



Guide to specialty inks, heat applications, gradients/simulated process, embroidery & belt printing

When we started Threadless back in 2000, designs were printed using fairly basic screen printing methods. With the launch of our Select line in 2006, we began to encourage artists to explore new printing techniques that allowed for more creativity and the use of some really interesting products. We decided to end the separation between regular Threadless tees and Threadless select tees by offering the use of all printing techniques that we use for Select to any artist that submits.

This is super exciting for everyone! Before, most chosen designs were printed with plastisol inks, some with a chino additive and a few with water-based or discharge inks. But now, designers can now use up to 8 colors, specify super glow, puff, high density, suede, UV color change, shimmer, metallic clear, glitter, blister, flock, vinyl, foils, embroider, gradients, simulated process and even belt printing.

While it's not required to use these techniques, we've created this guide to help you understand what can and can not be done during the production of your designs if it gets printed. What follows is an in-depth look at printing techniques we can employ, simply for your information. Please don't let this list dictate how you put together your submission!

Happy designing, and good luck!

-Your friends at Threadless

Specialty Inks

Super Glow

Super glow is what it sounds like... glow-in-the-dark ink, on steroids. It is very transparent and looks "water-color-ish". Super glow is really cool on light color shirts because it has a tonal clear effect that glows. It's great if you want to play around with the idea of hidden messages or design elements. Keep in mind that it's not 100% transparent, so elements in super glow will show up slightly even when not glowing.



Super Glow

Puff

Puff is a rounded, raised ink that's best when used with organic shapes and lines. Hard edges and angles are often softened or lost when printed with puff. It can hold some detail, however the finer the detail or smaller the line, the less it "puffs". Puff isn't effective for large fill areas due to its heaviness, and the area won't appear as puffed.



Puff

High Density

High density ink raised, square stack ink. It's much better than puff for elements that have hard edges or angles. Similar to puff, areas of fine detail or with elements that come to a point don't translate well. It's also not recommended for fill areas, as the center of the fill tends to "sink". Essentially, high density ink would be used if you don't want the "rounded, raised" look of puff, but wanted a "squared, raised" look. High density ink also can be printed in "clear", which produces a darkened, tonal effect on a tee. Pretty neat stuff!



Suede

Suede

Suede ink isn't actually suede, but a raised ink with a fuzzy nap reminiscent of suede leather. It's pretty fun to play with texture and raised design elements as it softens geometric shapes. There needs to be a certain thickness (1/8" - 1/4" at least) to any line work so the nap is visible - otherwise it looks like puff. Not good with really large fills or super fine detail.

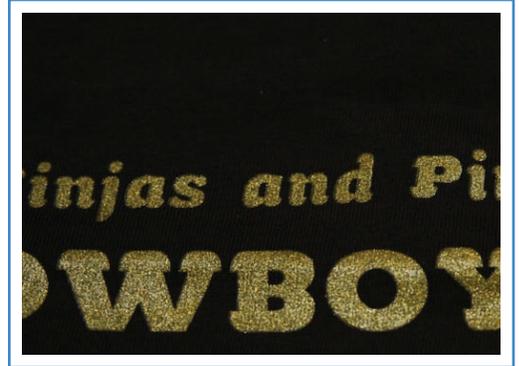
(Specialty Inks, continued)

UV Color Change

To begin with, UV Color Change ink doesn't work on dark tees at all. If you're still interested in using it... read on! With this ink, colors disappear indoors but appear when exposed to any ultraviolet light. The colors achieved are bright but tend to lack vividness of regular inks due to their translucent nature. Color remains true on light colored tees such as white, cream or silver. The ink will appear on other light shirt colors, but is unpredictable. In other words, the shirt color affects the color of the ink.

Shimmer

Shimmer is basically sparkly, metallic ink. It's available in silver, bronze, black and gold. We've previously experimented with special formulas for a pinkish-red shimmer and a bluish-aqua shimmer, but the results ended up looking like grayed-out, non-sparkly versions of the color. It does not hold super-fine detail well and starts to look flat grey in areas of finer detail.



Shimmer



Blister

Metallic Clear

This ink is really cool when printed on top of any ink color. It can be printed on its own also and produces a darkened tonal effect with sparkles on some shirt colors.

Glitter

Glitter ink has a fairly dense concentration of tiny glitter flakes. It's available in a range of basic "crayon colors". We don't recommend it for tiny details. When it's printed over another ink, or directly onto a tee, the underlying color can slightly show through the glitter.

Blister

Think puff with dimples. This is super cool, especially when it's "stacked up" for some great sculptured texture. You want to have a decent fill area or line thickness to allow ink to texture up. Keep in mind that it does tend to get heavy on a shirt, so large fill areas could end up being uncomfortable to wear..

Heat Applications

We can now use heat applications with a variety of inks which means a lot more flexibility with mixed-media. For example, we can print orange and pink; then print metallic clear over the pink, and foil anywhere you want! In the past, we couldn't really use foil comprehensively in a design that incorporated something like metallic clear. Who says dreams don't come true?

Flock

Flock is a fuzzy, slightly "felty" looking material. It isn't terribly flexible, so if there's a ton on the tee, it could be a little uncomfortable until it's worn in a bit. Flock is really cool when used to give a little added texture to your design.

Vinyl

Vinyl is exactly what you think... shiny and plastic, like the numbers on the back of a team jersey. Vinyl comes in a good range of "crayon colors".

Foils

Foil is shiny and soft and has a slightly mirror-ish appearance. It's available in silver, gold, bronze, red, blue, green, black, purple, iridescent clear, iridescent silver, luminescent silver, metallic rainbow (bands are fixed width), patterned silver and patterned gold. The metallic foil "pattern" appears like a super zoomed-in shot of a reflector.



Flock



Foil

Gradients and Simulated Process

Gradients and gradient blends tend to print with a banding effect similar to how it appears in an Illustrator file. Even if you transfer the file to Photoshop, gradients create a troublesome issue to overcome, so it's best to create nice smooth gradients in Photoshop. Gradients can be achieved by using half-tones as well. The lightest halftone that can be printed is about 10%. Sometimes we can accept less than a 10% half-tone, but it really depends on the individual artwork. If need be, we can simulate "process" (CMYK) to achieve very fine gradients or images with high tonal quality such as stylized photography or photo-realistic elements.

Embroidery

In addition to the inks and heat applications you can also now spruce up your designs with a good old fashioned needle and thread. We guess Threadless isn't so "threadless" after all. We have tons of thread colors a stitch styles that we can use to match your desired special effect.

Belt Printing

Belt printing was really popular back in the 70's and has been making a comeback lately. A belt printer uses huge screens that cover the entire front and back of the garment. It's great for all-over pattern printing, but can be used in many other creative ways. Belt printing works best on designs with a limited color palette that don't require tight registration. One thing to keep in mind when designing for a belt printed tee is that the colors used in your design should never touch each other because registration is never exact. For this reason, one-color designs are recommended. Also, the same design will vary slightly from shirt to shirt when belt printing is used, due to the shirt size and how it's placed on the printer. These characteristics give each individual belt printed shirt a unique look.



Gradient



Simulated Process



Embroidery



Belt Printing