

Creating Fabrics with your Computer, Scanner, Camera and Printer

Kathryn Walmsley ©2009

It's easy to create fabrics of your own design if you have a printer and computer. A scanner and digital camera expand the possibilities!

Fabric...

Prepare the fabric you plan to print. I like to use unbleached, non permanent press muslin. The inexpensive kind you get at chain fabric stores. I've tried nicer muslin purchased at quilting shops but it tended to be a little heavier and so caused more printer problems. You can use bleached muslin if you want white in your finished fabric and light weight smooth silks. Avoid any fabrics with slubs or thick and thin places or very course weave.

Purchase freezer paper designed for craft work in 8.5 x11 or 12x15" sheets from www.darmatrading.com or search C. Jenkins freezer paper sheets from other suppliers. I prefer to use the sheets rather than freezer paper on a roll from the grocery store because once on a roll it never flattens out causing more printer problems.

I stumbled accidentally on the technique of using the fabric on the bias. This turned out to be important because the edges of the fabric do not fray so stray threads are not a problem to the printer. If you are making this fabric for quilting you may have to cut your patches with the straight of the grain causing a bit more waste of your custom made fabric.

Lay the smoothly ironed fabric on a firm surface like Masonite or plywood, place a piece of freezer paper on top, shiny side down, and iron to the fabric with a hot dry iron. Trim, leaving about ½ "of fabric all around. Turn over and press again making sure that any air pockets are pressed down and that the edges are firmly stuck in place. Use sharp scissors to cut away the excess fabric right next to the edge of the freezer paper. I prepare both 8.5 x 11 sheets and 8.5 x 14" sheets. If you have a larger format printer you can use the 12x15" freezer paper sheets full size!

If preparing your own fabric to print seems like just too much work you can buy prepared to print fabric sheets but they are very expensive. Before you choose visit www.darmatrading.com as they sell these products by the yard which might save you money.

Printers...

Printers which have a straight feed of stock to be printed are a better choice than those which bend the paper around the print heads.

I have an Epson Artisan 50 printer. I like this printer because it's inexpensive and uses Epson Clarion ink. Earlier Epson printers that use Durabrite ink work well too. This ink comes in

separate color cartridges so you replace only the one which is empty. The ink is archival, fade and water resistant. I test washed my custom made fabric with a heavy load of towels and jeans with warm water and detergent in my washer and then dried the load in the drier. The computer fabric I made came through very well with just a tiny bit of fading. It's always best to test for yourself before committing time and money to create an elaborate project.

I've tested some other printers including my large format HP printer but those inks were not water proof. I tried Bubble Jet Set with the HP printer. Bubble Jet Set is a liquid sold with the claim that it will make any ink jet printer ink water proof and fade resistant when printed on treated fabric. In the end it was such a pain to press fabric, buy Bubble Jet Set, soak fabric, dry fabric, *try* to get the fabric to press flat again and finally print the fabric that buying a \$75.00 Epson seemed a better choice. See if the printer you have has water resistant ink. Especially if you plan to wash the fabric you create.

Printer Settings...

My Epson Artisan 50 printer prefers to be set on bright white paper rather than the matt heavy weight paper setting I used on the previous Epson C82 and C86 printers. You will have to experiment to find the best setting. The paper setting chooses how much space there is between the upper and lower rollers that guide the paper and how much ink to use. I also set to photo/text or photo. Using Best Photo has not proved to be an improvement over the other settings. Make sure you set the paper size too!

So in the printer dialogue box for YOUR printer you will need to set the size and type of paper and the type of document you will print, text or picture.

Printing...

Printing fabric takes constant supervision and a willingness to take a little risk with your printer. These are not expensive printers but if it's your only printer for the family and you are not comfortable with replacing it if necessary this technique may not be for you. That said so far after several years of printing fabric I have not killed a printer yet.

I load one piece of prepared fabric/freezer paper at a time, check my settings and click print. I am familiar with the sound of my printer because it sits right on my desk a foot away. I can hear right away if there is a problem. This usually sounds like a whooshing or rubbing sound. I can look right into the slot where the printed paper will come out and watch for the edge of the fabric sheet to start showing. Be patient but if the sheet does not show in a reasonable time cancel the print job!

Sometimes I can look into the slot and see that one of the rollers is hung up on a folded corner. I keep a paperclip handy to quickly straighten out the corner and hopefully the sheet will go through. Yes the printer is still plugged in and running so you'll have to decide for yourself if

you want to do this. Often the sheet will make it through anyway but with smudged ink along the edge with the bent corner.

To minimize problems start with pressed sheets that are completely flat with no curled corners and fully adhered freezer paper.

Expect some type of imperfection in about 1 in 6 sheets. To minimize the waste set the margins on the file you plan to print at about 1" top and bottom. The first and last inch, is where most of the troubles (smudges) will show up.

Once the new fabric is printed you can store it on the paper backing until ready to use. I press the sheets again to be sure the ink is well bonded. Wait until the ink dries to do this.

How to use this technique...

Remember that most fabric you purchase has copyright protection. You would probably safe from © infringement reproducing new fabric from scraps you may have in your vintage fabric collection.



This is a picture of a patchwork skirt I created and scanned using vintage prints and solids. I can print this as fabric for re-use. I can change the look of this patchwork by bringing the image into an image editor and turning it to sepia or black and white. I can also fade it by reducing the opacity and change the size by enlarging or reducing the file. So I could make tiny patchwork to use on a miniature doll!

I designed the wrappers for my "Crayons©" using Microsoft Publisher, a simple, popular, program which comes on lots of computers. I played with type boxes, fill techniques and grouping and ungrouping objects to get the files. These were all done with nothing but what was already on the computer.



If you have a scanner, camera or internet connection you can find worlds of graphic and type information to assemble into your own fabric designs. I made the fabric below by arranging leaves on the bed of my scanner, covering them with fabric and scanning. I expanded the size of the fabric by copying and pasting several of the resulting images side by side into a new document.



You can see that I have not aligned the little files I assembled perfectly. Look at the lower left corner and you can see the actual little file. Be sure to have the files overlap a tiny bit or use an image editing program like Adobe Photoshop to fill in the missing pixels. I reduced the size of the original file until the leaves were a pleasing size for the fabric.

With a digital camera you can take pictures of the sky and create special fabric. I also searched “stormy sky” on Google and found free images which I saved to my computer. Use any picture you take with your camera, find online or scan into your computer, select the area of the photo or image that you like and crop away the rest in an image editing program. Then enlarge the image to the maximum size you can print or reduce it and copy and paste several to create a larger image.



Interesting natural or manmade textures make great materials for fabric designs. I created a fabric by scanning a piece of birch bark. I printed out several paper copies and pasted them together on paper to create a more pleasing design than the original piece of bark. Next I scanned the new paper “collage” and used Photoshop to clean up the scan and refine the colors and tone.

Leaf wears clothing all made with fabric I designed and printed.

Keeping track of your digital fabric designs...

It's amazing how quickly your designs will build up. Before you start designing do a little preparation on your computer. Set up a new file inside My Documents called Computer Fabric. Inside the Computer Fabric file create new files labeled Raw materials and others with specific names like "Sky Fabric", "Leaf Fabric", "Crayon Label Fabric" etc. Save bits of this and that into the Raw Materials folder and save everything to do with "Leaf Fabric" from the original scans through finished fabrics ready to print in different size and color schemes. You'll thank yourself later if you do this.

A further note on file types...

Images such as the crayon wrappers which I created in Microsoft Publisher will not open in any other program. If possible create your fabric files in an image editor like paint, draw or Photoshop. Save them as jpeg files and place them in your computer fabric folder. You can make several versions of each file with different resolutions. The higher the resolution # the better the print result will be. Use a minimum of 300 dpi. for printing. I reduced all the files I used for this tutorial to 72dpi which is great for viewing on the computer screen online but will give a poor result when printing. So when you save your files be sure to check, file size, file resolution and file type before you click SAVE !

Enjoy making your own fabric to fit just the needs you have for your new works of art.

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