MerchZing.com

A FREE GUIDE FROM MERCHZING

Retro T-SHIRT DESIGN LAB

Turn Your Idea Into a Finished, Print-Ready Design with ChatGPT or Another Image Tool



TEN ERA EXAMPLES • FIVE MORE STYLE LOOKS
THREE FULL PROMPTS • A BRIEF BANK OF 40 IDEAS
AND THE FINISHING STEPS THAT KEEP YOUR WORK OUT OF THE SLOP PILE.

Read this first

AI is your designer. You are the creative director.

You will hear two things about AI-made apparel. One says it is a button that prints money. The other says it is slop that is junking up the shops. Both are wrong about the same thing. Neither is about the tool. It is about who is doing the creative work.

In this guide the work stays with you. You bring the idea: who the shirt is for, what it says, why someone would wear it. The AI is the designer you hand the brief to. It draws fast and it never gets tired, and it gets things wrong a lot. Hands, spelling, edges and proportions come out broken often enough that the first result should always be treated as a draft.

So your job does not end when the image appears. It starts there. You look, you correct, you tweak, you redo or throw it away, and you only put your name on what you would be proud to sell. That is the difference between a design and a pile of output.

Four jobs that stay yours

1

The idea

Who it is for, what it says, why they would wear it. The AI has no idea who your buyers are. You do.

2

The brief

A specific scene beats a vague wish. Clear direction is the skill that separates your results from everyone else's.

3

The review and the fixes

Check hands, lettering, edges and shirt contrast. Correct it, regenerate it, finish it in an editor, or reject it.

4

The standard and the name

You decide what is good enough to sell, you answer to the customer, and you stand behind it.

MerchZing tip A good test for any design: would you be comfortable explaining exactly how you made it, out loud, to a customer who asked? If yes, you are using AI as a tool. If the honest answer is "I pressed generate and uploaded it," keep working.

Slop versus craft

Slop is not a type of tool. It is a type of habit. Here is the line, in plain terms.

Slop	Craft
Uploads whatever the first result was	Treats the first result as a draft and fixes it
No idea of who it is for	Starts with a specific buyer and a real reason to wear it
Typos, extra fingers, mushy edges	Checks full size, thumbnail and several shirt colors
A generic look that could be anyone's	Adds something only you would think of: a joke, a place, a memory
Copies famous characters, brands and slogans	Makes original characters and original words
Hundreds of near-identical listings	A small catalog you would put your name on
Hides how it was made	Follows each platform's rules and answers honestly when asked

The questions people will ask you

"Isn't that cheating?"
Design has always been a stack of tools: type, templates, stock fonts, photo editors. Customers pay for the idea, the taste and the fit for them. The tool changed, and the judgment still has to come from you.

"Won't it junk up the marketplace?"
Junk comes from volume without care. The answer is the opposite approach: fewer designs, each one made on purpose, for a buyer you understand. One great design for a niche you know beats two hundred generic ones.

"What about artists?"
How image models were trained is a real and unsettled debate, and this guide does not claim to settle it. What you control is what you make. These prompts use eras and general techniques, never a living artist's name or signature style, and the character prompt blocks lookalikes of famous mascots. Bring your own hand to every design.

"Can I own what I make?"
It is less certain than people assume. In the United States, the Copyright Office has said that images made purely from prompts are not protected by copyright, while a person's own creative changes, selection and arrangement can be. Rules differ by country and keep changing. Treat your protection as only as strong as your own contribution, and do not count on being the only one with a similar design.

"Do I have to say I used AI?"
It depends on where you sell. Many marketplaces now require disclosure or restrict AI art, and the rules change, so read the current policy of every platform you use. On your own shop, say so plainly if it matters to your buyers, and never call AI work hand-drawn.

This is general information, not legal advice. Check current rules before you sell.

Start here

This guide turns an idea into a finished apparel illustration. Pick a visual era, define a specific concept, complete the template, generate in ChatGPT, then inspect, revise and finish before printing.

1. The five-minute workflow

- Choose one era based on the visual language you want, not only the subject.
- Write a niche, one clear design concept, the exact text, and an optional creative direction.
- Copy the entire master prompt into ChatGPT, drop in your era's style language, and replace every bracketed field.
- Generate one design. Review it at full size, at thumbnail size, and against both dark and light shirt colors.
- Use the correction prompts later in this guide. Regenerate if anatomy or lettering is fundamentally wrong.
- Finish it yourself (page 22) and check size and transparency before printing.

2. How to find ideas worth illustrating

Start with a specific audience, then find a shared behavior, object, memory, frustration, joke or identity. Build the visual around one concrete scene. A clear scene beats a vague instruction such as "make a cool retro design."

- **Audience + familiar object:** arcade fans + a worn joystick + a triumphant comeback.
- **Identity + contradiction:** quiet introverts + noisy concert-poster typography.
- **Everyday ritual + unusual character:** weekend coffee + an overconfident cartoon animal.
- **Place + movement:** desert highway + a vintage motorcycle + a minimal sunset.
- **Short statement + visual metaphor:** "OFF DUTY" + a retired robot folding its work uniform.

MerchZing tip Your edge is what you know that a generic prompt does not: your town, your trade, your hobby, your family's inside joke. Buyers connect with specifics. The brief bank on pages 25 and 26 has 40 starting points. Make each one yours before you run it.

3. Turn an idea into a strong brief

NICHE identifies the buyer. DESIGN CONCEPT specifies the main subject, action, setting and mood. EXACT TEXT supplies every printed word, including punctuation. CREATIVE DIRECTION describes the layout, emphasis, palette or visual restraint.

Weak

"A retro gaming shirt."

Stronger

"A battered fictional arcade cabinet with one joystick, a pixel spaceship on screen, and angular bursts framing the machine. Bold 1985 cabinet-art colors. No people."

How to use ChatGPT for this

- Open a ChatGPT conversation with image generation available.
- Paste the complete master prompt from page 18. Replace the style-language slot with your era's paragraph, and replace the bracketed brief fields with your own.
- Keep the original requirements for transparency, crisp edges, proportions and garment contrast.
- Ask for one finished, isolated design. Not a model, a product photo, a mockup or a page layout.
- If a result misses the brief, name the specific defect and ask for a targeted revision, or start a fresh generation.
- For a new idea, reuse the template and replace the fields. Do not reuse an old image as a reference unless you want its visual influence.

Using a different image tool?

The structure works in most image tools. If one ignores very long instructions, trim the prompt to your era's style language, your brief, the exact text, and the transparency and edge lines. If a tool cannot produce a transparent PNG, ask for a flat, plain, single-color background and remove it afterward (see page 22). Spelling inside images varies a lot between tools, so always check the lettering.

Choose your era

Each era is a complete visual language, not just a subject. Pick the one that fits the feeling you want. The next five pages show an example of each and the style language to paste in.



1955
Atomic Diner



1965
Mid-Century Rebel



1968
Drive-In Creature



1975
Psychedelic Roadhouse



1980
New Wave Poster



1985
Arcade Electric



1990
Hip-Hop DJ



1995
Alt. Underground



2003
Weird Web / Y2K



1980s bonus
Saturday Morning

The examples are style references only. They were made with AI image tools from prompts like these. The artwork files are not included and are not meant to be copied or sold: you use the prompts with your own details to make original designs.

MerchZing tip Short on time? Open the brief bank, pick a row, choose the era in its last column, and you can have a first draft in about five minutes.





The same art on white, black, navy and red

1955

Atomic Diner

Chrome diners, atomic starbursts, streamlined signage and precise ink contours.

Works well for

Diner and coffee lovers, car-show and retro-kitchen fans, midcentury design fans.

Style language to paste in

1955 American diner advertising, streamlined signage, atomic starbursts, precise ink contours, flat screen-print inks. Turquoise, cherry red, ivory, mustard yellow and charcoal.



The same art on white, black, navy and red

1965

Mid-Century Rebel

Hot rods, surf signage, confident ink drawing, mid-century character art.

Works well for

Hot rod fans, garage and tool people, grill and BBQ dads, surf and beach towns, diners.

Style language to paste in

1965 hot rod magazine illustration, surf-club signage, expressive ink contours, restrained halftones, warm ivory, faded turquoise, tomato red, golden yellow and charcoal.





The same art on white, black, navy and red

1968

Drive-In Creature Feature

Late-1960s drive-in horror posters, hand-painted monsters, dramatic pulp lettering.

Works well for

Horror and monster-movie fans, drive-in and movie-night people, Halloween shoppers, retro cinema nostalgia.

Style language to paste in

1968 drive-in horror advertising, hand-painted creature-feature posters, dramatic pulp lettering, inked shapes, restrained vintage halftones. Swamp green, faded orange, aged cream, mustard and deep midnight blue.



The same art on white, black, navy and red

1975

Psychedelic Roadhouse

Psychedelic concert lettering, choppers, earthy colors, organic curves.

Works well for

Bikers, campers, van-life and road-trip people, record collectors, fishing and outdoors.

Style language to paste in

1975 psychedelic concert-poster lettering, custom motorcycle art, organic flourishes, vintage screen-print texture, burnt orange, mustard, avocado, antique cream and dark brown.





The same art on white, black, navy and red

1980

New Wave Geometric Poster

New wave and post-punk poster design, angular shapes, controlled asymmetry.

Works well for

Music and new-wave fans, graphic-design lovers, early-tech nostalgia, anyone who loved a good phone cord.

Style language to paste in

1980 new wave and post-punk poster design, angular shapes, experimental typography, controlled asymmetry, flat solid inks. Signal red, cyan, warm ivory, yellow and charcoal.



The same art on white, black, navy and red

1985

Arcade Electric

Arcade cabinet art, geometric energy, pixel motifs, flat neon-inspired color.

Works well for

Gamers, retro-tech and sci-fi fans, runners and gym people, anyone who spent quarters.

Style language to paste in

1985 arcade cabinet side art, retro-futurist geometry, pixel motifs, electric cyan, hot magenta, violet, bright yellow, cream and charcoal. Neon impression through flat printed colors, never actual glow.





The same art on white, black, navy and red

1990

Hip-Hop DJ Streetwear

Early 1990s hip-hop streetwear, bold urban screen-print illustration, energetic hand lettering.

Works well for

DJs, vinyl and hip-hop fans, music producers, anyone who owns more records than shelves.

Style language to paste in

Early 1990s hip-hop streetwear, bold urban screen-print illustration, energetic hand lettering, restrained halftones. Golden yellow, teal, red, ivory and charcoal.



The same art on white, black, navy and red

1995

Alternative Underground

Alternative music merchandise, skate graphics, zine texture, bold distress.

Works well for

Music and concert fans, skaters, punk and grunge nostalgia, introverts, coffee shops.

Style language to paste in

1995 alternative rock and skate merchandise, photocopied zine layout, stark ink silhouettes, controlled distressed block type, bone white, charcoal, faded crimson and muted olive.





The same art on white, black, navy and red

2003

Weird Web / Y2K

Early-2000s weird web and Y2K alternative streetwear, playful geometry, eccentric type.

Works well for

Early-internet nostalgia, gamers, coders and tinkerers, Y2K fans, the extremely online.

Style language to paste in

Early-2000s weird web and Y2K alternative streetwear, playful geometry, eccentric typography, flat digital illustration. Acid green, electric blue, orange, warm ivory and charcoal.

Characters? Use the full prompt on pages 19 and 20 for any design with a character in it. Its originality rules help keep your character from looking like an existing mascot.





The same art on white, black, navy and red

1980s bonus

Saturday Morning Animation

Original 1980s animation cels, expressive characters, flat ink color.

Works well for

Cereal-and-cartoons nostalgia, lazy-day humor, robots, pets, funny sidekick characters.

Style language to paste in

1980s animation cel art, bold ink outlines, clean flat-color fills, expressive faces, original characters only. Warm orange, golden yellow, vintage turquoise, antique cream and charcoal.

Characters? Use the full prompt on pages 19 and 20 for any design with a character in it. Its originality rules help keep your character from looking like an existing mascot.

Beyond eras





Example: Midnight Run

Style

Vintage Heritage Screen Print

Authentic worn-ink screen print with a vintage racing and roadside feel.

Works well for

Car and garage people, road-trippers, shops and clubs that want a heritage look.

Style language to paste in

Authentic 1970s hot-rod screen print. Low three-quarter car view, warm orange, mustard, ivory, charcoal and faded red. Controlled halftones, intentional distress inside ink shapes, bold racing lettering.

How the example was filled in

Niche: Classic automotive
Concept: A fictional 1970s muscle car on a winding desert road, framed by layered sunset stripes and mesas.
Exact text: MIDNIGHT RUN / NO DESTINATION REQUIRED





Example: Born to Outrun

Style

Bold Modern Vector Graphic

Clean angular vector forms, sharp silhouette and a strong geometric wordmark.

Works well for

Streetwear, motorsport, teams and clubs, gaming and fitness brands.

Style language to paste in

Clean, angular vector forms, controlled symmetry, sharp silhouette, dark charcoal, warm ivory, racing orange and teal. Integrate a bold geometric wordmark below the wolf.

How the example was filled in

Niche: Automotive streetwear
Concept: A forward-facing mechanical wolf head combining believable wolf anatomy with precise motorsport-inspired geometric armor.
Exact text: BORN TO OUTRUN





Example: Professionally Unsupervised

Style

Retro Comic Book Pop Art

Hand-inked comic illustration, expressive faces and Ben-Day dots.

Works well for

Humor shirts, Gen X and family jokes, backyard-and-barbecue culture.

Style language to paste in

1970s–1980s hand-inked comic illustration, expressive faces, Ben-Day dots, mustard, turquoise, orange, cream and black. Natural seated anatomy, two correctly attached arms and legs, believable chair support and restrained foreshortening.

How the example was filled in

Niche: Gen X humor
Concept: A relaxed middle-aged man seated in a lawn chair with a coffee mug, while a hose sprays, a grill smokes, a bicycle tips, and a cat leaps.
Exact text: PROFESSIONALLY UNSUPERVISED / SINCE 1985.

Anatomy priority line added for people: trace each limb from its attachment point through its joints to the hand or foot. Use plausible proportions, a natural pose and coherent furniture interaction. Avoid extreme foreground shoes and confusing leg overlap.





Example: My Social Battery Is Not Rechargeable

Style

Premium Hand-Lettered Typography

Words as the artwork: custom lettering with a clear hierarchy and one small icon.

Works well for

Quote and humor shirts, introverts, trades, teams and groups where the words are the whole idea.

Style language to paste in

Bold 1970s-inspired display lettering with sophisticated hierarchy: emphasize SOCIAL BATTERY and RECHARGEABLE. Warm ivory, sage, orange and charcoal. Precise letterforms, spacing and legibility.

How the example was filled in

Niche: Introvert humor
Concept: A custom lettering composition with a small empty battery icon integrated into the typography.
Exact text: MY SOCIAL BATTERY IS NOT RECHARGEABLE





Example: The Night Watch

Style

Premium Engraved Illustration

Antique woodcut and natural-history engraving with crosshatching and an elegant serif title.

Works well for

Wildlife, outdoors, gothic and nature lovers, bookish and antique-print fans.

Style language to paste in

Antique natural-history woodcut engraving, precise feather anatomy, controlled crosshatching, organic ornament, antique ivory, copper, gray and charcoal. Elegant engraved serif title.

How the example was filled in

Niche: Wildlife and gothic nature
Concept: A great horned owl perched on an oak branch beneath a crescent moon, surrounded by oak leaves, acorns, flowers and stars.
Exact text: THE NIGHT WATCH

Era or style? Or both?

Pick an **era** when the setting and period are the point: a 1955 diner, a 1985 arcade. Pick a **style** when the technique is the point: lettering only, an engraving, a pop-art comic. You can also combine them. Paste an era's style language and a style's language into the same brief and see what happens, for example 1975 Psychedelic Roadhouse lettering with the Engraved Illustration treatment.

Use an era for

Nostalgia shirts, scenes with a place and a time, anything where the colors and lettering should feel like a specific decade.

Use a style for

Word-driven shirts, animal and nature art, mascots and logos, humor with a character, or when you want a timeless look.

MerchZing tip Whichever you choose, change one thing at a time while you test. If a design gets worse, you will know which change caused it.

Copy and paste

The quick prompt

A shorter alternative to the era template, with four fields. It works well for the five styles above and for quick tests of any idea. Use NONE for no text and AUTO for artistic discretion. It has no separate originality block, so add this sentence when your idea involves a character or a famous-feeling subject: “Invent every character and logo; do not resemble any existing mascot, brand or franchise.”

Act as a senior creative director, expert apparel illustrator, typography specialist, and print-production artist. Design ONE original, commercially compelling T-shirt graphic in the **[STYLE NAME]** style.

NICHE: **[INSERT NICHE]**
CONCEPT: **[INSERT IDEA]**
EXACT TEXT: **[INSERT TEXT OR NONE]**
CREATIVE DIRECTION: **[OPTIONAL DETAILS OR AUTO]**

ART DIRECTION

[PASTE THE STYLE LANGUAGE] Interpret the supplied concept creatively. Keep the artwork distinctive, readable at thumbnail size, and cohesive. Use a limited, coordinated ink palette and avoid generic decorative filler.

UNIVERSAL SHIRT COLOR COMPATIBILITY

The graphic must remain readable and visually complete on black, white, gray, navy, red, green, blue and other common garment colors. Never rely on the shirt color to fill missing artwork. Build light-and-dark contrast into the print itself. Add narrow, deliberate contrasting keylines where necessary, without thick sticker borders or opaque background panels.

TRANSPARENCY AND EDGES

Produce isolated artwork on a genuine transparent PNG alpha channel. All pixels outside intended ink shapes must be transparent. No white, black or colored canvas, no checkerboard simulation, no mockup, no shirt, no model. Crisp, properly antialiased outer and inner contours. No blur, feathering, halos, glow, external shadows, stray pixels or colored fringes. Keep internal texture confined to printed shapes.

PRINT AND COMPOSITION

Use strong hierarchy, balanced vertical chest-print composition, clear focal point, clean ink separations, and adequate line thickness. No tiny unreadable details or unnecessary gradients. Keep full artwork uncropped with transparent margins. Target 4500 × 5400 px at 300 DPI if the image system supports it. Verify actual file dimensions and alpha channel after export.

TEXT

Reproduce EXACT TEXT verbatim with correct spelling, punctuation and legible letterforms. Do not invent words. If EXACT TEXT is NONE, include no lettering.

QUALITY CONTROL

Check silhouette, object geometry, perspective, and interactions. For figures or animals, verify anatomical proportions, correct counts and connections of limbs and features, natural joints, hands/paws and feet, and believable poses. Correct missing, extra, fused or disconnected body parts before finalizing. Check readability on both black and white backgrounds, plus text and edge quality. Generate only the finished standalone artwork.

Copy and paste

The era template

Every era page above works with this one reusable prompt. Replace the era name, paste that era's style language into ERA ART DIRECTION, and fill in the five fields. The next two pages show a finished version and five real fill-ins.

ROLE
Act as a senior creative director, premium apparel illustrator, technical drawing specialist and originality-conscious art director.

GOAL
Create ONE original, professionally finished T-shirt illustration in the **[ERA NAME]** visual language. The result must be artwork only, not a product mockup.

FILL IN THESE FIELDS
AUDIENCE / NICHE: **[SPECIFY WHO WILL WEAR THIS]**
CENTRAL CONCEPT: **[DESCRIBE ONE MAIN SUBJECT, ITS ACTION AND UP TO THREE SUPPORTING ELEMENTS]**
EXACT PRINTED WORDS: **[ENTER ALL WORDS EXACTLY, OR WRITE NONE]**
COMPOSITION NOTES: **[OPTIONAL POSITION, MOOD OR VIEW ANGLE]**
COLOR DIRECTION: **[OPTIONAL PALETTE OR USE RECOMMENDED COLORS]**

ERA ART DIRECTION
[PASTE THE ERA'S STYLE LANGUAGE FROM ITS PAGE] Favor a cohesive, premium chest-print composition with strong hierarchy, hand-designed typography and printable shapes. Historical technique is inspiration, not permission to copy a particular work.

ORIGINALITY
Invent every character, logo, sign, symbol and arrangement. Do not reproduce or closely resemble identifiable copyrighted characters, cereal or advertising mascots, movie monsters, band graphics, album covers, branded products, logos or franchise imagery. Avoid recognizable combinations of silhouette, facial features, costume, color scheme and props. Replace any potentially derivative element with a substantially different original design. Do not add brand names.

ANATOMY AND OBJECT CONSTRUCTION
Use a coherent viewing angle and believable structural connections. For humans, preserve correct limb counts, joints, fingers and natural poses. For animals or creatures, define and maintain consistent anatomy. For machines and vehicles, use logical mechanics and perspective. No extra or missing parts, fused digits, floating objects, impossible intersections or duplicated components. If complexity causes errors, simplify the scene.

LETTERING
Render EXACT PRINTED WORDS precisely, preserving spelling, punctuation and capitalization. Make letters readable at small size. Do not invent secondary copy, random text, symbols that resemble letters or fake brand marks.

PRINT AND GARMENT COMPATIBILITY
Use substantial lines and solid color areas. Keep halftone dots and distress inside printed shapes, not on the exterior edge. Maintain strong contrast on black, white, navy, gray and bright shirts through integrated light and dark separation. No thick sticker border or opaque rectangle.

TRUE TRANSPARENCY AND EDGES
Deliver a genuine transparent PNG with an alpha channel. All pixels outside the intentional artwork must be transparent. No white or black canvas, checkerboard imitation, background panel, halo, glow, exterior shadow, blur, feathering, stray pixels or fringe. All outer contours and internal boundaries must be crisp and clean.

FINAL CHECK
Inspect originality, exact text, anatomy, perspective, physical interactions, light/dark shirt contrast, transparent edges and print-safe details. Correct defects before finishing. Deliver ONE vertically centered isolated graphic with transparent margins. Target 4500 × 5400 pixels at 300 DPI if supported. Do not claim these technical specifications unless the exported file meets them. No mockup, mannequin, T-shirt or photograph.

Final file verification

- Open the exported PNG on both black and white backgrounds. Confirm the alpha channel is real, not a simulated checkerboard.
- Zoom in on edges, lettering, joints, fingers, wheel geometry and mechanical connections.
- Confirm the exported pixel size and DPI. Resize or prepare the art in a graphics editor if the file does not meet your printer's requirements.
- Check minimum line thickness and halftone size against your print provider's specifications.
- Review originality before selling. Prompts reduce the risk of imitation. They do not guarantee legal clearance.

Worked example

A completed prompt: THE LAST SHOW AT MIDNIGHT

This is the template filled in for the 1968 example artwork on page 7. Notice how specific the scene and the construction check are: what the creature has, what it does not have, and what must line up. That specificity is what keeps results clean.

ROLE
Act as a senior creative director, expert 1968 commercial illustrator, professional apparel designer, technical drawing specialist and originality-conscious art director.

CREATE
One original premium T-shirt graphic titled “THE LAST SHOW AT MIDNIGHT.” Artwork only, no mockup.

AUDIENCE
Fans of retro design, independent illustration and vintage visual culture.

EXACT LETTERING
Top: “THE LAST SHOW”
Bottom: “AT MIDNIGHT”
No other text. Spell every word exactly. Use custom, readable period-appropriate lettering with balanced spacing.

SCENE AND COMPOSITION
A fictional 1968 drive-in monster movie poster composition: an original friendly-but-eerie three-eyed swamp creature rises behind a stylized outdoor movie screen, while a tiny vintage projector casts a sharply defined triangular beam toward the screen. The creature has two arms, two webbed hands and one tapering lower body, with no legs. A crescent moon and two small stars complete the composition.

VISUAL LANGUAGE
late-1960s drive-in horror advertising, hand-painted creature-feature posters, dramatic pulp lettering, inked shapes, restrained vintage halftones. Palette: swamp green, faded orange, aged cream, mustard, deep midnight blue. Use decisive contours, clear hierarchy, strong silhouette and flat print-friendly inks. Build a vertically oriented composition framed by the exact headline and bottom line. Keep enough open space to separate subject, props and typography.

CONSTRUCTION CHECK
Creature anatomy must be internally coherent: exactly three eyes, two arms, two hands, no legs, consistent joints and webbing. Projector lens, beam and screen must align. Do not borrow the silhouette or distinctive features of any famous movie monster. Check every joint, connection, contour and intersection. No duplicated or missing parts, malformed digits, floating pieces or inconsistent perspective. Simplify the illustration if necessary rather than hiding mistakes with decorative elements.

ORIGINALITY / COMMERCIAL DISTINCTIVENESS
Everything must be independently designed. No existing cartoon characters, cereal mascots, famous movie creatures, advertising mascots, recognizable product logos, trademarked signs, band graphics, album artwork, or signature franchise design elements. Avoid even close lookalikes made by changing only color or minor details. Create original lettering and a fictional scene, not a reproduction of a known poster or brand.

GARMENT READABILITY
The complete artwork must read clearly on black, white, navy, gray and saturated shirt colors. Use integrated contrasting dark and light outlines or local ink separation where needed. Avoid a thick sticker outline or a solid rectangular background. Keep thin lines and distress printable.

ALPHA TRANSPARENCY AND EDGE QUALITY
Output a true PNG with functioning alpha transparency. Every pixel outside intended artwork must be transparent. No simulated checkerboard, white/black backdrop, opaque panel, photographic environment, exterior shadows, halos, outer glow, blurred or feathered edges, stray pixels or background-colored fringes. Use exceptionally crisp outer and internal edges.

FINAL INSPECTION
Verify exact wording, originality, coherent anatomy or mechanics, accurate perspective, believable object interactions, clean color separations, contrast on light and dark shirts, and genuine transparent margins. Fix defects before finalizing.

DELIVERABLE
ONE centered, vertically oriented, isolated print graphic. Target 4500 × 5400 pixels at 300 DPI if supported, with transparent margins. No T-shirt, model, mockup, or presentation. Generate only the completed artwork.

See the pattern

Five real fill-ins

Every example in this guide was made from the same template. Copy the pattern: one main subject, a few supporting elements, exact words, and a plain list of what must be built correctly.



MIDNIGHT AT THE ATOMIC DINER — 1955 Atomic Diner

Exact words: MIDNIGHT AT THE / ATOMIC DINER

Scene: A fictional atomic-age roadside diner at midnight, with a sharply angled roof, chrome trim, illuminated-looking starbursts, a two-tone 1950s car parked outside, and a steaming coffee cup in the foreground. No human characters.

Construction check: Diner architecture must have coherent supports and window alignment. Car must have logical wheel placement, connected bumpers and consistent three-quarter perspective. Coffee cup must have a proper elliptical rim and attached handle.



FUTURE IS CALLING — 1980 New Wave

Exact words: FUTURE / IS CALLING

Scene: A fictional early-1980s red telephone handset floats above concentric cyan signal rings, with angular lightning shapes, offset triangles and asymmetrical geometric accents. No people.

Construction check: The handset must have exactly two receiver ends connected to one coherent body. The cord must connect logically. Signal rings and rays must have consistent spacing and deliberate geometry.



RESPECT THE RHYTHM — 1990 Hip-Hop DJ

Exact words: RESPECT / THE RHYTHM

Scene: A fictional classic DJ turntable shown from above at a shallow angle. Two anatomically accurate hands interact with the equipment: the left hand touches the vinyl and the right hand adjusts the pitch slider. Dynamic hand-lettered framing.

Construction check: Both hands must have five digits each, with natural wrists and believable gestures. Turntable must have one record, one platter, one pivoted tonearm and one pitch slider, all in coherent perspective.



INTERNET MADE ME WEIRD — 2003 Weird Web

Exact words: INTERNET MADE / ME WEIRD

Scene: A fictional chunky CRT desktop computer with a wildly cheerful original face on its screen, a coherent keyboard, a tower, and a few connected cables. Surround with a small number of pixel stars, geometric warning symbols and a playful pointer icon.

Construction check: Computer must have one screen, one keyboard, one tower and logically attached cables. The screen face has two eyes and one mouth. Avoid recognizable operating system interfaces or mascots.



THE LAST SHOW AT MIDNIGHT — 1968 Drive-In

Exact words: THE LAST SHOW / AT MIDNIGHT

Scene: A fictional 1968 drive-in monster movie poster composition: an original friendly-but-eerie three-eyed swamp creature rises behind a stylized outdoor movie screen, while a tiny vintage projector casts a sharply defined triangular beam toward the screen. The creature has two arms, two webbed hands and one tapering lower body, with no legs. A crescent moon and two small stars complete the composition.

Construction check: Creature anatomy must be internally coherent: exactly three eyes, two arms, two hands, no legs, consistent joints and webbing. Projector lens, beam and screen must align. Do not borrow the silhouette or distinctive features of any famous movie monster.

Copy and paste

The master prompt

One template for every era. Copy everything in the box into ChatGPT. Replace the highlighted fields: the era's name and style language from the era pages, then your own brief. A plain-text copy of every prompt comes with this guide.

Act as a senior creative director, master apparel illustrator, anatomical drawing specialist and print-production designer. Create one premium T-shirt graphic in the **[ERA NAME]** visual style.

STYLE-SPECIFIC LANGUAGE
[PASTE YOUR ERA'S STYLE LANGUAGE HERE]

CREATIVE BRIEF
NICHE: **[INSERT NICHE]**
DESIGN CONCEPT: **[INSERT IDEA]**
EXACT TEXT: **[INSERT WORDING OR NONE]**
CREATIVE DIRECTION: **[OPTIONAL OR AUTO]**
SUBJECT-SPECIFIC CONSTRUCTION: **[HOW THE MAIN OBJECTS ARE BUILT AND HELD]**

ART DIRECTION
Produce ONE original, commercially compelling illustration with a clear central subject, disciplined visual hierarchy and period-authentic lettering. Use a cohesive limited palette and controlled negative space. Avoid stock-art appearance, gratuitous decoration, modern glossy 3D effects and photographic rendering.

ORIGINALITY
Invent every character, logo, sign and symbol. Do not reproduce or closely resemble identifiable copyrighted characters, mascots, movie monsters, band graphics, branded products or logos, and do not add brand names. If any element looks derivative, replace it with a substantially different original design.

TYPOGRAPHY
Reproduce supplied wording exactly, including spelling and punctuation. Integrate lettering with the illustration. Keep every character legible at thumbnail size. Do not invent extra text.

ANATOMY AND STRUCTURAL QUALITY
Every human and animal must have correct species-appropriate anatomy, consistent proportions and logically connected joints. Humans require exactly two arms, two hands, two legs and two feet, and five digits on each visible hand. No extra, missing, fused, floating or disconnected limbs, malformed fingers, twisted knees, impossible poses, disproportionate feet or contradictory foreshortening. Vehicles and objects require physically coherent geometry and correctly attached parts. Use restrained perspective and readable silhouettes. Never hide errors with props or texture.

ALL-SHIRT COLOR COMPATIBILITY
Artwork must retain clarity on white, black, gray, navy, red, green, blue and bright fabric. Build both dark and light contrast into the graphic itself. Use integrated contrasting keylines where needed, not an oversized sticker border. Never rely on the garment color to supply a missing design element. Avoid large opaque background panels.

ABSOLUTE TRANSPARENCY
Deliver only isolated artwork on a genuinely transparent PNG background with an alpha channel. Every pixel outside the intended printed shapes must be fully transparent. No white, black or colored canvas, no checkerboard simulation, paper texture outside artwork, backdrop, opaque rectangle, garment or mockup.

CRISP EDGE STANDARD
All exterior contours and interior color boundaries must be razor-sharp, precisely antialiased and clean. No blur, fuzzy edges, feathering, halos, external shadows, glow, stray pixels or background-color fringes. Confine halftone and distress textures to intentional printed areas. Keep lines substantial enough for fabric printing.

MANDATORY PRE-FINAL REVIEW
Check the complete silhouette, limb and digit counts, anatomical joint paths, object construction, perspective, spelling, letter spacing, light/dark garment contrast, true alpha transparency and edge cleanliness. Correct detected defects before finalizing.

DELIVERY
One vertically balanced standalone transparent PNG, generous clear margins, no cropping. Target 4500 × 5400 pixels at 300 DPI if supported. Generate only the finished artwork. Do not claim the file meets these specifications unless it does.

Copy and paste

The character prompt

Use this full prompt for any design with a character, mascot or creature in it, in any era. It adds originality rules, so your character does not drift toward an existing mascot, and character-specific anatomy checks. Its style section is the 1980s Saturday-morning look; to change eras, swap that section for your era's style language.

Act as an award-winning traditional animation character designer, 1980s commercial illustrator, professional anatomical drawing specialist, intellectual property-conscious creative director, and premium apparel graphic designer.

Create ONE exceptional, original T-shirt graphic inspired by the general visual techniques of 1980s Saturday morning animation.

NICHE: **[INSERT NICHE]**
DESIGN CONCEPT: **[INSERT IDEA]**
EXACT TEXT: **[INSERT WORDING OR NONE]**
CREATIVE DIRECTION: **[OPTIONAL OR AUTO]**

ARTISTIC STYLE:
Use original hand-drawn character illustration inspired by traditional 1980s animation cels, vintage animated advertising techniques, expressive cartoon design, and classic screen-printed merchandise.

Feature:

- Bold, confident ink outlines.
- Clean, flat-color fills.
- Expressive facial animation.
- Memorable, original character silhouettes.
- Strong visual storytelling.
- Controlled cel-style shading.
- Professional color separation.
- Authentic hand-illustrated personality.

Capture the artistic techniques of the era without reproducing recognizable characters, established franchises, or protected brand identities.

ORIGINALITY AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY REQUIREMENTS:
The finished design must feature independently conceived, original characters and visual elements.

Do not reproduce, imitate, closely resemble, or create recognizable variations of existing copyrighted cartoon characters, cereal mascots, advertising mascots, comic-book characters, animated television characters, or trademarked brand identities.

Specifically avoid:

- Recognizable character silhouettes.
- Signature costumes or accessories associated with established characters.
- Distinctive facial structures strongly associated with famous mascots.
- Familiar branded color arrangements combined with recognizable character features.
- Existing character names, logos, catchphrases, or slogans.
- Slightly modified versions of established characters.
- Designs that appear to be unofficial merchandise for an existing franchise.
- Combinations of distinctive features that collectively evoke a recognizable existing character.

Do not assume that changing a character's color, clothing, expression, or name makes a derivative design sufficiently original.

If the requested concept resembles an established character or mascot, reinterpret the underlying idea through a substantially different character design, silhouette, personality, and visual construction.

Use the historical animation style as inspiration, not the recognizable identity of any existing character.

CHARACTER DESIGN:
Develop an original character with a distinctive personality, unique silhouette, and memorable visual features.

Favor creative character concepts that avoid established commercial mascot conventions.

Examples include:

- An eccentric household robot.
- A sleepy woodland creature with an unusual but believable design.
- An original animated household appliance.
- A fictional mechanical creature.
- An imaginative character built from everyday objects.

These are starting points, not references to existing properties.

ANATOMICAL AND STRUCTURAL ACCURACY:
All characters must have coherent anatomy or mechanical construction appropriate to their design.

For human characters:

- Exactly two arms and two legs.
- Correctly connected shoulders, elbows, wrists, hips, knees, and ankles.
- Five digits per hand where fully visible.
- Natural body proportions and believable poses.

For animal characters:

- Species-appropriate anatomy.
- Correct limb counts.
- Properly connected joints.
- Natural body structure.
- Believable movement and positioning.

For robots and mechanical characters:

- Logically connected mechanical components.
- Consistent joint construction.
- Correctly aligned limbs.
- Coherent structural geometry.
- No floating or disconnected components.

For every character:

No extra limbs.

No missing limbs.

No duplicated hands or feet.

No malformed fingers.

No fused body parts.

No impossible joint angles.

No distorted proportions.

No unexplained structural intersections.

Stylization must never conceal anatomical or mechanical errors.

TYPOGRAPHY:
Reproduce the supplied wording EXACTLY.

Use bold, expressive, original cartoon merchandise lettering inspired by the graphic design techniques of the 1980s.

Ensure:

- Correct spelling.
- Correct punctuation.
- Consistent letter construction.
- Excellent readability.
- Balanced spacing.
- Strong integration with the illustration.

Do not invent additional text.

UNIVERSAL GARMENT COMPATIBILITY:
The artwork must remain visually strong and readable on virtually every common T-shirt color, including black, white, gray, navy, red, green, blue, and bright colors.

Build a completely self-contained contrast system.

Use coordinated dark outlines and carefully integrated light-colored separation where necessary.

No essential visual element should depend on the garment color.

Avoid thick sticker-style borders and unnecessary opaque background panels.

ABSOLUTE TRANSPARENCY:
The final artwork MUST have a genuinely transparent background with a functioning alpha channel.

Every pixel outside the intended printed artwork must be fully transparent.

No white background.

No black background.

No colored backdrop.

No checkerboard transparency simulation.

No opaque rectangular canvas.

No paper texture background.

No photographic environment.

CRISP EDGE REQUIREMENTS:
All exterior contours and interior boundaries must be exceptionally sharp, precise, and professionally finished.

No blurry edges.

No fuzzy outlines.

No feathering.

No halos.

No exterior shadows.

No outer glow.

No stray pixels.

No unwanted background remnants.

Use clean antialiasing without visible background-colored fringes.

COMPOSITION:
Create a cohesive, vertically oriented T-shirt graphic with a memorable central character, integrated typography, and generous transparent margins.

Maintain excellent readability at thumbnail size.

Avoid overcrowding and unnecessary decorative elements.

PRINT PRODUCTION:
Use clean flat-color illustration, substantial printable details, and clearly defined color separation.

Avoid photographic effects, 3D rendering, excessive gradients, tiny fragile details, and decorative clutter.

MANDATORY FINAL QUALITY INSPECTION:
Before completing the artwork, review:

1. ORIGINALITY: The character must be independently designed and visually distinct from recognizable existing properties.

2. CHARACTER IDENTITY: No recognizable mascot features, trademarked elements, or derivative character combinations.

3. ANATOMY: Correct proportions, limb counts, joints, and physical connections.

4. OBJECT ACCURACY: Believable furniture, props, and mechanical construction.

5. TYPOGRAPHY: Exact supplied wording with correct spelling.

6. COLOR: Professional palette and clear visual separation.

7. UNIVERSAL COMPATIBILITY: Excellent visibility on light and dark garments.

8. TRANSPARENCY: Genuine alpha transparency without background artifacts.

9. EDGE QUALITY: Sharp, clean, professional contours.

10. PRINT READINESS: Clear details suitable for apparel production.

Correct detected inconsistencies before finalizing.

OUTPUT:
Produce ONE standalone transparent PNG.

Target resolution: 4500 × 5400 pixels at 300 DPI if supported.

Orientation: Vertical.

Composition: Centered with generous transparent margins.

No T-shirt, mockup, mannequin, model photograph, or presentation scene.

FINAL STANDARD:
The finished artwork must resemble a professionally commissioned, original 1980s-inspired animation illustration created specifically for a premium independent apparel brand.

Prioritize originality, character accuracy, commercial distinctiveness, genuine transparency, exceptionally crisp edges, and professional print quality.

Generate ONLY the completed artwork.

MerchZing tip Notice what this prompt does that most do not: it tells the AI what not to make, and it asks for a self-inspection before the final image. Both habits carry over to any prompt you write yourself.

Prompting tricks for better results

- Use one dominant subject and a limited number of supporting objects. Complexity raises the chance of errors.
- For people, specify the pose, which hand holds each object, and where the feet rest.
- For vehicles, name the wheel count, the view angle and the major mechanical connections.
- Use “restrained three-quarter perspective” when extreme foreshortening is not essential.
- For text-heavy designs, keep the phrase short and explicitly forbid extra lettering.
- Choose a limited palette with both dark and light ink shapes. Check visibility on black and white shirts.
- Ask for print-safe halftones and distress inside the artwork, never soft pixels around its perimeter.
- If the model repeatedly fails at a complex scene, simplify the composition rather than adding more restrictions.
- Change one thing at a time when you revise, so you can tell what helped.

Final correction prompts

Paste one of these after a generation that is close but not right.

ANATOMY AND PERSPECTIVE
Revise the existing illustration while preserving its concept and era. Correct all anatomical and perspective errors. Trace each limb from its point of attachment through every joint to the hand or foot. Ensure correct limb and digit counts, realistic proportions, and believable contact with furniture or props. Remove duplicated or floating parts. Favor a simpler pose if needed. Keep all other approved design elements.

EXACT LETTERING
Correct the typography to read EXACTLY: **[PASTE FINAL WORDING]**. Preserve spelling, punctuation, capitalization and word order. Remove every unintended word or character. Make the lettering clear at small sizes while maintaining the selected era.

TRANSPARENCY AND CRISP EDGES
Deliver only the isolated artwork as a true transparent PNG with an alpha channel. Remove any opaque canvas, simulated checkerboard, background rectangle, glow, halo, soft shadow, stray pixels or fringe. Preserve intentional printed details. Make exterior contours and interior boundaries crisp and clean.

LIGHT AND DARK SHIRT COMPATIBILITY
Refine the design to remain readable on both black and white shirts, plus common colored garments. Add subtle integrated contrasting keylines only where needed. Do not use a thick sticker border or solid rectangular background. Preserve the artwork’s original palette and hierarchy.

SIMPLIFY FOR PRINT
Simplify fragile details for apparel printing. Increase the thickness of hairline strokes, remove unnecessary microtexture, clarify overlapping objects, and keep distress inside printed shapes. Preserve the central idea, exact text and vintage style. Do not add a background.

Practical limit: image generation is not a deterministic quality-control system. Visual inspection and file verification remain necessary, even when the prompt requests an internal inspection.

This is where it becomes yours

Finish it yourself

The AI's first result is a draft. Most people stop there. The finishing pass takes ten or fifteen minutes and is what makes a design look like it came from someone who cares.

1. **Look at it three ways.** Full size, shrunk to about an inch wide, and placed on white and black. Fix anything you cannot read or do not like.
2. **Fix small things by hand.** Free editors such as Photopea, GIMP or Canva can erase a stray mark, nudge spacing or repair a letter. If the AI keeps misspelling a word, remove it and retype the words yourself in a font whose license allows commercial printing.
3. **Make the transparency real.** If the background is not truly transparent, regenerate on a flat, plain, single-color background, then use a background remover (most editors have one). Zoom in to 200 percent and clean any leftover fringe or halo along the edges. A black preview is not proof of transparency.
4. **Meet the printer's size.** Printers list their own file requirements. Follow theirs, not a generic number. If your file is smaller than they need, use an upscaler, then check the edges again.
5. **Put some of yourself in it.** Change a color to match your brand, redo the funniest line in your own lettering, combine the best parts of two generations, add a small tag or date, or redraw one detail by hand. The more of you in the design, the less it looks like everyone else's, and the stronger your claim to it.
6. **Keep a design log.** For each design, save the idea, the prompt, the draft you kept and the final file in one folder. If you ever need to remake it, explain how you made it, or answer a platform's question, you will have the record.

MerchZing tip Do not be afraid to throw a result away. A design that needs five fixes and still looks off is a signal to change the concept or simplify it, not to keep patching. Fewer, better designs is what makes a shop look like a real brand.

Fonts and add-ons. If you add anything yourself, such as fonts, icons or textures, check that its license allows commercial printing on products. "Free to download" does not always mean "free to sell."

Originality and IP checklist

Following this checklist lowers your risk. It does not clear a design legally. Gen X nostalgia is full of things you can enjoy but cannot sell. Capture the feeling, not the property: a boombox, a Saturday morning, a mall at dusk. Not a named cereal mascot, a movie title or a famous character.

Leave these out

- **Brand names, logos, slogans and catchphrases.** Short phrases can be trademarked for clothing.
- **Characters, mascots and anything that looks like one.** Changing the color, the clothes or the name does not make a lookalike original.
- **Song lyrics, movie and TV quotes, show titles and band names.**
- **Sports teams, schools and organizations**, unless you are the one who runs them.
- **Real people's names, faces and likenesses.**
- **A living artist's name or signature style** in a prompt. Use an era and general techniques instead, as this guide does.

The two-second test

If someone could glance at your design and name the specific character, brand or show it reminds them of, start over with a different character, silhouette and personality. Do not tweak. The character prompt on pages 19 and 20 is built around this rule.

Before you list it

- Search your exact words in quotation marks, along with the word "shirt." See what already exists.
- Search the trademark database for your country. In the United States, the USPTO's trademark search is free.
- Read the current AI and content policy of every marketplace you use. Some require disclosure, some limit AI art, and the rules change.
- Check the license of every font, texture or image you added by hand.
- Verify your real PNG outside the image generator: transparency, pixel size, and a printed sample. Remember that purely AI-made artwork may not be protected by copyright where you live. Your own changes and arrangement help.

MerchZing tip A fun rule that keeps your shop clean: if you would not be comfortable getting an email about the design from a lawyer, a fan, or the artist you borrowed it from, change it. Original work is also easier to build a brand on.

General information, not legal advice. Laws and platform rules differ by country and change over time.

Test before you sell

Production checklist

- Treat “4500 × 5400 at 300 DPI” as a target, not a guarantee. Confirm actual pixel dimensions and metadata after export.
- Open the PNG in software that shows the alpha channel. A black preview is not proof of transparency.
- Inspect the design against white, black and at least one saturated garment color.
- Look at it the size of a thumbnail. Could a stranger read it from across a room?
- Zoom into hands, feet, faces, wheels, object intersections and every letter.
- Read the printed words out loud, letter by letter, against your exact text.
- Check fine lines and halftone dots against the print provider’s minimum specifications.
- Verify the printer’s accepted file type, color requirements, print area and transparency handling.
- Order a sample print before offering a new design commercially. A screen is not a shirt.

What passing looks like

The fifteen examples in this guide on white, black, navy and red. Dark outlines and light separations are built into the art, so it holds up on every shirt color without a sticker border.



Final delivery prompt

Prepare the approved design for print. Deliver ONE isolated, vertically centered PNG with genuine alpha transparency, crisp contours, no halos, no mockup, and generous transparent margins. Preserve the exact approved text and subject. Ensure no distorted or missing parts. Maintain contrast on light and dark garments. Target 4500 × 5400 pixels at 300 DPI if supported. Do not claim technical specifications unless the exported file meets them.

Ideas on tap

The brief bank

Forty starting points. Each is a niche, a concept and exact text, with an era that suits it. Treat them as seeds: change the scene, the words, the town or the trade until it is yours. Check the originality checklist before you use any wording as-is.

Niche	Design concept	Exact text	Era
Gen X nostalgia	A boombox on a curb at dusk, a cassette half ejected, the first streetlight flickering on	**HOME BEFORE THE STREETLIGHTS**	1985
Latchkey kids	One house key on a string, a quiet suburban street and a sinking sun behind it	**LATCHKEY KID. STILL SURVIVING.**	1975
Mixtape makers	A cassette tape unspooling into the shape of a heart	**MADE YOU A MIXTAPE**	1995
Landline era	A rotary phone with a long, hopelessly tangled cord	**CALL ME BACK AFTER DINNER**	1965
Mall nostalgia	An escalator climbing into a pastel sunset, shopping bags riding up	**MEET ME AT THE FOUNTAIN**	1985
Video store regulars	A video tape with a tiny comet trail, rewinding itself	**REWIND IT YOURSELF**	1985
Lazy-day humor	A sleepy original cartoon dog asleep in front of a static-filled TV	**STATIC IS A LIFESTYLE**	Sat. morning
Skaters who got older	A scuffed skateboard deck with a bandage on the nose	**STILL ROLLING, JUST SLOWER**	1995
Concert-goers	A ticket stub and a pair of foam earplugs, side by side	**I WAS THERE. MY EARS REMEMBER.**	1995
Tabletop gamers	A twenty-sided die tumbling off a cliff edge	**THE DICE ARE NOT YOUR FRIEND**	1985
Grill dads	A charcoal grill built like a hot rod, smoke streaming back	**LOW AND SLOW**	1965
Mechanics	A wrench crossed with a spark plug, small sparks flying	**FIXED IT TWICE**	1965
Road trippers	A chopper on an empty desert highway at sunset	**MILES OF NOTHING, PERFECT**	1975
Anglers	A bass leaping out of a lake at sunrise	**ONE MORE CAST**	1975
Campers	A glowing lantern, a tent and a ring of pine trees	**SMELLS LIKE CAMPFIRE**	1975
Gardeners	A fat tomato wearing a tiny crown on a vine	**GROW SOMETHING**	1965
Coffee people	A percolator with lightning bolts flying out of the spout	**BREW FIRST. PEOPLE LATER.**	1965
Bakers	A rolling pin and a puff of flour shaped like a burst	**FLOUR POWER**	1975
Dog people	A dog riding in a hot rod, ears blowing straight back	**WINDOWS DOWN, EARS UP**	1965
Cat people	A cat sitting proudly on a stack of unread mail	**I SIT WHERE I WANT**	Sat. morning

Niche	Design concept	Exact text	Era
Rescue pet owners	A happy mutt and a heart-shaped collar tag	**ADOPTED THE BEST ONE**	1965
Nurses	A stethoscope forming a heart, a bolt of lightning behind it	**RUNNING ON COFFEE AND COMPASSION**	1985
Teachers	A chalkboard with an apple and a long equation of tally marks	**ALL OF THE ANSWERS, NONE OF THE SLEEP**	1965
Retirees	A lawn chair facing a big orange sunset	**OFFICIALLY OFF DUTY**	1975
Introverts	A houseplant wearing oversized headphones	**LOUD IN MY HEAD**	1995
Night-shift workers	A crescent moon above a glowing diner window	**NIGHT SHIFT CLUB**	1965
Runners	A worn sneaker with a lightning bolt on the heel	**ONE MORE MILE**	1985
Bowlers	A bowling ball and pins bursting apart with stars	**SPARE ME**	1965
Motorcycle riders	A flame-painted chopper, front wheel slightly lifted	**RIDE LOUD, WAVE POLITELY**	1975
Record collectors	A vinyl record growing roots like a tree	**STILL SPINNING**	1975
Gamers	A joystick with a pixel burst exploding from the top	**ONE MORE LEVEL**	1985
Cryptid hunters	A big fuzzy footprint under a harvest moon	**WE ARE NOT LOST. WE ARE LOOKING.**	1995
Book lovers	A tall stack of books drawn as a skyline	**ONE MORE CHAPTER**	1965
Movie-night families	A popcorn bucket launching like a rocket	**INTERMISSION IN PROGRESS**	1985
Hikers	A single muddy boot at the top of a jagged peak	**THE VIEW WAS WORTH THE BLISTERS**	1975
Small-town pride	A water tower at sunset with swallows around it	**SMALL TOWN, LOUD OPINIONS**	1965
Parents of teenagers	An open, empty refrigerator glowing in the dark	**SNACKS ARE GONE AGAIN**	1985
Self-employed	A neon-style OPEN sign with a tiny crown above it	**MY OWN BOSS (HE IS DEMANDING)**	1985
Holiday humor	A retro glass ornament with a tiny smirk	**NAUGHTY LIST, FRAMED**	1965

MerchZing tip Local and personal sells. Swap the niche for your own town, your trade or your hobby, and put it in the exact text: “SMALL TOWN, LOUD OPINIONS” becomes yours the moment it says where you are from. Do not use team, school or brand names unless they are yours.

What happens after the PNG

From finished file to first sale

A great design is not a business yet. Here is the shortest honest path from your finished file to a first order. It works with any shop. We also show where MerchZing fits, because we build it.

1. **Pick a printer.** Print-on-demand printers make each shirt after someone orders it. Printify and Printful are the two most common. Their shirt costs, shipping and print quality differ, so compare the exact shirt you plan to sell.
2. **Create the product.** Upload your transparent PNG, choose the shirt colors your design actually works on, set the print area and check the mockups. Skip any color you did not test.
3. **Know what each order leaves you.** Add the printer's cost, shipping and the card fee, then compare it to your price. Many sellers only discover thin margins at the first payout. Do the math before you list. Bigger sizes often cost more to print.
4. **Order a sample.** Feel the shirt, check the print and photograph it. It is the cheapest insurance you can buy.
5. **Open a shop that looks like a brand.** A clean store, one clear product, honest descriptions and a plain refund policy.
6. **Tell the right people.** Start with the audience you wrote down in your brief: groups, friends of friends, the people the joke is for. Then repeat what sells.

Where MerchZing fits

MerchZing builds the shop for print-on-demand sellers. Pick a look made for your kind of merch, connect your Printify or Printful account, and your products arrive with sizes, colors and printer costs. A checklist in your Admin shows what is left before you can take orders, and the Profit check shows what each order leaves you, by size, before you set a price.

It is one plan at $12 a month with no cut of your sales. Your customers pay into your own Stripe account, and printer costs and card fees are separate. This guide stays free either way, and it makes no income promises.

Ready to put these on a shop?

You have an idea, a brief, a finished design and a way to test it. The next step is a place to sell it.

Your own merch shop, up and selling in an afternoon.

See twelve sample stores you can click through, the Profit check, and what is included. Point your phone's camera at the code or visit merchzing.com.

More free from MerchZing

The Print-on-Demand Playbook

A free step-by-step guide to how printers charge you, finding a niche with real buyers, and the profit math before you set a price.

merchzing.com/guide

Share this guide

This guide is free to share and give away. Pass it to a friend, post it, hand it out at an event or include it in your own newsletter, as long as it stays whole and unedited, with this page and the MerchZing name attached. Please do not sell it.

Retro T-Shirt Design Lab · Edition 1 · November 2026 · © MerchZing. The example artwork was made with AI image tools from prompts like the ones in this guide and is shown as a style reference only. The artwork files are not included, and the guide gives you the prompts, not the designs. MerchZing is not affiliated with OpenAI, Printify, Printful, Photopea, GIMP or Canva. Rules and prices change; check them before you sell.

From us Tried it? We would love to see what you made. Share your design in the Owners' Community when you open your MerchZing shop, or tell a friend who has a shirt-worthy idea.