brightness of 92. You can buy letter-size (8.5x11-inch) photocopy paper in stationery stores, supermarkets, pharmacies, convenience stores, even newsstands—either in small packs of 50 or 100 sheets, a ream (500 sheets), or a 10-ream box. It's also the cheapest paper around, costing, on average, 1 cent to 3 cents per sheet, depending upon brand and quantity.
- Does it pay to buy brand-name photocopy paper? Yes and no. For everyday use no-name photocopy paper at Sam's Club, or the store brand at Staples or OfficeMax.
- For reports, letters, manuscripts, and other printouts where a professional-quality presentation is expected, move up to a higher grade of store-brand paper—say, with a brightness of 96 and 24-pound weight.





## For Special Occasions: Laser and Inkjet Paper

- The next bump up in quality from photocopy paper is laser and inkjet paper. Both are specifically formulated for their respective technologies, so they can produce optimum quality. Also, they are acid-free, so the pages won't yellow and become brittle after a few years. Most inkjet and laser papers are heavier and brighter than photocopy paper.
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- Laser paper is hard and smooth, with a surface designed to withstand the high temperatures required for fusing toner particles to it. This makes toner impressions cleaner, sharper, with more contrast.
- Similarly, inkjet paper is coated with clay or calcium carbonate, which aids in absorbing ink without mashing or smearing. It also makes colors look more vivid and accurate.



## For Special Occasions: Laser and Inkjet Paper (cont'd)

- There's one important caveat, though, to using inkjet and laser paper: Don't mix them up. The smooth, hard surface that is great for lasers doesn't absorb ink as well, so the excess can run and smear. And the inkjet paper coating isn't designed for high temperatures, so running it through a laser printer not only significantly degrades print and image quality, it can actually damage the hot fuser rollers.
- Then there's the cost: Laser and inkjet paper is two to five times more expensive than photocopy paper. But if you are printing business graphics or photos on nonglossy paper, if you want or need to make a good impression, these are the times when you should bite the bullet and print on the best paper available for your inkjet or laser.
- Another consideration is whether to buy inkjet and laser paper directly from the manufacturer. And again, this depends on how important the document you are printing is. Most manufacturers produce paper that they say works best with their printers. If the quality of your document is important, it's probably best to go with the manufacturers' paper. But for everyday printing purposes, a store brand will do the job just fine.



# How to Save Some Cash

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- As a practical matter, you can save money by printing your rough drafts on cheap photocopy paper and your good copies on better-quality paper. Another trick is to output your rough drafts and file copies as multipage documents. Multipage printing is the process of printing one, two, or four pages on a single sheet of paper. (Most printers and printer drives support multipage output.) The type and graphics will be much smaller but remain readable, and that can save you reams of paper over time.
- While double-sided printing can save both paper and money in the short run, we don't recommend it as a standard practice. Double-siding stresses a printer and can often lead to mediocre print quality, frequent jams, and even expensive repairs. Save your double-sided printing for those jobs that require it, not as a regular shortcut to save a little paper.



# Knowledge is Power

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- Paper is an often-neglected consumable that you don't think about until you need to buy it. But it's important to understand that the paper you choose can send a subtle message to your colleagues, clients, and friends. Your paper can say, "I don't care about this document or communication" (you don't want that), "This is an informal, friendly note" (which is okay, if that's your intention), or "Time, thought, and money was put into this presentation or letter" (now we're talking).
  - Yes, use the cheap stuff (the sale-price photocopy paper) for drafts, file copies, internal memos, and such. But for important and meaningful documents, pay attention to the paper's brightness, opacity, weight, and texture. After all, your paper can say more than just what you've printed on it.