

*Scrappy*

The Ultimate  
**Artwork  
Preparation  
Guide**  
for Custom Apparel



# The Ultimate **Artwork Preparation Guide** for Custom Apparel



Wouldn't it be nice if you could wave a magic wand and make your design appear on a t-shirt?

We think so too. If you figure out how to do that, let us know. But until then, it's crucial to know how to prepare your digital artwork files for production.

If you don't have a design background or you've never ordered custom apparel before, you might not be aware of the optimal file formats and specifications for your artwork.

That's why we created this little beauty: The Ultimate Artwork Preparation Guide for Custom Apparel.

We have this process down to a science, and we're about to rock your world with a guide that answers all your questions on how to get your designs ready to print.

(And if you happen to have additional questions at the end, don't worry. Our team is ready to answer them.)

# Artwork preparation **will make or break** your finished products

It's time to put down the Pen tool and put on your learning cap.

Although the technical details of the artwork preparation process may seem small, they are incredibly important. These intricacies are the difference between t-shirts from heaven and a custom apparel faux pas.

There's nothing more disappointing than opening your custom apparel order only to find that the colors are mismatched and your artwork looks fuzzy.

BTW, that will never happen if you choose to work with us. Want to know why? Well, let's take a look at the first step in our artwork preparation process:

## **1. Choose a custom apparel partner that will triple-check all the details of your project before putting it into production.**

Artwork preparation means preventing mistakes, and that should be your custom apparel partner's responsibility as well as your own.

Our amazing team and seamless Brand Building Process (BBP) eliminate the margin of error by extensively reviewing every last detail of your project to make sure there are no hiccups.

## **2. Decide in advance which printing technique, garment patterns, fabric, and ink you will use for the project.**

Clarifying the basic details of your project will help you understand what to expect from your finished product.

It will also help you determine which kind of artwork file you'll need to provide in order for your design to look its best on the final garment.

For example, if you're using a discharge printing technique, your design should be

vectorized. If you're using a water-based ink on a dark t-shirt, we recommend using a high-contrast color scheme.

If you're unsure about which printing techniques, garments, fabrics, or inks to use, our team will be happy to help you decide based on your project goals.

### **3. Be mindful of the limitations of each printing technique.**

Each printing technique has its own set of limitations that you need to be aware of when you're creating your artwork. For example, certain effects often don't look good when they're screen printed.

#### **Be cautious of these effects when creating your artwork to screen print:**

- **Drop shadow:** The ink often bleeds, making the shadow appear messy.
- **Gradient:** The color transition might not be as smooth as you want it to be.
- **Glow:** The ink won't achieve the same "glow" effect you'd get from looking at the image on a screen.
- **Transparency:** If you use overlapping colors that have less than 100% opacity, it will be difficult for the printer to achieve the same look you see on the screen because the ink transparencies can be unpredictable. Instead, you can use a spot color to ensure the overlapped section prints accurately.

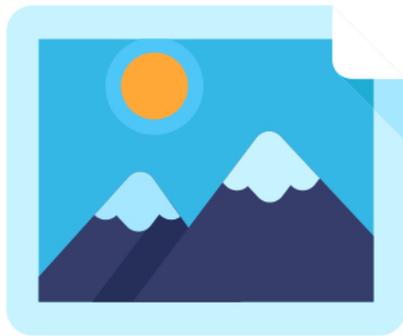
Keep these limitations in mind when you're creating your artwork so you can choose the best printing technique for your custom apparel project.

## 4. **Create your design in Adobe Illustrator.**

If you want your design to look amazing on a t-shirt—or any other product, for that matter—you need to create it in Adobe Illustrator.

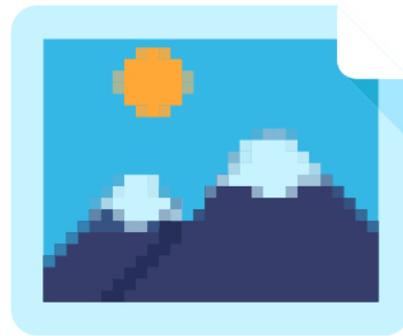
Adobe Photoshop just doesn't cut it when it comes to vector files, which is the only file type you should use for printing.

### **VECTOR**



**AI, EPS, CGM, PDF, SVG, CDR**

### **RASTER**



**BMP, TIFF, PCX, GIF, PNG, JPEG**

### **What's a vector file?**

Vector files (like AI or EPS) are made up of mathematical curves instead of a series of dots. Vectors can be scaled to any size without losing quality, unlike raster files.

### **What's a raster file?**

Raster images (like JPEGs or PNGs) become blurry and pixelated when they're enlarged. So if you want your design to look crisp and clean on a t-shirt, you need to start with a vector file.

### **How to create a vector file**

There are a few different programs you can use to create vector files, but Adobe Illustrator is by far the most popular (and for good reason). Illustrator offers an incredible amount of control and flexibility when it comes to creating artwork for printing.

If you're not already familiar with Illustrator, we recommend taking some time to learn the basics before you start working on your design.

There are lots of great tutorials online (thanks to our friends Google and YouTube). And you can even try Illustrator for free by [signing up for a 7-day trial of Adobe Creative Cloud](#).



## What to do if you **draw your custom apparel designs by hand**

Not everyone is a digital artist, and that is completely okay!

If you're someone who likes to draw their designs by hand, the best thing you can do is scan your artwork into a computer and trace over it in Illustrator using the Pen tool.

That may sound like a lot of work, but it's actually pretty easy to do. And once you get the hang of it, you'll be able to create vector files from your hand-drawn designs in no time.

Plus, tracing your artwork in Illustrator will give you a lot more control over your design than if you were to just scan it in as a raster image.

### **Here's a quick tutorial on how to trace a hand-drawn design in Illustrator:**

1. Start by scanning your artwork into the computer. Make sure the scan is at least 300 DPI.
2. Open the scanned image in Illustrator and select the "Pen" tool from the toolbar.
3. Use the Pen tool to trace over the outline of your artwork. Try to stay as close to the original linework as possible.
4. Once you've finished tracing the outline of your design, delete the scanned image and you're done!

**5. Create a mockup of your design to see what it will look like when it's printed on the apparel.**

This will help you visualize the final product and make sure that the sizing, placement, and colors are all perfect.

There are a few different ways to create mockups, but we recommend using Adobe Photoshop.

Once you have your design ready in Illustrator, simply open it in Photoshop and place it on the mockup template.

You can find lots of great free mockup templates online, and in fact, we have several [3D Apparel Templates](#) that are picture-perfect representations of our own garments.



## **6. Create your artwork in its actual size.**

This may seem like a no-brainer, but it's actually one of the most common mistakes we see people make.

When you're designing your artwork, you need to make sure to create it at its actual size because t-shirts (and other garments) are printed on large format printers.

Your artwork will be printed at 100% scale, so if it's not the right size, it will either be too small or too large.

## **7. Keep in mind that intricate details and ultra-fine lines may not translate to the finished product.**

If your design is too detailed, it may need to be simplified in order for it to print well.

And if you're using a printing technique like screen printing, keep in mind that the screens themselves have a limited resolution.

This means that super fine details might get lost in the printing process.

We recommend ensuring that all your lines are at least 0.3 pt thickness so they can be printed accurately.

## **8. For a cost-effective design, use solid colors and stick to a few of them. (Not a million.)**

We know, it's tempting to go overboard with color when you're creating your custom apparel design. But trust us, less is *usually* more.

Why? Because more colors = more expensive.

Each color requires a separate screen to be made, and each screen costs money.

If you want to keep your design cost-effective, we recommend using a limited color palette. And if you really want to keep the price low, stick to one or two colors. Solid colors are the most economical option.

**When it comes to choosing colors for your design, there are a few things you need to keep in mind:**

First, you'll want to make sure that the colors you choose will look good on the garment color you've chosen.

For example, if you're printing on a dark shirt, you'll want to use light colors so your design will be visible.

If you're printing on a light garment, you can use darker colors without any problems

Just be sure to avoid using colors that are too close to the shirt color. (This can make your design difficult to read.)

Another thing to keep in mind is that some colors are more difficult (and therefore more expensive) to print than others.

For example, metallics and fluorescent colors can be tricky to print, so you'll want to avoid using them if you're trying to keep costs down.

## **9. Ensure all typography is large enough to be readable.**

This is especially important if you're using a small font size.

When in doubt, use a larger font size than you think you need because it will be difficult to read if it's too small.

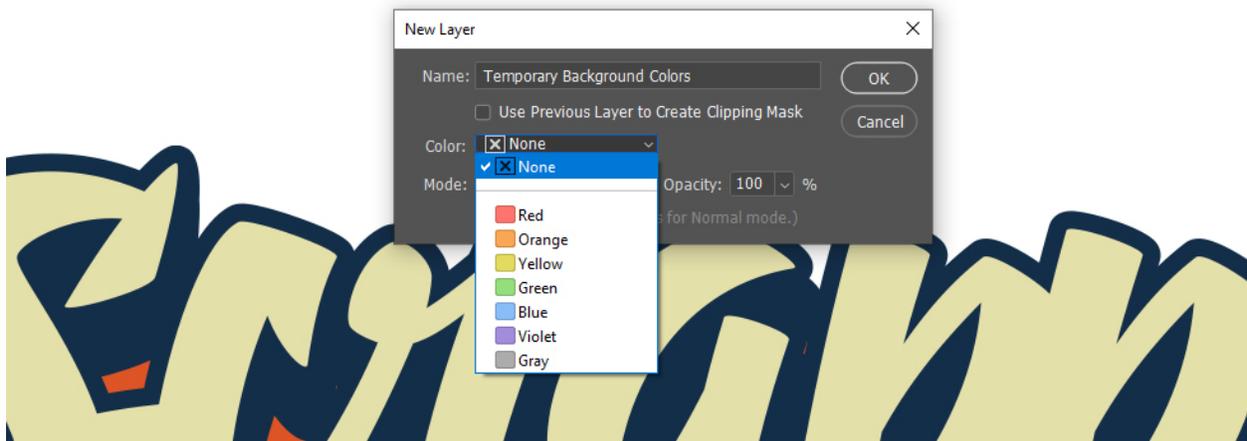
And if you're using a script or handwriting-style font, make sure it's legible by testing it out on different people.

The last thing you want is for your custom apparel to be unreadable!

## 10. Test temporary background colors behind your design to see what the artwork will look like on different apparel colors.

Since t-shirts (and other apparel) come in a variety of colors. It's important to test your artwork on as many different backgrounds as possible, especially if you plan on ordering shirts in multiple colors.

The easiest way to do this is to create a new layer in Photoshop and fill it with a solid color. Then, position your artwork on top of the colored layer and change the opacity of the layer so you can see your design on top of the background.



Repeat this process for as many different colors as you want to test.

## 11. Save your artwork in the right file format.

When you're exporting your file, make sure you save it as an EPS or AI file. These are both vector file formats that can be opened in Illustrator.

If you save your file as a JPEG or PNG, it will be saved as a raster image, which means it will lose its quality when it's printed.

## 12. Use **CMYK or Pantone (PMS)** color modes.

When you're creating your artwork, you need to make sure it's in either CMYK or Pantone (PMS) color mode. These color modes are used for printing.

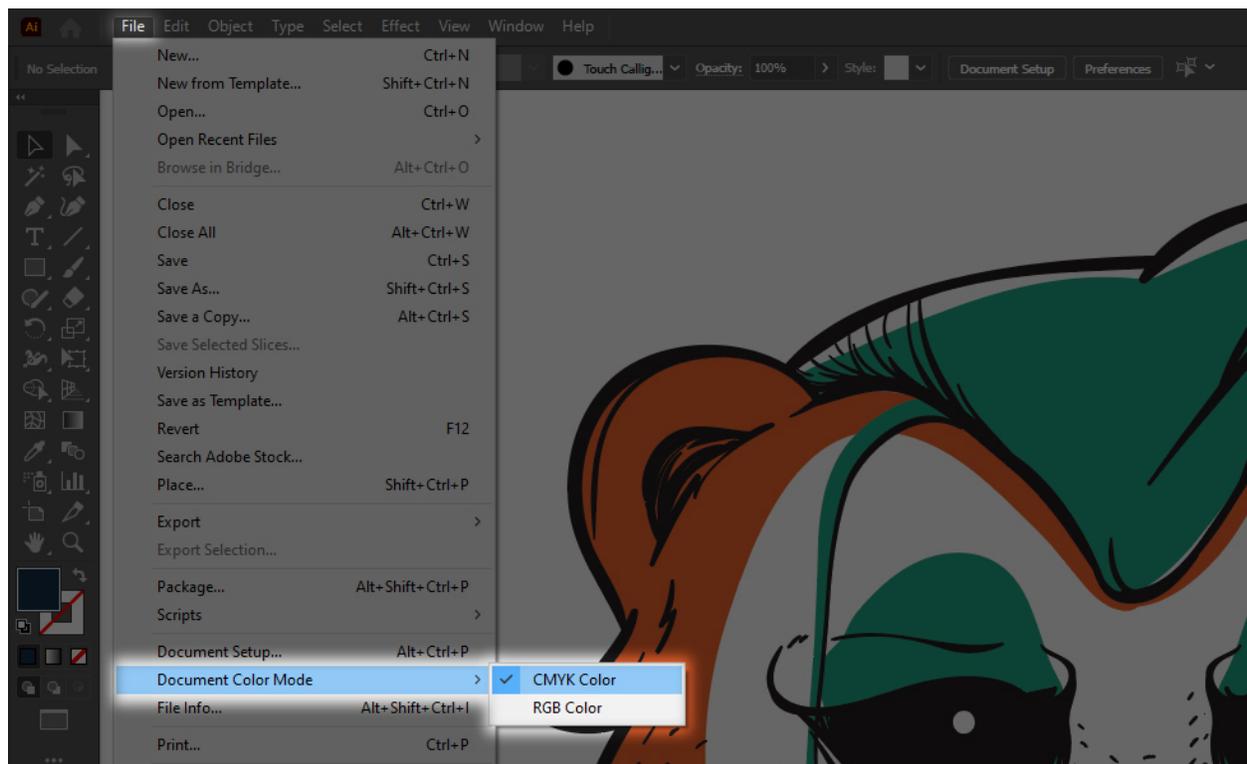
### Let's take a look at the use cases of each color mode:

- **CMYK:** Used for printing on paper. It's a subtractive color mode, which means it starts with white and then adds cyan, magenta, yellow, and black ink.
- **RGB:** Used for digital displays (like your computer screen). It's an additive color mode, so it starts with black and then adds light in the form of red, green, and blue.
- **Pantone:** Used for printing on fabric. It's a spot color mode, which means that each color is printed as its own ink (rather than being mixed together).

**For precise color matches, Pantone is the way to go.**

### How to change the color mode in Adobe Illustrator

If your file is in RGB, you can change the color mode by going to File > Document Color Mode > CMYK.

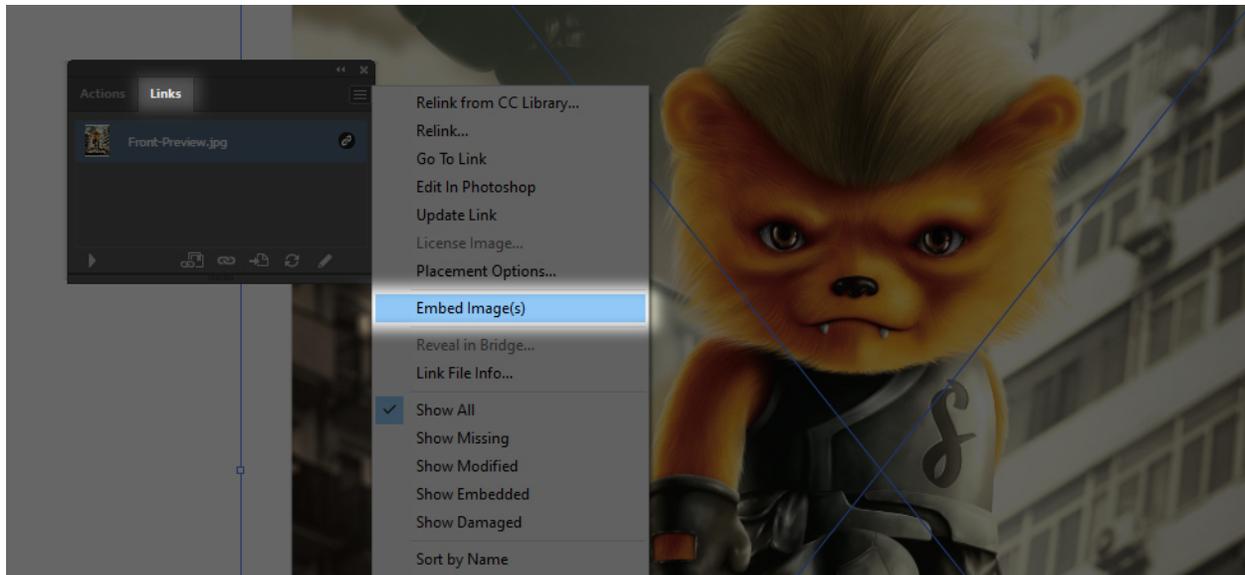


### 13. **Embed all linked images and textures.**

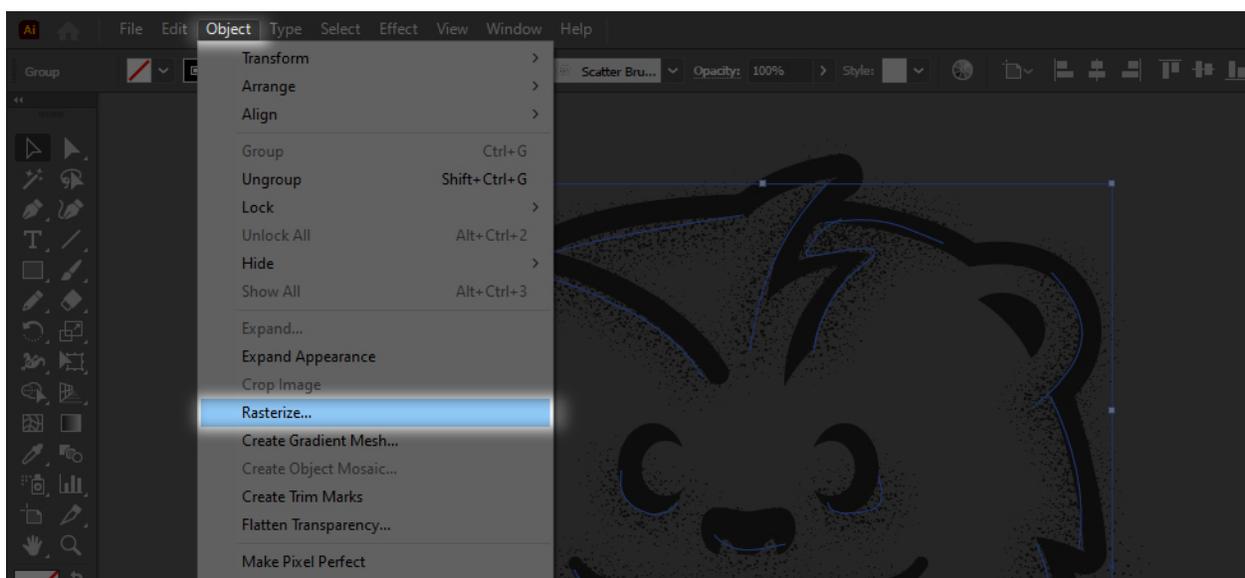
If your artwork has any linked images or textures, you need to embed them before you send the design off to be printed.

Linked images are not fully part of your Illustrator document. Think of them as hyperlinks—they point in a certain direction, but the links themselves do not contain all the content.

To embed an image, select it and go to Edit > Embed.



If you want to embed a texture, click on the image and then go to Object > Rasterize.

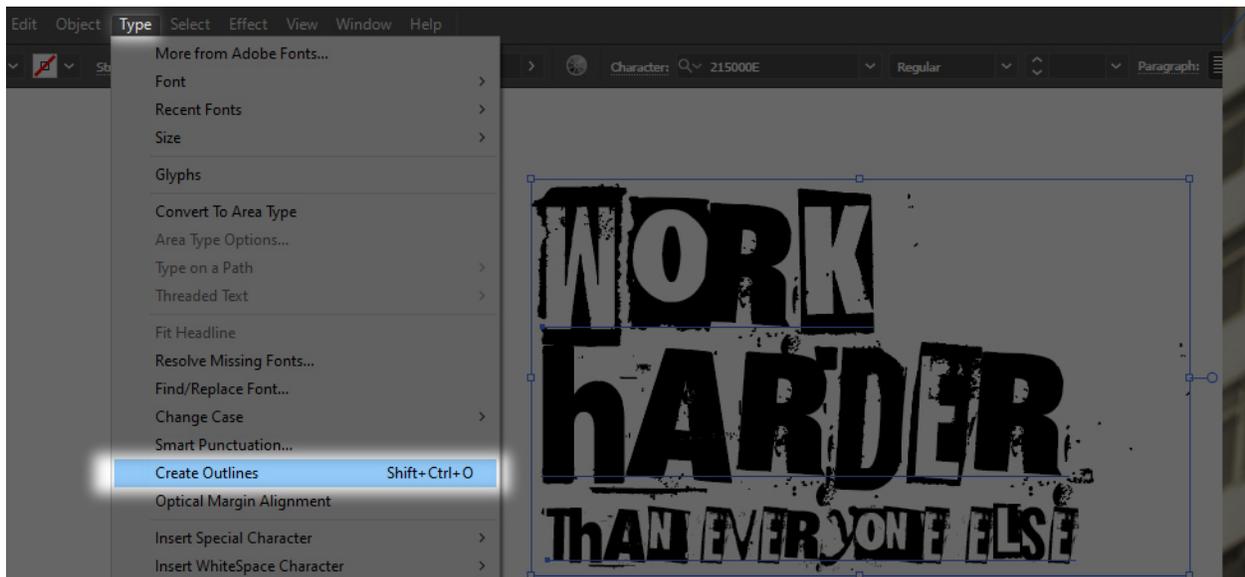


## 14. Convert **all text to outlines.**

Fonts are just like linked images—they are not fully embedded into the Illustrator file. When you transfer the file to someone else, the font will only carry over if the recipient has the same font installed on their computer.

That's why you need to make sure to convert all your text to outlines before exporting your artwork.

To convert your text to outlines, select it and then go to Type > Create Outlines.

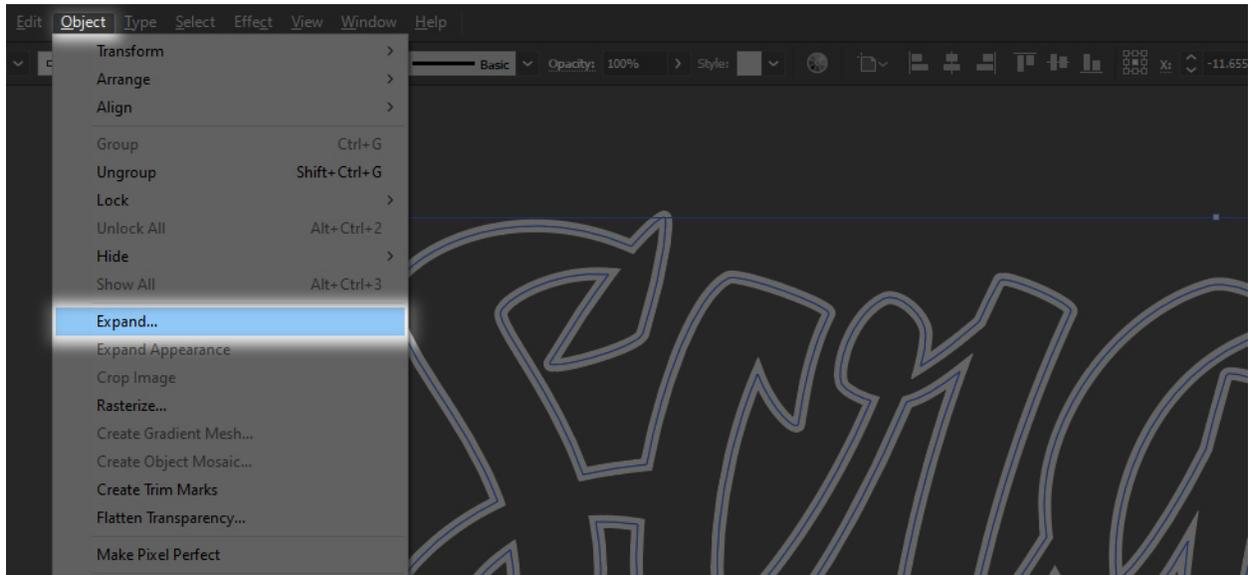


## 15. **Expand all strokes.**

Before exporting your file, make sure all strokes are expanded.

Expanding strokes ensures that your design will be printed correctly and there won't be any white gaps around the edges of your lines.

To expand your strokes, select them and then go to Object > Expand.



## 16. **Allow your custom apparel partner to adjust the halftones for you.**

Halftones are the tiny dots that make up a printed design, and they need to be adjusted depending on the printing technique that's being used.



For example, screen printing uses a coarser halftone than digital printing, so if you're going to screen print your design, you need to make sure the halftones are adjusted accordingly.

We don't recommend trying to mess with the halftones on your own, however. It's something your custom apparel partner can do for you. All you need to do is send them your artwork in the right color mode (CMYK or Pantone) and they'll take care of the rest.

## If you're unsure, **just ask!**

Our custom apparel experts are ready to assist you. In fact, answering questions is one of our favorite hobbies.

For general inquiries, we're available **Monday through Friday from 10 am – 5 pm. Call 833-SCRAPPY (833-727-2779)** to get in touch with us.

If you're ready to get your custom apparel project rolling, we are too!

Schedule a call with one of our Scrapy Sales Reps to get the party started:

**Grab Your FREE Quote**

