

How to press sublimation transfers

These are starting points, not fixed recipes. Heat presses, blanks and coatings vary, so follow your blank and press manufacturer's temperature, time and pressure first — and press one test item before you run a batch.

Sublimation works on white or light-colored polyester and polymer-coated blanks. It doesn't print white: white areas of your design show the color of the item, and a colored item changes the colors of the print.

Before every run

- ☐ Transfers arrive mirrored — don't mirror them again
- ☐ Keep transfers dry, clean and flat until you press
- ☐ Use the blank and press maker's settings first
- ☐ Keep heat and pressure even, with full contact
- ☐ Place the printed side against the item
- ☐ Tape the transfer down with heat-resistant tape
- ☐ Press one test item before a production run
- ☐ Remove the paper carefully, as the blank or paper maker directs

Starting points by what you're pressing

FABRIC / APPAREL

Fabric & apparel in a heat press

Common starting point: 385–400°F (196–204°C) for 45–60 seconds at medium pressure. If your blank maker's settings differ, use theirs.

Choose the right fabric. White or light 100% polyester or sublimation-ready fabric. Lower polyester content prints lighter; cotton won't hold the ink.

Pre-press the garment. A few seconds of heat removes moisture and wrinkles. Lint-roll the print area.

Protect and position. Slip protective paper inside the garment, place the transfer printed side down and tape it so it can't shift. Cover it with protective paper.

Keep the pressure even. Keep seams, zippers, buttons and collars out from under the platen, or use a pressing pillow so the print area sits flat.

Remove the paper carefully. Lift it off in one smooth motion, as your paper or blank maker directs, without letting it slide.

Check your test piece. Scorching, yellowing or a color shift means lower the time or temperature; faded color means more heat, time or pressure.

HARD GOODS

Mugs in a mug press

Common starting point: Around 360–400°F (182–204°C) for roughly 3–4 minutes, depending on the press, the mug and its coating. Follow the press and mug maker's settings first.

A real example: Sonscreens' mug press read 385°F for the Recipe Box Brunch Hub latte mugs in our customer project.

Start with a clean, dry, room-temperature mug. A cold or damp mug soaks up heat and can press faded or uneven.

Wrap it tight. Wrap the transfer printed side in and tape it at the seam and edges so it can't move.

Firm, even contact. The heating element should touch the mug from rim to base. Tapered (latte) mugs need an element or wrap made for that shape.

Let the press recover. A ceramic mug pulls a lot of heat — give the press time to return to temperature between mugs.

Handle it hot with care. Wear heat-resistant gloves, remove the paper as the mug maker directs, and set the mug on a heat-safe surface to cool.

HARD GOODS

Mugs & tumblers in a convection oven

Common starting point: Around 350–400°F (177–204°C) for roughly 5–8 minutes in a fully preheated convection oven; larger mugs take longer. Follow the wrap and blank maker's settings first.

Use a dedicated oven. Use an oven kept for sublimation — never one used for food.

Check the real temperature. Use an oven thermometer; dial settings are often off.

Fit the wrap snugly. Tape the transfer, then use a silicone wrap or shrink sleeve sized for the item so the paper touches the surface everywhere.

Tumblers vary. Stainless and polymer tumblers each have their own settings — use the tumbler maker's time and temperature.

Handle it hot with care. Wear heat-resistant gloves, remove the wrap and paper as directed, and let the item cool on a heat-safe surface.

HARD GOODS

Metal panels, plaques, tiles & other flat blanks

Use the blank maker's settings. Thin sublimation metal, hardboard and ceramic tile need very different temperatures and times, so there is no single starting point for flat blanks.

Coated side to the transfer. Only the sublimation-coated face takes the ink. Peel any protective film first.

Even contact. Medium-to-firm pressure, with the press height set for the blank's thickness so the whole surface is pressed flat.

Edge to edge? Edges and corners fade first when contact is uneven. For a full-bleed print, order the transfer slightly larger than the blank.

Protect the press. Cover the transfer with protective paper so ink can't reach the platen.

Troubleshooting

Faded or dull color

Usually too little heat, time or pressure, moisture in the paper or blank, or a blank that isn't polyester or sublimation-coated. Check your settings against the blank maker's, pre-press fabric, and test again.

Faded patches or edges

Uneven pressure or contact — a seam, zipper or the curve of a mug kept part of the transfer off the heat. Use a pressing pillow on garments; make sure the mug press or wrap fits from rim to base.

Ghosting (a faint double image)

Usually the paper shifted while hot — during pressing, as the press opened, or while it was removed — or the press ran too hot or too long. Tape the transfer securely, open the press smoothly, and remove the paper as your paper or blank maker directs.

Blurry or bleeding edges

Too much heat, time or pressure, or moisture. Move toward the blank maker's settings and keep transfers and blanks dry.

Color shift, browning or scorching

Too hot or too long. Polyester can scorch or yellow and colors can shift — reduce time or temperature and use protective paper over fabric.

Colors look off on a colored item

Sublimation ink is transparent and there is no white. Use white or light blanks for true color; on a colored item, its color shows through the print.

The design came out backwards

Our transfers arrive already mirrored. Press them as they come, printed side against the item — don't mirror them again.

The transfer looks pale on the paper

That's normal. Sublimation ink looks muted on the paper; the color develops when heat bonds it into the polyester or coating.