

Adobe illustrator 2026

Unleashed

From First Shape to Professional Design Career

Riley Mac

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PART ONE
WELCOME TO ILLUSTRATOR 2026

CHAPTER 1 - What Is Adobe Illustrator and Why Learn It?

"I remember the first time I opened Illustrator. I stared at a blank white canvas, moved the mouse around, and closed the app within four minutes."

Twenty-five years later, that same blank canvas is where I spend most of my working day — and I genuinely look forward to it every morning. This chapter will make sure your first experience is considerably better than mine.

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN IN THIS CHAPTER

What vector graphics are and why they matter in professional design

How Adobe Illustrator is used in the real world — from logos to billboards

The key differences between Illustrator, Photoshop, and Canva (and when to use each)

How Illustrator 2026 is different from older versions

How to set realistic expectations as a complete beginner

1.1 The Two Types of Digital Image — And Why It Matters

Before we talk about Illustrator, we need to talk about something more fundamental: the two completely different ways a computer stores a picture. Understanding this distinction is one of the most important things you can learn as a designer. It will shape every tool choice you make for the rest of your career.

Raster Images: Made of Pixels

Open any photograph on your phone and zoom in as far as you can. At some point you will see tiny coloured squares. Those squares are pixels — and an image built from a grid of pixels is called a raster image (sometimes called a bitmap image).

Every pixel in a raster image has an exact colour value. A 10-megapixel photo has 10 million of those coloured squares, all locked in place. Programs like Adobe Photoshop and apps like Lightroom are built specifically to work with raster images. So is every photo you have ever taken with a camera or smartphone.

The critical limitation of raster images is this: they are tied to a fixed size. If you design a logo as a raster image at 500 pixels wide and then someone asks you to put it on a billboard, you are in trouble. Stretching it larger just makes those pixels bigger — the result looks blurry and unprofessional. Designers call this "going pixelated" or "going jaggy."

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE

A small business owner asks a designer for a logo. The designer creates it in Photoshop at a small size. Six months later, the business wants the logo printed on a 3-metre shop sign. The raster logo looks terrible at that size — blurry and soft.

The designer has to rebuild it from scratch. This is a very common (and expensive) mistake that you will never make once you understand vectors.

Vector Images: Made of Maths

A vector image stores artwork as mathematical instructions rather than a grid of pixels. Instead of recording "pixel number 4,502 is the colour orange," a vector file says something like: "draw a circle, centred here, with this radius, filled with this colour."


When you resize a vector image, the software simply recalculates the maths. A vector logo that looks perfect at business-card size will look exactly as sharp on a 10-metre building wrap. The edge stays crisp at any size, on any screen, at any print resolution. This quality is called being resolution-independent, and it is the defining superpower of vector graphics.

Adobe Illustrator is the world's leading vector graphics application. Everything you create in Illustrator — every shape, every line, every letter — is stored as vector data. That is why it is the professional standard for logos, icons, typography, illustrations, and any artwork that needs to scale.

Side-by-Side Comparison

Feature	Raster (Photoshop)	Vector (Illustrator)
Built from	Pixels (tiny coloured squares)	Mathematical paths and points
Resize behaviour	Gets blurry when enlarged	Stays perfectly sharp at any size
File size	Can be very large	Usually small and efficient
Best for	Photos, realistic textures	Logos, icons, typography, illustrations
Common file types	JPG, PNG, PSD, TIFF	AI, SVG, EPS, PDF
Zoom in far enough and...	You see individual pixels	It stays sharp forever

Keep this table in mind whenever you start a new design project. Ask yourself: will this artwork ever need to be printed large, used at different sizes, or reproduced on different materials? If yes — Illustrator is almost certainly the right tool.

 **TRY IT NOW — See the difference for yourself**

1. Find any JPEG image on your computer (a photo works perfectly).

2. Open it in any image viewer and zoom in to 400% or more.
3. Notice how it becomes blurry and you can see the individual pixel squares.
4. Now think about a company logo you know. Imagine zooming into the original Illustrator file the designer used — it would stay perfectly sharp no matter how far you zoomed. That is the power you are about to learn.

1.2 What Do People Actually Use Illustrator For?

One of the biggest myths about Adobe Illustrator is that it is only for professional graphic designers at large agencies. In 25 years of using this software, I have seen it used by architects, surgeons, farmers, musicians, teachers, engineers, and stay-at-home parents — all making genuinely professional work.

Let's look at what real people create with Illustrator every single day.

Logos and Brand Identity

This is probably the most well-known use case, and for good reason. Every major brand logo you can think of — from Nike to Netflix, from Apple to Airbnb — was either created in Illustrator or lives in Illustrator as its "master" file. When a brand sends its logo to a printer, a sign manufacturer, a clothing company, or a web developer, they send a vector file from Illustrator. It will look identical at every size and on every material.

As a beginner, designing logos is also one of the best ways to practice core Illustrator skills: shapes, the Pen tool, typography, and colour. By the end of this book, you will design a complete logo from scratch.

Icons and User Interface Elements

Every icon you tap on your phone — the share button, the heart symbol, the menu icon — was almost certainly designed in Illustrator (or a tool that works very similarly). App icons, website buttons, social media icons, and the tiny symbols you see in maps and airline boarding passes are all vector artwork.

Icon design is a fast-growing freelance skill. A single well-designed icon set can be sold on stock platforms and generate ongoing income.

Posters, Flyers and Print Design

Event posters, concert flyers, restaurant menus, wedding invitations, book covers, magazine layouts — all of these live happily in Illustrator. The software handles both text and graphics in one place, and its output is print-ready without any extra steps.

PRO TIP

When I teach beginners, I always suggest starting with a poster or flyer as their first real project. Why? Because the skills you need are clear and practical: placing text, using shapes for layout, picking colours, and exporting a finished file. You get a

tangible result you can actually use or share. The same skills transfer directly to logos, icons, and every other project type.

Social Media Graphics

Instagram posts and Stories, YouTube thumbnails, LinkedIn banners, Twitter/X headers, Pinterest graphics — Illustrator is excellent for all of these. You can set up multiple artboards (Illustrator's version of separate canvases) inside a single file, one for each platform size, and design across all of them simultaneously.

With Illustrator 2026, you can even connect directly to Adobe Express to hand off designs to non-designer colleagues who need to make small edits without touching the original file.

Packaging and Product Design

Look at the cereal box on your kitchen shelf. The label on a wine bottle. The hang tag on a piece of clothing. All of that artwork was created in Illustrator (or a similar vector tool). Packaging design requires perfectly scalable artwork that can be sent to industrial printers, and vector files are the only format those printers accept.

Infographics and Data Visualisation

Charts, diagrams, maps, timelines, and illustrated data stories are an increasingly important part of journalism, marketing, and business communication. Illustrator gives you full control over every visual element, producing infographics that are clean, scalable, and ready to publish in any format.

T-shirts, Merchandise and Print-on-Demand

Print-on-demand platforms like Redbubble, Merch by Amazon, and Printful all require vector files for their products. If you want to sell artwork on t-shirts, mugs, phone cases, or tote bags, learning Illustrator is a direct path to income.

INDUSTRIES THAT USE ILLUSTRATOR EVERY DAY

- Graphic design and branding agencies
- In-house marketing and communications teams
- Advertising and media production
- Fashion and apparel design
- Packaging and product design
- Architecture and technical illustration
- Publishing (books, magazines, newspapers)
- Game design (UI elements, concept art, icons)
- Education and e-learning (diagrams, workbooks)
- Film and television (titles, motion graphics prep)

1.3 Illustrator vs Photoshop vs Canva: Which Should You Use?

This is the question I am asked most often by beginners, so let's answer it properly. These three tools are not competitors in the way that Pepsi and Coca-Cola are competitors. They are built for different tasks. Knowing when to use each one is a professional skill in itself.

Adobe Illustrator: The Vector Specialist

Use Illustrator when your artwork needs to scale, when precision matters, when you are working on anything that will be printed professionally, or when you are creating logos, icons, typography-heavy designs, illustrations, or packaging.

Illustrator gives you complete control over every anchor point, every curve, every colour. It has a learning curve, but the level of precision and quality it produces is why every professional design studio in the world uses it.

Adobe Photoshop: The Photo Expert

Use Photoshop when you are working with photographs, when you need realistic textures and painterly effects, or when you need to composite (combine) multiple photos together. Photoshop excels at manipulating existing images — retouching skin, removing backgrounds from photos, adding realistic lighting effects.

Photoshop is not the right tool for a logo. If you create a logo in Photoshop, it will look perfect on screen but will be unprintable at large sizes. Many beginners make this mistake. Now you will not.

Canva: The Quick Template Tool

Canva is a browser-based tool built around pre-made templates. It is designed for non-designers who need to produce social media posts or presentations quickly using drag-and-drop elements. It is genuinely useful for that purpose.

However, Canva is not a professional design tool. It does not produce true vector output, it gives you very limited creative control, and most employers and clients in the design industry do not accept Canva files. If your goal is to work in design professionally, build a freelance income, or create truly original work, you need Illustrator.

Think of it this way: Canva is a microwave oven. It is quick, convenient, and fine for everyday use. Illustrator is a professional kitchen. It takes longer to learn, but the results are in a completely different class.

	Illustrator 2026	Photoshop	Canva
Primary use	Vector design & illustration	Photo editing & compositing	Template-based graphics
Output quality	Professional / print-ready	Professional / print-ready	Screen use only
Scales to any size?	Yes — always perfect	No — pixels degrade	Limited
Skill required	Medium (worth it)	Medium	Very low
Accepted by printers?	Yes (EPS, PDF, SVG)	Sometimes (300dpi PNG)	Rarely
Best for beginners building a career?	Yes — industry standard	As a complement	No
AI-powered features (2026)	Firefly deeply integrated	Firefly integrated	Basic AI tools

DO I NEED PHOTOSHOP TOO?

Not to start with. Illustrator 2026 can now remove image backgrounds, extend backgrounds, and work with photos directly inside the app — features that used to require a trip to Photoshop. For most beginners, Illustrator alone will cover everything you need for months. Once you are comfortable with Illustrator, you can explore Photoshop to round out your skill set.

1.4 What's New in Illustrator 2026?

Adobe releases a major update to Illustrator every year, usually in October at the Adobe MAX conference. The 2026 version (version 30.x) is, in my opinion, the most significant update in at least five years. If you are picking up Illustrator for the first time now, you are starting at a genuinely exciting moment.

Here are the most important things that are new, explained in plain English:

It Is Dramatically Faster

Illustrator 2026 launches up to **3× faster** than older versions and saves files up to **6× faster**. That may not sound important until you have spent your time watching a loading screen. For beginners, faster feedback makes learning much more enjoyable. For working designers, it is a significant productivity gain.

The speed improvements come from deep optimisation for Apple Silicon (M-series Macs) and Windows ARM processors, plus a smarter saving system that only writes the changes you made rather than rewriting the entire file from scratch.

AI Is Built Into the Canvas

Adobe has integrated its Firefly AI engine directly into Illustrator 2026. This means you can type a text prompt and generate editable vector artwork without leaving your file. This is called Text to Vector Graphic, and it is genuinely remarkable.

There is also Concept to Vector, which converts a rough sketch or a raster photo into fully editable vector artwork. If you have an idea sketched on paper, you can photograph it, bring it into Illustrator 2026, and have a clean vector version within seconds.

We cover all of these AI features in detail in Part 4. For now, just know they exist and that this book will teach you how to use them responsibly and effectively.

Turntable: Multi-Angle Views Without 3D Software

A new feature called Turntable (currently in Beta) lets you view your vector artwork from multiple angles, almost like a simple 3D rotation. This is extremely useful for product designers, package designers, and anyone creating mockups. Previously, achieving this effect required a separate 3D application.

Better Gradients

Gradients in Illustrator 2026 now support dithering (which eliminates those ugly colour banding stripes you used to see in subtle gradients) and a new Perceptual blending mode that makes colour transitions look far more natural to the human eye. This might sound like a small detail, but for any design involving smooth colour gradients — backgrounds, illustrations, packaging — it is a meaningful quality improvement.

Collaboration Features

A new Projects system lets teams collaborate on Illustrator files, and tighter integration with Adobe Express means a designer can hand off assets to a non-designer colleague without sending them into the full Illustrator environment.

Refreshed Font Browser

Finding the right font used to require a lot of scrolling. The 2026 Font Browser is redesigned with better visual previews and filtering, making typography decisions faster and more intuitive.

A NOTE ON AI FEATURES

AI tools in Illustrator 2026 are genuinely useful, and this book covers all of them. However, I want to be clear about something from the start: AI does not replace the need to learn Illustrator properly. AI in Illustrator generates a starting point — a rough vector shape you then edit, refine, and integrate into your design. The better your core Illustrator skills, the more effectively you can use the AI tools. Think of AI as a fast pencil sketch, not a finished painting.

1.5 What to Expect as a Complete Beginner

I want to be honest with you about the learning curve, because I think most tutorials and books are not honest enough.

Illustrator is not difficult to learn. But it does require patience in the early stages. There are two tools that almost every beginner finds frustrating at first:

- **The Pen tool.** This is the tool you use to draw custom shapes and paths by placing anchor points. It feels nothing like drawing with a real pen. It has its own logic, and it takes practice before it feels natural. Chapter 5 of this book is dedicated entirely to the Pen tool, and I will take you through it step by step in a way that actually makes sense.
- **The coordinate system.** Illustrator thinks about position and size in exact numbers (x coordinate, y coordinate, width, height). Coming from a world where you drag things around freely, this precision can feel constraining. Within a few hours of practice, it becomes an enormous strength.

Everything else in Illustrator follows a clear and learnable logic. Once you understand the fundamentals — shapes, paths, colours, and layers — the rest builds on those foundations naturally.

A Realistic Timeline

Based on teaching hundreds of beginners over the years, here is what you can realistically expect if you work through this book consistently:

Timeframe	What You Will Be Able to Do
After 2–3 hours	Navigate the workspace, draw basic shapes, apply colours, save files
After 1 day (6–8 hours)	Create simple logos and icons, use the Pen tool for basic paths, work with text
After 1 week	Design posters, social media graphics, work with layers and effects confidently
After 1 month	Complete professional-quality work, use AI features effectively, export for print and screen
After 3 months	Build a portfolio, take on freelance projects, work at industry speed

These timelines assume you are practising actively — not just reading, but opening Illustrator and doing the exercises in this book. Reading alone will not make you a designer. Doing the work will.

THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT PIECE OF ADVICE I CAN GIVE YOU

Open Illustrator alongside this book and follow every example as you read it. Do not read a chapter and then open the software later. Keep both open at the same time. The muscle memory you build by actually clicking, dragging, and creating is what will make these skills permanent. Reading about the Pen tool and using the Pen tool are completely different experiences.

1.6 How This Book Is Structured

This book is designed to take you from "I have never opened Illustrator" to "I can create professional work and take on real projects." It is structured in five parts:

- **Part 1 (Chapters 1–3): Welcome to Illustrator 2026.** You are here. This part covers the fundamentals of what Illustrator is, how to install and set it up, and how to navigate the workspace without feeling lost.
- **Part 2 (Chapters 4–8): Core Tools and Fundamental Skills.** The essential tools: shapes, the Pen tool, colour, type, and transformations. These chapters are the foundation everything else is built on.
- **Part 3 (Chapters 9–13): Intermediate Techniques and Real Projects.** Layers, effects, brushes, working with images, and a complete logo project from start to finish.
- **Part 4 (Chapters 14–18): AI-Powered Features and Advanced Workflows.** Firefly AI, the Turntable feature, advanced typography, collaboration, and a full social media graphics project.
- **Part 5 (Chapters 19–20): Exporting, Printing and What's Next.** Getting your work out of Illustrator correctly for every possible use, plus a roadmap for where to take your skills from here.

Throughout the book you will find three types of practical element:

- **TRY IT NOW boxes** — short exercises you can do immediately, in under five minutes, to reinforce what you have just read.
- **Pro Tips** — insights from real professional practice that textbooks rarely include.
- **Real-world examples** — concrete scenarios showing how the skill you are learning is used in actual client work.

1.7 Your First Action: Open Illustrator Right Now

Before you move on to Chapter 2, I want you to do one thing. If you have Illustrator installed, open it now. If you do not, Chapter 2 will walk you through the installation.

When Illustrator opens, you will see the Home Screen. Do not panic about all the options. Do not click anything yet. Just look at it for 30 seconds. Notice the templates, the recent files section, the big orange Illustrator logo in the corner.

You have just opened the most widely used vector design application in the world. The same application used to design the logos of companies worth billions. The same application used to design the packaging of products you buy every week. The same application that has shaped the visual world around you for the last three decades.

In the next chapter, you are going to set it up properly and start making things.

 **TRY IT NOW — Your first two minutes in Illustrator**

5. Open Adobe Illustrator 2026 (or install it via Creative Cloud — see Chapter 2).
6. On the Home Screen, click 'New file'.
7. In the dialog that appears, select 'A4' under the Print tab.
8. Click 'Create'.
9. You are now looking at a blank Illustrator artboard. This is your canvas.
10. Press Ctrl+Z (Windows) or Cmd+Z (Mac) a few times — this is the Undo shortcut. You will use it hundreds of times. Good to know it already.
11. Close the file without saving. You're ready for Chapter 2.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Vector images are built from mathematical paths and scale to any size without losing quality. Raster images are built from pixels and degrade when enlarged.
- Adobe Illustrator is the industry-standard vector design application, used for logos, icons, packaging, posters, illustrations, social media graphics, and much more.
- Illustrator is different from Photoshop (which edits raster photos) and from Canva (a template tool for non-designers). Illustrator is the professional standard.
- Illustrator 2026 (v30.x) is significantly faster, includes deeply integrated Firefly AI tools (Text to Vector, Concept to Vector, Generative Expand), a new Turntable feature, improved gradients, and better collaboration tools.
- The best way to learn Illustrator is to keep it open alongside this book and complete every exercise as you encounter it.
- A motivated beginner can create professional-quality work within one month of consistent practice.

CHAPTER 2 - Installing, Setting Up & Your First File

"The difference between a professional designer and a beginner is not talent — it is a properly configured workspace."

In this chapter, I am going to make sure you are set up exactly like a professional from day one — the right colour settings, the right preferences, and the right document setup. Every shortcut you learn today will save you hours next month.

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN IN THIS CHAPTER

How to install Illustrator 2026 via Adobe Creative Cloud step by step

System requirements and how to check your computer meets them

How to navigate the Home Screen and understand what everything does

How to create a new document with the correct settings for print and screen

What artboards are and how to set them up correctly

The essential preferences to configure before you do any real work

How to save your file correctly and avoid the most common beginner mistakes

2.1 Do You Have a Subscription? Getting Access to Illustrator

Adobe Illustrator 2026 is available exclusively through Adobe Creative Cloud — a subscription service. There is no one-time purchase option. Here is what you need to know before you install anything.

Subscription Plans

Adobe offers several plans. For a beginner who wants to learn Illustrator, there are three realistic options:

Plan	What's Included	Best For
Illustrator Single App	Access to Illustrator only	Most affordable option; good if you only need Illustrator
Creative Cloud All Apps	Access to all Adobe apps (Photoshop, InDesign, Premiere Pro, etc.)	Best value if you plan to use multiple Adobe tools
Creative Cloud Free Starter	Limited free access to some Adobe tools	Does not include full Illustrator; useful for exploring the ecosystem

★ PRO TIP

Adobe regularly runs promotions — especially at the start of the academic year and during Black Friday. If the price feels high right now, check Adobe's website for current offers. Students and teachers get a substantial discount through the Education plan. If you are enrolled in any educational institution, always check whether you qualify before paying full price.

Once you have a subscription (or a free trial), go to adobe.com/creativecloud and sign in with your Adobe ID. If you do not have one, you can create one for free — your Adobe ID is the account that stores all your cloud assets, fonts, and preferences.

2.2 System Requirements for Illustrator 2026

Before installing, check that your computer meets the requirements. Illustrator 2026 is noticeably more demanding than older versions — particularly for AI features like Text to Vector and Concept to Vector — but it also runs more efficiently on modern hardware than any previous version.

Minimum vs Recommended Specifications

Component	Minimum (it will run)	Recommended (it will fly)	Why It Matters
Processor (CPU)	Intel/AMD 64-bit with SSE 4.2+ or Apple M1	Intel Core i7/i9, AMD Ryzen 7/9, or Apple M2/M3/M4	Faster CPU = faster rendering, smoother Pen tool response
RAM	8 GB	16 GB or more	Complex files with many objects will slow down below 16 GB
Storage	4 GB free (SSD preferred)	20 GB+ free on SSD	SSD is the single biggest real-world speed upgrade
GPU (Graphics Card)	1 GB VRAM, OpenGL 4.0	4 GB VRAM dedicated GPU	GPU acceleration makes zoom, scroll and effects buttery smooth
Display	1024 × 768 px	1920 × 1080 px or higher	Higher resolution = more workspace visible at once
Operating System	Windows 10 (v21H2) / macOS 13 Ventura	Windows 11 / macOS 14 Sonoma or 15 Sequoia	Newer OS = better performance and security

Component	Minimum (it will run)	Recommended (it will fly)	Why It Matters
Internet	Required for activation	Broadband for cloud sync and AI features	AI features need internet; core tools work offline

APPLE SILICON (M1/M2/M3/M4) — SPECIAL NOTE

If you have a Mac with Apple Silicon (M1, M2, M3, or M4 chip), you are in luck. Illustrator 2026 has been deeply optimised for Apple Silicon and delivers the best performance of any platform. Launch times up to 3× faster and file saves up to 6× faster compared to Intel Macs. If you are choosing between Mac and Windows for design work, Apple Silicon is currently the gold standard for Illustrator performance.

TRY IT NOW — Check your system specs right now

1. **On Windows:** Press the **Windows key + Pause/Break** key, or right-click the Start button and select 'System'. You will see your processor, RAM, and Windows version.
2. **On Mac:** Click the Apple logo () in the top-left corner, then select '**About This Mac**'. You will see your chip, RAM, and macOS version.
3. Compare what you see against the Recommended column above.
4. If your RAM is below 8 GB, note that some features (especially AI tools) may run slowly. The rest of the software will still work.
5. If your OS is older than what's listed in the Minimum column, you should update it before installing Illustrator.

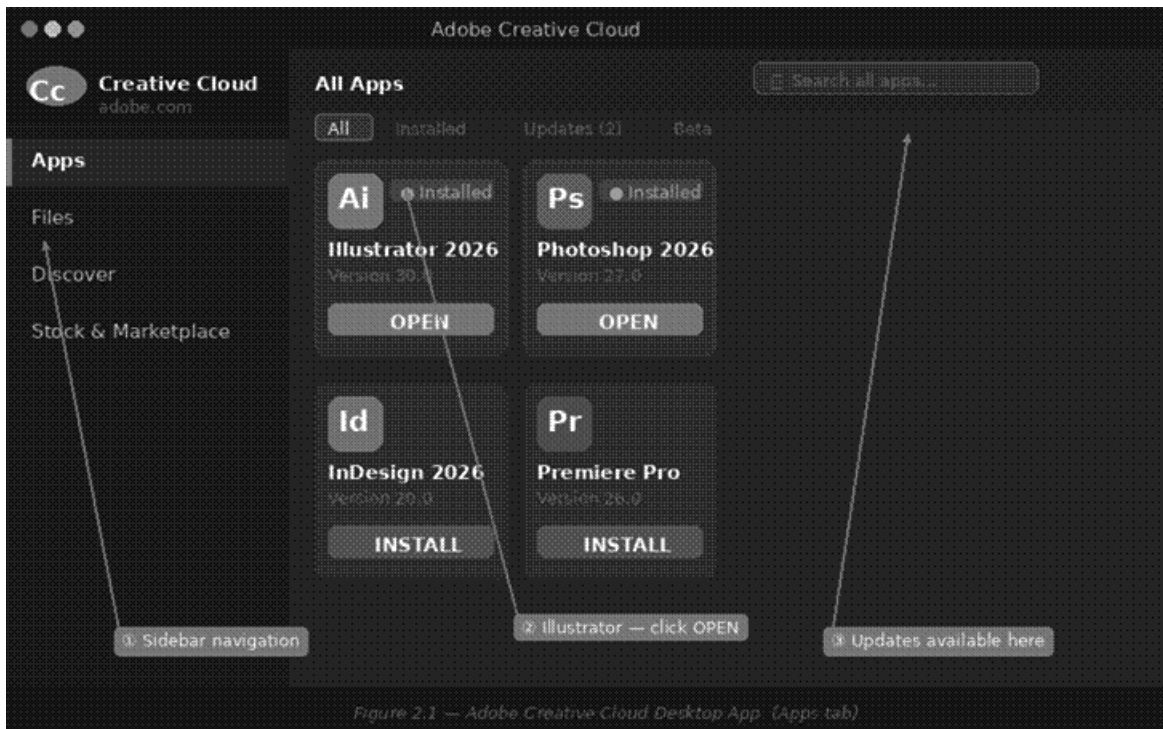
2.3 Installing Creative Cloud and Illustrator 2026

Installation has two steps: first you install the Creative Cloud Desktop App (a small management application), and then you use it to install Illustrator. This two-step process is how Adobe manages all its applications.

Step 1 — Install the Creative Cloud Desktop App

1. Open a web browser and go to: adobe.com/creativecloud/desktop-app
2. Click the Download button. This downloads a small installer file (approximately 2 MB).
3. Run the installer. On Windows, double-click the .exe file and click Yes when asked for permissions. On Mac, double-click the .dmg file, drag the app to Applications, and open it.
4. The Creative Cloud Desktop App will open and ask you to sign in. Use the Adobe ID you created or the account your subscription is linked to.

5. You will now see the Creative Cloud interface shown below.



In the Creative Cloud Desktop App, click 'Apps' in the left sidebar (see annotation ① in the figure above).

6. In the search bar at the top, type 'Illustrator'.
7. **If Illustrator shows 'Install'**: click it. The installer is approximately 2–3 GB, so this will take a few minutes depending on your internet speed.
8. **If Illustrator shows 'Open'**: it is already installed. You are ready to go.
9. **If Illustrator shows 'Update'**: click Update to get the 2026 version (v30.x).
10. When installation is complete, the button will change to 'Open'. Click it, or launch Illustrator from your Applications folder (Mac) or Start menu (Windows).

★ PRO TIP

When Illustrator installs, it also installs Adobe Fonts — a library of over 20,000 professional typefaces that sync automatically to Illustrator and all other Adobe apps. You do not need to do anything to activate these. They are one of the most underrated benefits of the Creative Cloud subscription. We cover fonts in detail in Chapter 7.

⚠ COMMON MISTAKE — AVOID THIS

Do NOT close the Creative Cloud Desktop App after installing Illustrator. It needs to run in the background to keep your licence active and to sync fonts, libraries, and

cloud assets. You can minimise it to the system tray (Windows) or the menu bar (Mac), but do not quit it while working in Illustrator. If Illustrator ever says your trial has expired when you have a paid subscription, re-opening the Creative Cloud app usually resolves it.

2.4 The Home Screen — Your First Look at Illustrator

When you launch Illustrator 2026 for the first time, you will see the Home Screen. This is not the design workspace — it is a launchpad. Let's understand everything on it before we move further.

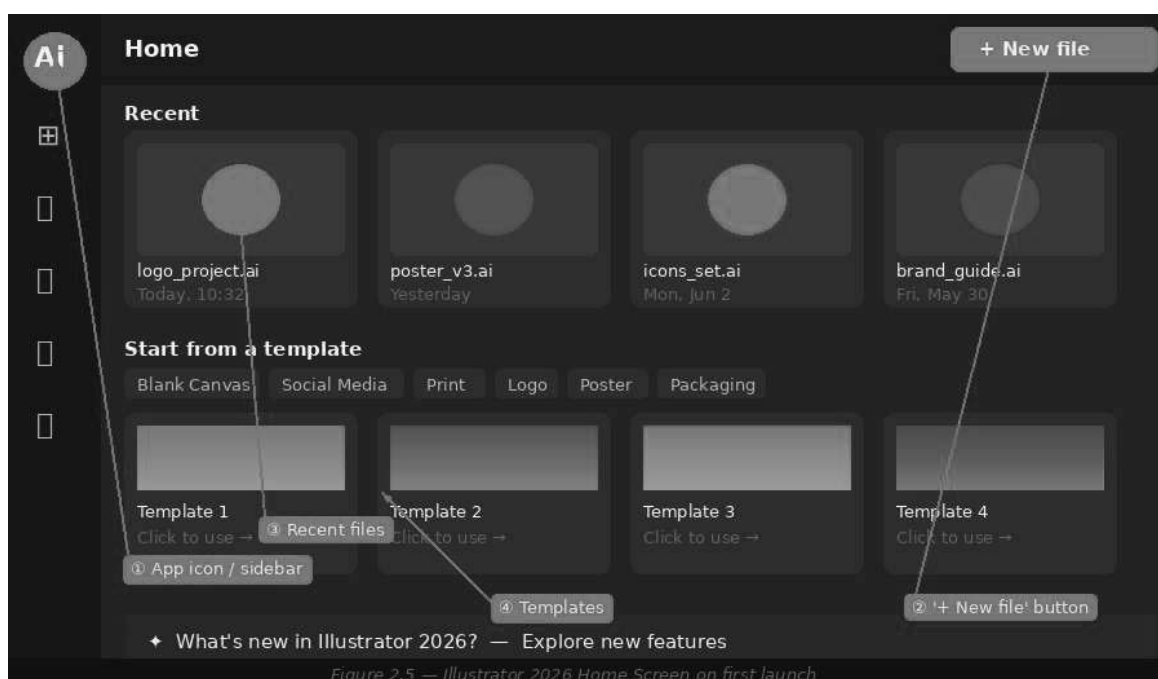


Figure 2.5 — Illustrator 2026 Home Screen. The four areas you need to know are labelled.

The Four Areas of the Home Screen

- **① The App Sidebar (far left).** The small column on the left contains icons for navigation: your recent files, starred (favourite) files, shared files, and cloud storage. You will use the Recent files icon daily.
- **② The '+ New file' button (top right).** This is how you start a new design project. We will click this in the next section.
- **③ Recent Files.** Every file you have opened recently appears here as a thumbnail. Single-click to open. Right-click for options (rename, duplicate, reveal in Finder/Explorer).
- **④ Templates.** Adobe provides professionally designed starting points for social media, print, web, and more. Using a template is completely legitimate — professionals use them as starting points all the time, especially for standard document sizes.

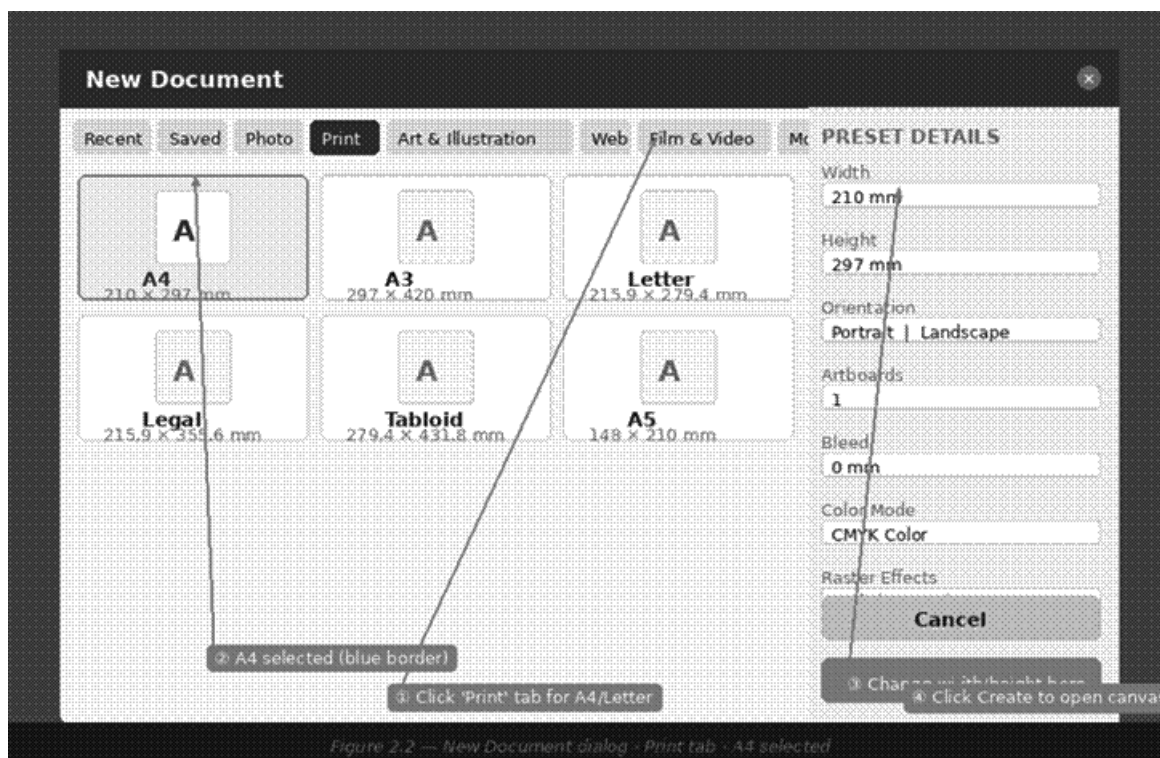
THE BLUE BANNER AT THE BOTTOM

If you see a blue or orange banner at the bottom of the Home Screen saying 'What's new in Illustrator 2026?' — click it. It launches an interactive tour of the new features. It takes about five minutes and will give you a useful overview of everything that is new. I recommend doing this before starting any project in a new version.

2.5 Creating Your First Document

Now we are going to create our first real Illustrator document. This is not just clicking New — the decisions you make in the New Document dialog affect the quality of your final output. Get these right from the start.

Click the '+ New file' button on the Home Screen. The New Document dialog will open.



- **Photo:** High-resolution settings for photography and photo editing (you would usually do this in Photoshop, but the preset exists).
- **Print:** CMYK colour mode, 300 ppi resolution. Use this for anything that will be professionally printed: logos, posters, packaging, business cards, flyers.
- **Art & Illustration:** RGB colour mode. Use this for digital illustrations, concept art, and artwork that will live on screen.
- **Web:** RGB colour mode, pixel-based units. Use this for website graphics, UI elements, and icons.

- **Film & Video:** RGB, standard video dimensions (1920×1080, 4K, etc.).
- **Mobile:** RGB, common phone and tablet screen sizes.

★ **PRO TIP**

The **single most common beginner mistake** I see is creating a Print design in RGB mode, or a Web design in CMYK mode. RGB colours look bright and vivid on screen but can appear dull and different when printed. CMYK colours are optimised for ink. Always choose the correct tab before creating your document — changing colour mode later causes colour shifts and extra work.

The Settings Panel (Right Side)

Once you select a preset, the right-hand panel shows its settings. You can change any of these before clicking Create:

Setting	What It Means	What to Choose as a Beginner
Width / Height	The size of your artboard (canvas)	Use the preset size or type your own (e.g. 210 mm × 297 mm for A4)
Units	The measurement system (px, mm, inches, cm)	mm for print, px for screen/web
Orientation	Portrait (taller than wide) or Landscape (wider than tall)	Portrait for most documents; Landscape for presentations or banners
Artboards	How many canvases to start with	Start with 1. You can always add more later.
Bleed	Extra space around the edge for print trimming	3 mm for most professional print jobs. Leave at 0 for screen work.
Color Mode	RGB (screen) or CMYK (print)	Set automatically by the tab you chose — do not change it unless you know why
Raster Effects	Resolution for effects like drop shadows	High (300 ppi) for print; Screen (72 ppi) for web

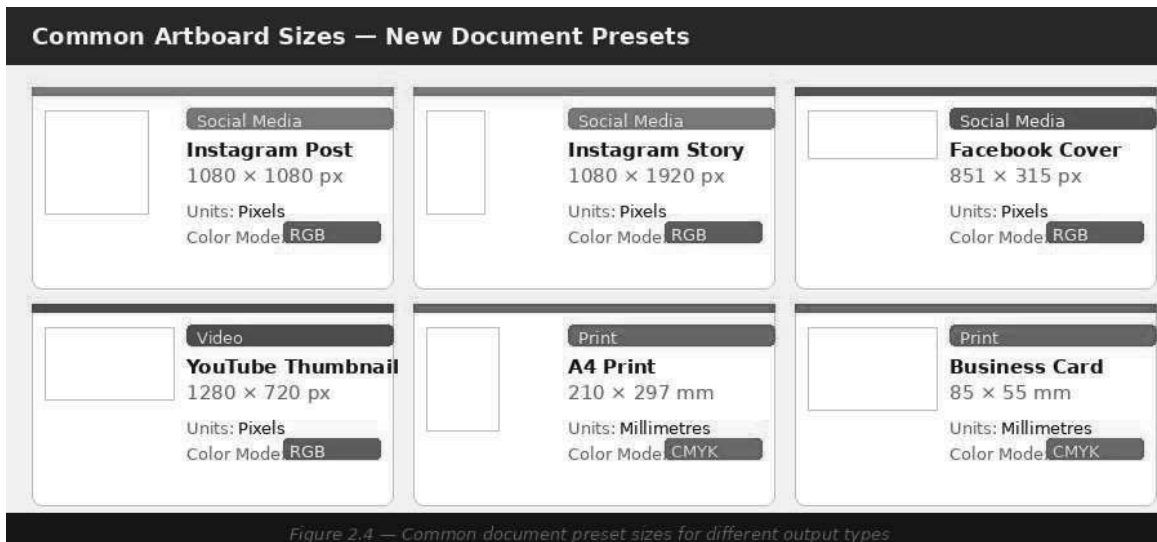


Figure 2.4 — Common preset sizes for different output types. Note the colour mode: RGB for screen, CMYK for print.

TRY IT NOW — Create your first three documents

6. **Document 1 — A4 Print flyer:** Click '+ New file', select the **Print** tab, click the A4 preset, confirm Color Mode is CMYK, set Bleed to 3 mm on all sides, click Create.
7. **Document 2 — Instagram Post:** Click '+ New file', select the **Mobile** tab, find the Instagram Post preset (1080×1080 px), confirm Color Mode is RGB, click Create.
8. **Document 3 — Custom size:** Click '+ New file', select the **Web** tab, type 1920 in the Width field and 1080 in the Height field, ensure units are set to Pixels, click Create.
9. You now have three documents open. Notice the tabs at the top of the screen — each tab is a separate open file. Click between them to switch.
10. Close Document 2 and 3 for now (Ctrl+W / Cmd+W). Leave Document 1 open.

2.6 The Illustrator Workspace — A Guided Tour

With your A4 document open, you are now looking at the Illustrator workspace. This is where all design work happens. Let's name every part of it so you are never lost.

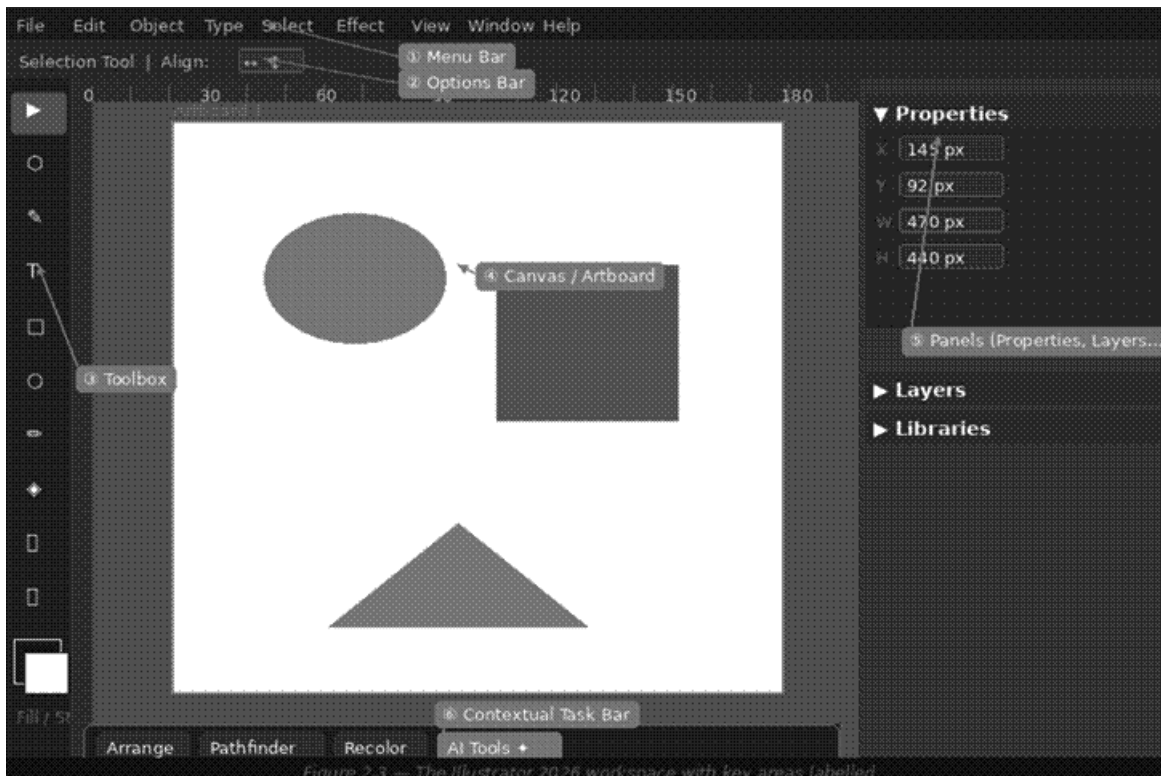


Figure 2.3 — The Illustrator 2026 workspace with key areas labelled

- **Selection tool (V):** The black arrow. Used to select and move objects.
- **Direct Selection tool (A):** The white arrow. Used to select individual anchor points on a path.
- **Pen tool (P):** For drawing custom shapes and paths. We devote all of Chapter 5 to this.
- **Type tool (T):** For adding text to your document.
- **Rectangle tool (M):** For drawing rectangles and squares.
- **Ellipse tool (L):** For drawing circles and ellipses.
- **Zoom tool (Z):** For zooming in and out. (Keyboard shortcut: Ctrl/Cmd + or – is faster.)

TOOL SHORTCUTS — MEMORISE THESE FIRST

Almost every tool has a single-letter keyboard shortcut. Press V to activate the Selection tool, P for the Pen tool, T for the Type tool. This is how professional designers work — left hand on the keyboard for shortcuts, right hand on the mouse/tablet. You do not need to memorise all the shortcuts now; focus on V, A, P, T, M, L, and Z for the first week.

④ The Canvas and Artboard

The white rectangle in the centre of the screen is your artboard — this is your actual design canvas. Anything placed on the artboard will appear in your final exported file. The grey area around it is the pasteboard — you can temporarily place objects here while working, but they will not export.

The artboard label ('Artboard 1') appears above the top-left corner. If you have multiple artboards, each one is labelled and numbered.

⑤ The Panels (Right Side)

Panels are the floating windows docked on the right side of the screen. They give you precise control over every aspect of your design. The most important panels to know:

- **Properties panel:** Shows the most relevant settings for whatever you have selected. A great all-in-one panel for beginners.
- **Layers panel:** Manages the stacking order and organisation of all objects in your document. Critical once your designs have more than a few elements.
- **Color panel:** For applying and editing colours.
- **Swatches panel:** Your saved colour palette.
- **Libraries panel:** Stores and syncs assets (colours, graphics, type styles) across documents and devices.

You can show or hide any panel from the Window menu. If a panel you need is not visible, go to Window → find the panel name.

⑥ The Contextual Task Bar

New in recent versions and refined in 2026, the Contextual Task Bar is a small floating bar near the bottom of the canvas. It changes based on what you have selected and suggests the most relevant next actions. If you select a shape, it offers Pathfinder operations. If you use the Text tool, it shows type formatting options. If you select an image, it offers background removal and tracing.

As a beginner, think of the Contextual Task Bar as Illustrator gently pointing you towards what to do next. It is genuinely useful and I recommend keeping it visible (View → Show Contextual Task Bar).

2.7 Essential Preferences to Set Before You Start Working

Most beginners launch Illustrator and start designing without ever looking at the Preferences. This is a mistake. Five minutes spent on preferences now will save hours of frustration later. Here is exactly what to set.

Open Preferences:

- **Windows:** Edit → Preferences → General (or Ctrl + K)
- **Mac:** Illustrator → Settings → General (or Cmd + K)

General Preferences

The first tab is General. Two settings to change here:

- **Keyboard Increment:** This controls how far an object moves when you press an arrow key. The default (1pt) is often too small. Set it to 1 mm for print work or 5 px for screen work.
- **Use Preview Bounds:** Turn this ON. It makes the width and height values in the Options Bar reflect the visual size of the object including stroke width, rather than the mathematical path. Much more intuitive.

Units Preferences

Click 'Units' in the left list. Set your units to match your typical work:

- **General:** Millimetres (for print work) or Pixels (for screen/web work)
- **Stroke:** Points (industry standard for stroke weight)
- **Type:** Points (industry standard for type size)

★ PRO TIP

You can change units on the fly for any document without going back to Preferences. Right-click on the ruler (the measurement guide along the top or left edge of the workspace) and select your preferred unit from the dropdown. This changes units for just the current document without affecting your global defaults.

Performance Preferences

Click 'Performance' in the left list. Two settings here matter:

- **GPU Performance:** Turn this ON if your computer has a dedicated graphics card. This enables hardware-accelerated rendering, which makes zooming, scrolling, and screen redraw dramatically faster.
- **Animated Zoom:** Turn this ON. It makes zooming feel smooth and intuitive rather than jumping in steps.

File Handling Preferences

Click 'File Handling' in the left list. Important:

- **Number of Recent Files to Display:** Increase this to 20 or more. The default (10) is too few when you are working on multiple projects.
- **Automatically Save Recovery Data Every:** Make sure this is ON and set to every 5 minutes. If Illustrator crashes (it is rare in 2026 but still possible), this saves you from losing work.

⚠ COMMON MISTAKE — AVOID THIS

Illustrator does NOT autosave over your original file. The 'Recovery Data' preference creates a temporary recovery file in case of a crash. It does NOT replace saving your file manually with Ctrl+S / Cmd+S. Develop the habit of saving manually every few minutes. Ctrl+S / Cmd+S takes less than a second and has saved my work on hundreds of occasions over 25 years.

 **TRY IT NOW — Configure your preferences now**

11. Open Preferences (Ctrl+K / Cmd+K).
12. In General: set Keyboard Increment to 1 mm. Turn on 'Use Preview Bounds'.
13. Click 'Units' in the left sidebar. Set General to Millimetres, Stroke to Points, Type to Points.
14. Click 'Performance'. Turn on GPU Performance (if available) and Animated Zoom.
15. Click 'File Handling'. Set Autosave Recovery to every 5 minutes. Set Recent Files to 20.
16. Click OK to save your preferences.
17. Your setup is now configured like a professional's.

2.8 Saving Your File — Understanding Illustrator File Formats

Saving in Illustrator is not as simple as pressing Ctrl+S / Cmd+S, because Illustrator gives you several different file format options, each serving a different purpose. Understanding this now will prevent a very common and painful beginner mistake.

The Native Format: .AI

The **.AI (Adobe Illustrator)** format is Illustrator's native file format. Always save your working file as .AI. It preserves everything — all your layers, editable text, live effects, appearance attributes, and artboards. Think of the .AI file as your master source file. You never send this to a printer or client directly; it is your editable original.

Save as .AI: File → Save (Ctrl+S / Cmd+S) the first time, then just Ctrl+S / Cmd+S from then on.

Exporting for Print: PDF and EPS

When you need to send artwork to a professional printer, you export as a **print-ready PDF**. This is different from saving as .AI. Use File → Save a Copy → choose Adobe PDF. We cover print-ready PDF export in full detail in Chapter 19.

Exporting for Screen: SVG, PNG, JPG

For web and digital use, you export rather than save. Use File → Export → Export for Screens. This gives you control over resolution, format (SVG, PNG, JPG, WebP), and which artboards to export. We cover this in full in Chapter 19.

Format	Use For	Editable?	How to Create It
.AI	Your working master file	Yes — fully editable	File → Save

Format	Use For	Editable?	How to Create It
.PDF	Sending to print shops, sharing with clients	Partially (if saved with layers)	File → Save a Copy → Adobe PDF
.SVG	Web graphics, icons, logos for web use	Yes (code-based vector)	File → Export → Export As → SVG
.PNG	Screen graphics with transparent backgrounds	No — flattened raster	File → Export → Export for Screens
.JPG	Photos and complex images for web (no transparency)	No — flattened raster	File → Export → Export for Screens
.EPS	Legacy print workflows, older printers	Partially	File → Save a Copy → EPS

★ PRO TIP

Always maintain a **two-file system** for every project: the .AI master file (your editable source) and an exported file for delivery (PDF for print, PNG/SVG for screen). Name them consistently: **logo_brand_v1.ai** (working file) and **logo_brand_PRINT.pdf** (delivery file). Never send clients your .AI file unless they specifically ask for it and have Illustrator themselves.

2.9 Navigating Your Document — Zooming and Panning

Before you start designing, you need to know how to move around your document efficiently. Navigating Illustrator smoothly is a skill in itself, and it makes a bigger difference to your speed than most beginners expect.

Zooming In and Out

There are four ways to zoom, and you will end up using all of them depending on the situation:

- **Keyboard (fastest):** Ctrl+= (Cmd+=) to zoom in, Ctrl+- (Cmd+-) to zoom out. Ctrl+0 (Cmd+0) fits the artboard to your screen. Ctrl+1 (Cmd+1) shows 100% actual size.
- **Mouse scroll wheel:** Hold Ctrl/Cmd while scrolling up to zoom in, scrolling down to zoom out. This is the method I use most often.
- **Zoom tool (Z):** Click to zoom in, Alt+Click (Option+Click on Mac) to zoom out. Drag a rectangle to zoom into a specific area.
- **Navigator panel:** Window → Navigator. Shows a thumbnail of your whole document; drag the red box to move your view.