

DESIGN: Preflighting? Check. Take the pain out of layout error detection...

... but make sure you know more about preflighting than your desktop publishing software, or you're likely to get caught out on your way to print.

Grammar purists, look away now: this is all about a word that's made its way from composite adverb to standalone verb. Preflighting is the act of going through a series of important checks before committing yourself. It originated in the flight industry (hence the name, obviously), where it refers to the rather important process of checking through vital points before taking off. Flaps? Check. Rudder? Check. Fuel? Check. Wings? Check... Okay, real preflight checklists are far more serious than that – and also even more boring. And that's part of the point; they're formal lists of things that would be too easy to skip or forget otherwise.

Preflighting in the design and publishing production industry isn't quite the same life-or-death stuff, but it can make the difference between something going smoothly through the prepress process or turning into an expensive, deadline-busting disaster. The production preflight process is unarguably boring, but it's just as unarguably important. It can spot the fiddly little slip-ups that turn a job into an expensive nightmare.

The good news is that doing this yourself, by hand, isn't necessary. That's good news, because anything that's boring and repetitive

risks being left undone. Admit it, we're all the same. Your DTP software will have basic preflight features built in, so you can check for problems from the same place you (possibly) created them in the first place. This is as it should be, as it's the job of software to take care of tedious, repetitive jobs for you.

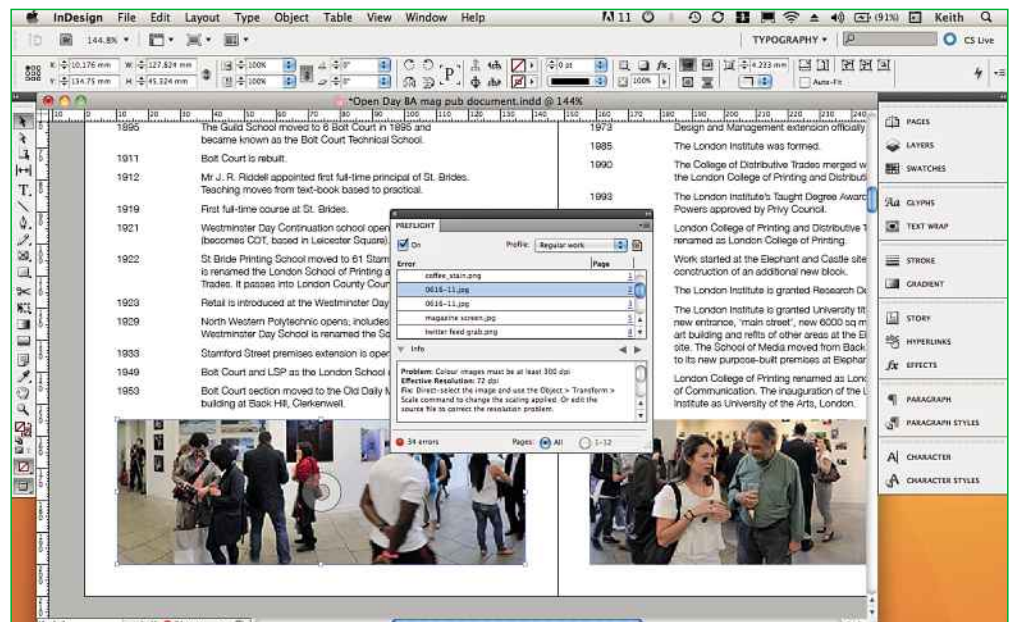
Adobe appeared to reduce the importance of the preflighting process back in InDesign CS4 by pulling the Preflight term from the File menu. The Package command is still there, and it still does some basic preflight operations and reporting before actually packaging anything. But preflighting hasn't been spurned – far from it, although you'd be forgiven for thinking otherwise.

Instead, InDesign CS4 brought us the Preflight panel, which is used by some, ignored by most. This was done to provide as-you-go preflight features, catching errors and glitches as they occur, rather than at the end of a long production workflow, if you can be bothered to check and if you remember. This is a good idea and a very worthy ambition – if only it matched up with reality. What actually happens is pretty much the same as always: people design things, then maybe check near the end to see if any problems have cropped up. If you have any experience in publishing,

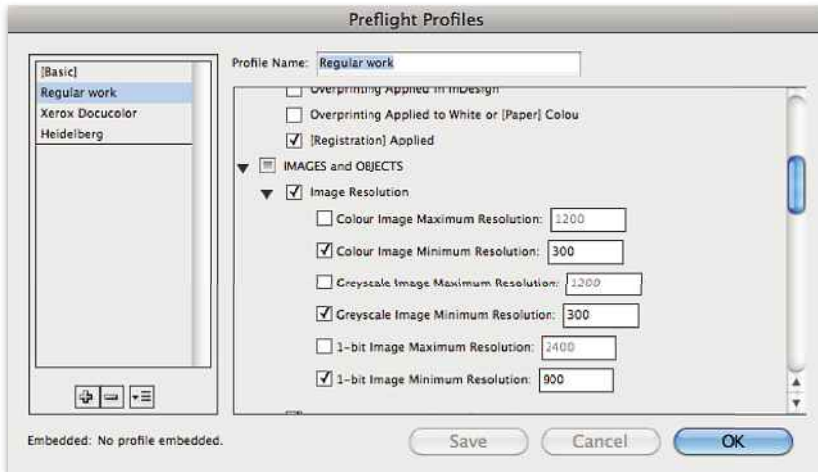


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The Preflight panel offers information about each error that it flags, but which errors are noticed is entirely dependent on what preflight profile is set. Make sure you set this up to reflect common errors in your workflow, such as low-res images.



▲ The default '[Basic]' profile is a little lightweight and can't be edited, so it's wise to add your own custom preflight profiles with the options that matter to your workflow and output.

this will be a familiar story. Yes, making sure things work well early on is good. But in many established workflows, it can be a little disruptive having to stop to fix things as you go rather than all at once later on.

One of the strengths – and, as happens so often, also one of the weaknesses – of InDesign's dynamic preflighting feature is that it's based on predefined profiles. Set these up just so and you end up with the equivalent of a smart expert watching out for slip-ups as you work. The trouble is, as with all clever stuff of this nature, you're assumed to know both the why and the how: why you should customise profiles and how to do it.

The good side of on-the-fly preflighting is that it can help at least to basic levels without any customising. The warnings shown with the default profile cover missing image links, overset text and missing fonts, classic slip-ups that cause print production errors. The bad side is that there are other common mistakes that aren't enabled by default: low image resolution is possibly the most common error of them all, but that's not included in the default Basic profile.

The solution is to create a customised profile that includes the things you worry about. Yep, I'm recommending buying into the whole dynamic preflight routine.

Open InDesign's Preflight panel (Window > Output > Preflight) and see what's shown in the Profile popup menu. Unless you've been here before, it will be the one called '[Basic]'. Pick Define Profiles from the panel's popup menu and create a new profile. Give this the same options as the default one and add the minimum resolution options for colour, greyscale and 1-bit monochrome images. These should be at 300, 300 and 900ppi respectively, not the oddly lower 250 and 800ppi these are to start with. Non-proportional scaling of placed objects is also worth considering; that should help deal with stretch-to-fit graphic laziness. Other options to consider depending on your print output methods are minimum stroke width (hairline 0.125pt is often risky), non-proportional type scaling (you don't expect me to allow type distortion, do you?), minimum type size, but

limited to multiple inks or white. The latter will help avoid the disappearing white-on-black text problem that happens with small text.

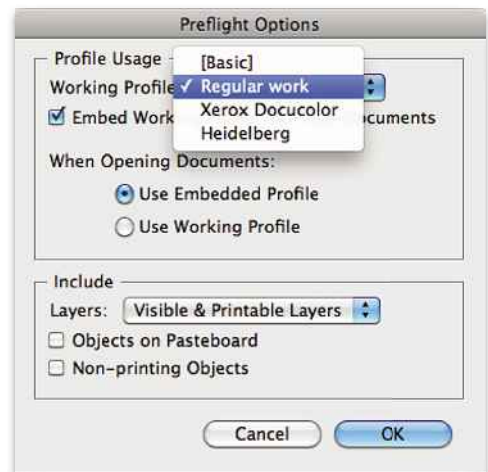
Once you've saved your profile, you can switch between this and the default in the Preflight panel and see where your errors crop up. You can also work with this panel closed, as the traffic light icon and error count field are shown in the bottom of your document window as well.

Stop for a moment, though, and think about the consequences of using all of these settings. One not-so-great result is error fatigue, or 'cry wolf' syndrome, where the sheer number of errors and their apparent (and often actual) triviality leads people to ignore the warnings. They're also likely to

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assume there are no other issues beyond what's reported, which is definitely risky.

One recent example was a document with 54 warnings shown in the small bar at the bottom of the layout document – and this was *after* fixing the various broken links to images that had been moved around in the Finder. The errors were all down to two things: images in RGB rather than CMYK mode and overset text. In this case, the output was to be PDF using the Press Quality preset, so all colour would be converted to CMYK in the output, using the specified FOGRA27 destination. Leaving images in RGB, rather than pre-converting them in Photoshop and placing CMYK files in InDesign, means not taking direct charge of the conversion process, but that's actually a good thing: doing all the conversion in one place at one time minimises the room for error. This is known as an RGB workflow, and despite the warnings preflight software gives, there's nothing wrong with it: quite the contrary, as long as you do make sure the final conversion – wherever that might be – is appropriate.



▲ The Preflight Options dialog lets you pick your preference for the default 'working' profile and embed this in documents.

As for the overset text, this was caused by stray return characters spilling out of the end of some text boxes. No visible content was lost, but the extra returns were too much for the boxes to hold. Was this a problem? Well, yes and no. There was no 'missing' text; no sentence was lost or cut off halfway through. But because this was flagged as a problem and the designer knew it wasn't, the warning was completely ignored, and would be again in the future. And that really is a problem, because there could have been an actual case of cropped-off text somewhere.

As it happens, there were real problems in the layout, but not anything the regular preflight process had picked up. Solid black blocks were set behind white banner-style

text, which is fine. But some of the blocks were filled with InDesign's default plain black, a single-colour hit of ink that would

look thin over large areas; one had a custom rich black (100% K plus a percentage of other inks to add weight); and the rest were filled with an RGB black swatch, which would be converted to CMYK in the PDF export using the current output settings, most likely resulting in a murky, over-rich four-colour black. This all came to light when checking the PDF in Acrobat, which renders on-screen simulations of the CMYK ink behaviours, so the mix of grey-black and black-black boxes gave it away. It might have been picked up in InDesign by temporarily selecting Proof Colors from the View menu or, more reliably, Window > Output > Separations Preview. Would it ever be picked up in an automated preflight process? It isn't in the list of options in the Preflight Profiles setup dialog, so no.

InDesign's automatic preflight feature is certainly better than what we had before, but it's a far cry from comprehensive. The bottom line is that there's just no substitute for intelligent workflows and careful preflight checking by hand – with the software there to relieve the more boring aspects, of course. ☺