

HOW TO MAKE A STAB BOUND PHOTOBOOK

Anyone can make a photobook; here's a breakdown of how I do it

INTRODUCTION

This is my how-to guide, tutorial if you like, for how I make my hand-sewn A5 photobooks. Some of the techniques are generic and some less so. In writing this guide, my goal has been to promote the idea that making a photobook is something that anyone can do. It might seem daunting at first but once you break it down into discreet steps, the path through the process is clear; and suddenly, making a book is both doable and achievable.

Once you see how it's done and what's involved, I hope you'll see that it's something you can do yourself. Your photobook might end up being simpler, bigger, or different in any number of ways, but I hope that this set of process steps will inspire you to make a start and create your first book. Whatever it ends up looking like, it will be beautiful. It will be yours; it will be handmade and unique; and it will be the foundation for your next one.



One of my recent photobooks



PHOTO CURATION

Editing, sequencing, number of images, number of pages, pairing

Editing your work is hard. Selecting which images to use and which to leave out. Often the first step in the book making process and one that often derails a project before it even gets going. You will get better at it. You will build your *ruthless* muscle. When starting out it's important to get your first book done.

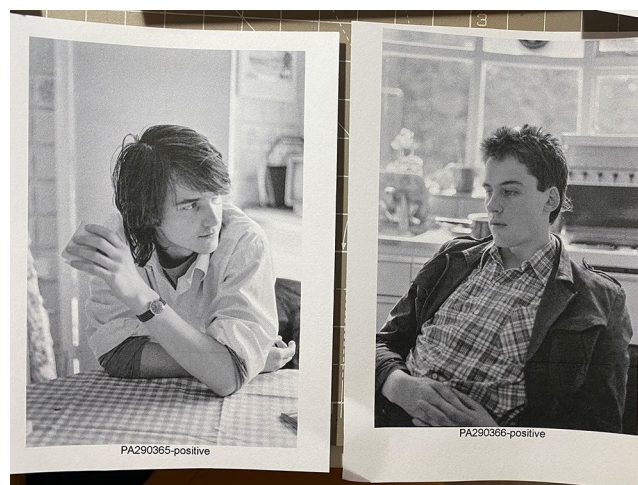
Print out your candidate images. I print them lo res, four up on A4 (Letter if you're in the US) and use Lightroom to help me do this (it has a built-in tool for it).

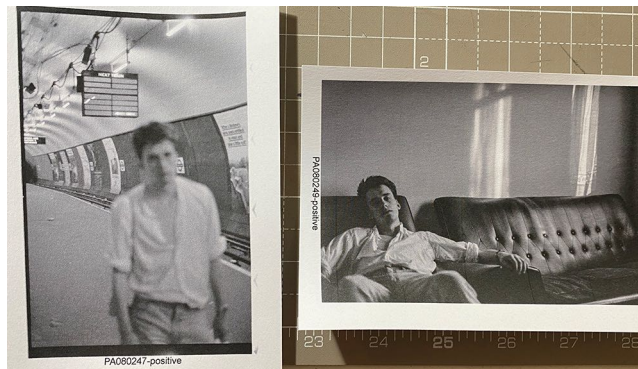
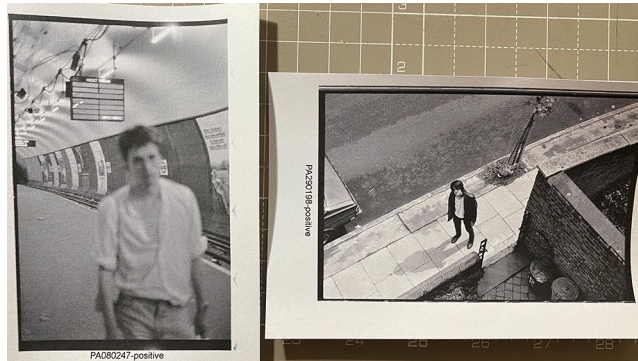
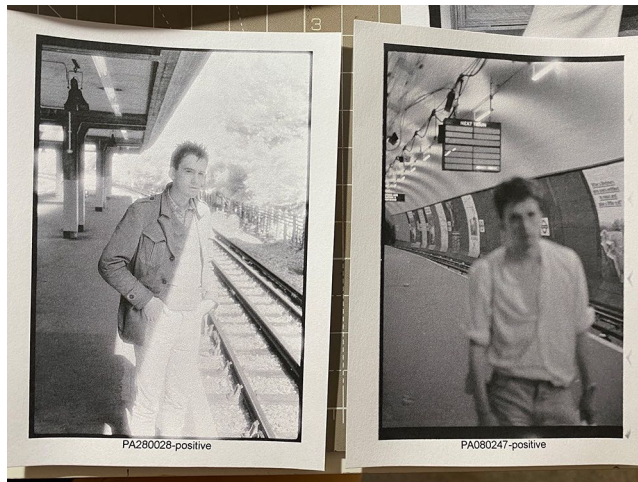
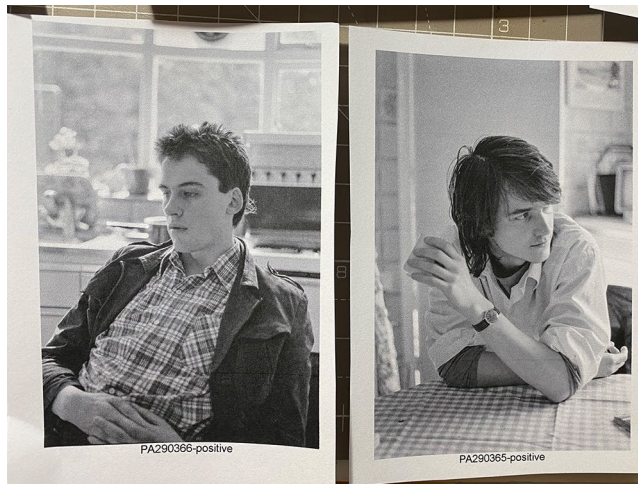
Editing your printed work down to a manageable number is an iterative process. Discard some of them. Restack, rearrange, and remove some more. Keep going until you have the number you want/need. How many is right will in part depend on your binding method. For the sort of binding I use 40 or so pages is about the limit. Allowing for any end pages, and how many images per page you go for, you can work out how many images you need. Alternatively, don't factor in how many pages you have at this stage; instead, decide which images and content you want to include and then use this, and the page limit to drive the design (number of images per page for example).

It's here, when thinking about number of images and number of pages, and page layout of course, that including foldouts, text, etc. come into play.

Sequencing the content is a very personal aspect of the book. It's about the mood and feeling you want to convey, and whether you want that to be smooth for the reader or want to include some jolts to engage them in some way; to make them stop and think. Your book design will impact this too. Facing pages, and multiple images per page make sequencing significantly more important. If I end up with more images than my binding allows, I tend to revise the page layout to accommodate the additional ones. And this is where you need to bring in your additional, non-image content. They will need sequencing too.

Here are some examples that show how different feelings and messages can be communicated simply by pairing photographs in different ways. Sometimes it will be obvious to you and sometimes it won't matter what the order is. You'll know. It's a hard but fun part of bookmaking; knowing you can radically alter what you're saying simply by juxtaposing the content in different ways.





And because there's no right or wrong way, you can't mess it up! When you've decided (you might change your mind though) number the prints to preserve the ordering.



You've now chosen and sequenced your photos so the book making can begin. It's probably around this point that you'll once again start to doubt the project. Why am I doing this? Who's ever going to look at it? What's so special about these photographs anyway? Keep the faith. This is for you. It's so you can hold at your photographs in your hand. You can show people without having to use an annoying screen. Keep going.

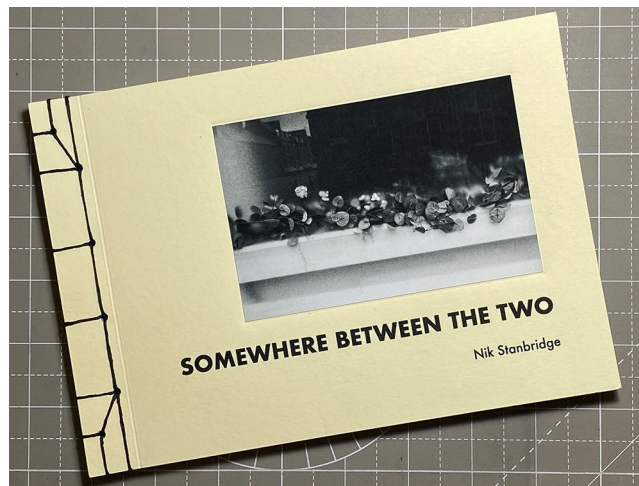
DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Book format, single vs. double sided, fold outs, number of pages, full bleed or not, 'copyright page' info, text

This is a very big part of the book, secondary, or parallel to, the choice of images/purpose of the book. It's all about how it's going to look (design), and in the next section, how you're going to go about achieving the look you want (software).

I chose to standardise my books so spending (considerable) time on the software side creating a reusable book template was time well spent.

I'm a big photobook collector which I imagined would help me design mine. That said, my choice of printer limits me to A4 printing and practicalities led me to use A5 as my preferred size. Added to that, my decision to use stab binding steered me towards a landscape format, binding on the short edge.



Stab binding isn't really a technique that enables books to lay flat, so I stuck to single sided printing. At the design stage though I hadn't decided on the paper I was going to use, and double-sided printing severely limits paper choice as there aren't many out there. In the end, the paper I chose does indeed have a double-sided option (only a bit heavier) so that door is open to me to experiment with. And of course you don't have to double side all pages; it could be for just a few spreads.

Fold outs are very cool and have a lot of visual impact; a lot of people use them, and I will at some point too. Bear in mind though the impact they have on the thickness of the book and the ability of the pages to 'close' flat. You might have to pay a bit more attention to the scoring of the fold out fold so that it closes as flat as possible. They must be accommodated into the template (see below) and remember that the fold out page isn't twice the width of a regular page; the fold out bit is shorter as it doesn't get bound.

I print onto paper that I buy in as A4 and then cut down to A5 - more on this below. This is significant in that my printer, for reasons I don't understand, doesn't have the capability to print full bleed on A5 (it does on A4 though). If I want a full bleed image/page in my book I must incorporate the bleed into the book template and then print the A5 page to A4 paper. This I then cut down to an A5 full bleed page. Sounds complicated but is straightforward when you remember to print the full bleed pages into A4 stock. Reason for mentioning this here in the section on design is that you need to factor in the capabilities of your printer when making design decisions.

My choice of stab binding sets a vague limit of about 40 pages. Above this and the book feels unwieldily and hard to read. Experimentation will guide you here. I made a few book mock-ups to text paper and cover stocks, and binding methods to better understand the limitations of your format and techniques.

SOFTWARE AND LAYOUT TEMPLATES

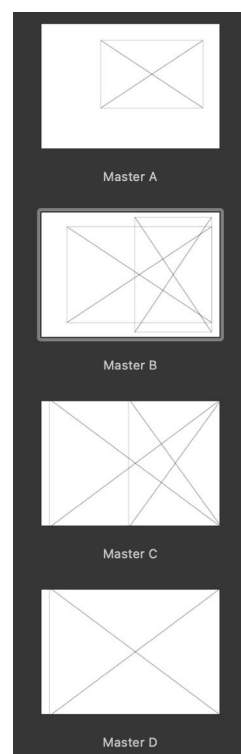
Publishing software, page design, templates

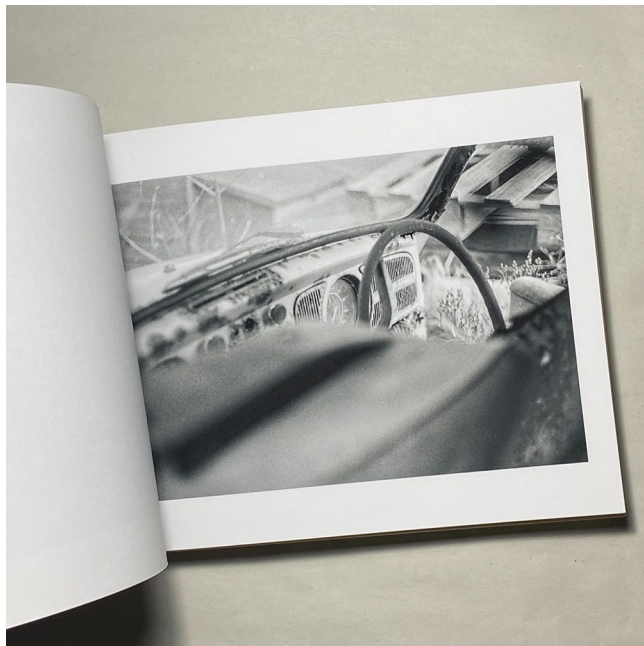
I was a devotee of Adobe InDesign (it was all I knew) but when I was paying the bill, I balked at the astronomical *annual* cost. This was the point when I tried out Affinity Publisher. I rapidly concluded that it was equal to InDesign for the sort of projects I had in mind; was a one-off cost; short learning curve.

My previous experience of bookmaking in InDesign taught me that building in template-based standardisation had long term benefits despite the short-term cost of the time involved. While putting together my first book in Publisher, I was in parallel making template level decisions (because I had already decided that I was going to be making several similar photobooks). This led to master page designs for:

- Cover (*Master A*)
- Copyright page
- Image page (*Master B*)
 - Landscape and portrait images both accommodated so you can use one page template for either a landscape or a portrait image just by deciding where to drop the dragged image
- Image page (*Master C*)
 - As above but accommodating a full bleed landscape or portrait image
- Image page (*Master D*)
 - Image full bleed on the page
- Text/paragraph styles for book text, image captions etc
- Image box decoration (borders)

These are my template pages because I want my images the same size and in the same position on each page. Your design choices will determine what types of templates you'll need. They can incorporate borders, margins and binding space; text pages; fold outs; page numbers, image captions etc. with associated font and text decoration styles. Anything that will be carried over from book to book; or simply what will be used page to page in a one-off book. The book will benefit from some level of consistency from page to page (unless that goes against what your book is all about of course).





From Master B



From Master B



From Master C (full bleed, portrait)



From Master D (full bleed, landscape)

Make sure your template/image positioning takes into consideration the space needed to bind your book and then build this into your template. I use a 20mm border to accommodate the stab binding and scoring (see below).

PAPER AND COVER STOCK

I bought paper sample packs from Hahnemühle, Awagami, Fotospeed and Innova and spent a huge amount of time printing a test image with a wide range of ICC profiles and print media settings. The paper weights ranged from super lightweight 40 gsm Japanese papers to heavy 330 gsm watercolour-style, but most were only suitable for so-called fine art printing: not really for bookmaking. The biggest factor though in terms of making books with any of them was cost. Many of the papers are the equivalent of £1 per A4 sheet, which makes a 40-page A5 book ~£20. An OK cost for a one-off book perhaps but too costly for making books in editions to sell.

In the end I settled on simple 170 gsm coated inkjet paper; the printed images are beautiful; it feels good in the hand, and the cost per A4 sheet is £0.07!

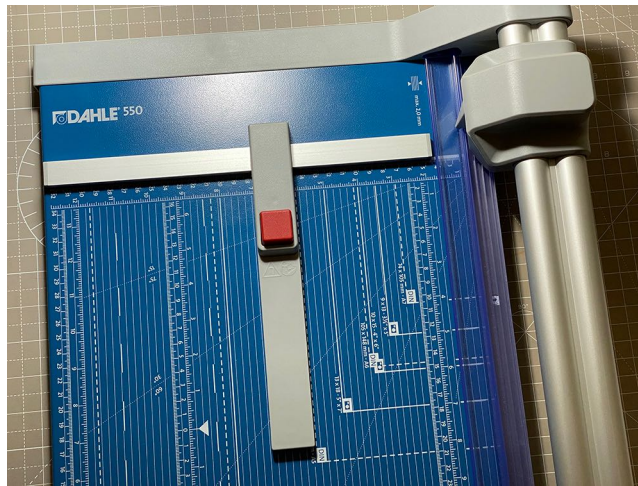
In practice, any paper will work. In the future I'm going to experiment with using different papers within a single book. I think the notion of unusual and experimental design philosophies work well in semi one off books like these; especially ones designed for you and your immediate cohort. I make my books to have a physical rendering of my photography; to having them use unusual binding techniques and thought-provoking paper choices is all part of the aesthetic.



Sample packs of inkjet paper

PAPER CUTTING

I use a (self-sharpening) wheel-based guillotine to cut A4 pages down to the A5 size of the book. Because I wanted accurate and consistent results, I decided to get one with an edge/size guide and this meant getting an A3 one, the Dahl 550. It was a significant purchase, but the results are excellent and the consistency really shows in the finished book. I tried the knife/ruler method and it works well: cutting the paper; but consistent results are impossible. And a guillotine without the edge guide delivers the same inconsistent results. Believe me, it's worth the investment if you need to cut a lot of pages the same size.



Cutting guide set to A5



Ready to cut an A4 sheet

PRINTING AND ICC PAPER PROFILES

I've been through a lot of printers; we all have I imagine. My current printer, an Epson ET-8500, was chosen because:

- It's EcoTank which means bottles of ink, not cartridges
- It has grey, black and pigment black inks so is good with B&W images
- Has a rear feeder as well as a flat feeder for thick materials like cover card stock
- It was [favourably reviewed](#) by Keith Cooper at Northlight Images
- Keith had downloadable ICC profiles for some of the papers I was going to experiment with

I use the A4 version but there's a near identical A3+ one (ET-8550) if you want to go big.

There are better and cheaper printers out there, but I was working to a budget in terms of cost and quality and this fitted the bill.

To get the most out of your chosen paper and printer combo, it pays to have the right, or at least a consistent choice of, printer/paper print settings. This could be a dedicated ICC profile for your paper and your printer, or it could just be using the printer settings that will get the most out of the

paper and using those settings consistently. Most people will admit that there are many dark arts to getting good results out of a printer. Most will agree that finding what works for you and sticking to it is the route to getting consistently good results. It's a very big topic that I can't cover in detail here unfortunately. The best place to start is to research how to get the most out of your printer. I discovered for example, that only one of the many Epson supplied paper profiles used the pigment black ink (Velvet Fine Art). I now know to standardise on this profile. It's also safe to say that you will only get the very best image quality if you use OEM inks, despite the cost. These are the sorts of things you need to uncover about *your* printer. Keith Cooper has a great deal of this sort of info on his website; [it's a good place to start](#).

Several paper suppliers here in the UK will create, for free, ICC profiles for any paper that they sell. this is an amazing service and is by far the best way to get the most from your paper/printer. The process is very simple: you download the test chart; print it on your chosen paper carefully following the instructions; send the print to them; wait for them to send you the ICC profile. If you don't have access to this sort of service, make some test prints (maybe using Keith Cooper's text image) using a range of standard settings/profiles and pick the one that you like the best. and then stick to it to get those consistent results.

MAKING THE COVER

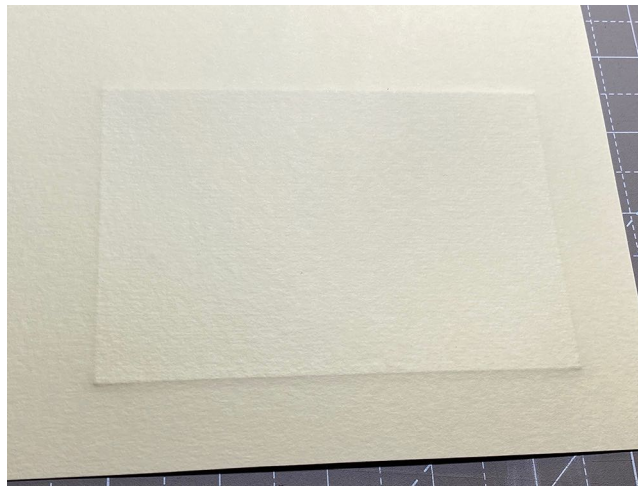
Tipping in, glue

Choosing my cover stock was more straightforward than for the page stock as I wanted a splash of colour and here my choices were more limited (thankfully). I didn't do much experimenting, and I didn't spend much time research either. My local art materials shop has Daler Rowney Canford Card (A4, 300 gsm) in a wide range of colours and is only £1 per sheet. It's the right weight for me, looks good, can be printed on, and took blind embossing well - more on this below.

I did want to jazz up the cover though with a printed image; but how to do this when the cover is (in my case) coloured card? My solution was a 'tipped in' image. It's something I'd seen on commercially produced photobooks; it looks classy, and how hard can it be? Turns out it's not hard at all. It essentially involves sticking an image on the cover, optionally doing this into a blind emboss.



Blind emboss from the front



Blind emboss seen from the back

I have access to a print studio with a press so that's what I used to do the embossing. I used a small piece of quite thick copper (2mm or so) and was able to emboss without dampening or tearing the card.

Tipping in solves the problem of not being able to print a high-quality image onto coloured card but it does introduce the challenge of how to glue paper to card without wrinkling. After much research, the answer is to use solvent-based fabric glue rather than water-based paper glue. The result is truly lovely!

I print the tipped in image using the same settings and paper I use for the book pages.



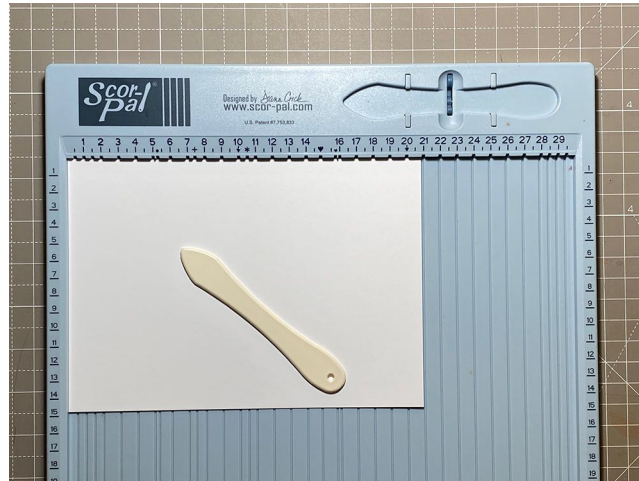
Tipped in image

SCORING AND PUNCHING

I punch the holes before scoring; the rationale being that the pages sit flatter when unscored and thus are easier to punch accurately.

To make my books easy to open, flick through and use, I score each page, including the covers before binding. It also helps to reduce the strain on the binding when opening the book.

I use a simple scoring frame that's quick and easy to use.



Scoring frame, the included tool, and an A5 sheet ready to be scored



Scoring at 2cm



The finished score

BINDING

Hole punching, needle, thread

In the past I've used large staples to bind my photobooks but this time round I wanted them to look as handmade and individual as possible; and to exude a level of craftsmanship that staples just don't have. I decided on Japanese stab binding because of its versatility, ease of execution, and sheer simple beauty.

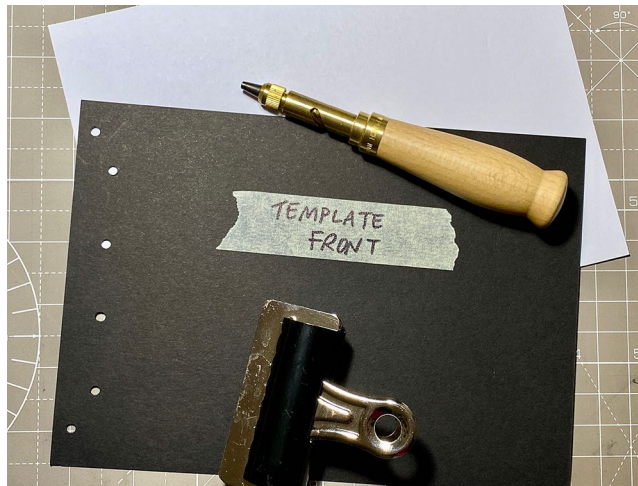
After watching a few videos, I discovered it's easier to do than it looks and the results are even more exquisite to behold in the finished book than I'd imagined. [This video is very good](#) and shows the process in clear and simple terms. She demonstrates the type of binding I use, Noble Binding, at 3m34s.

It starts off with a regular set of holes being punched into every page. I made myself a template from a piece of cover card (and labelled it TEMPLATE so I wouldn't accidentally use it in a book). To make the holes, I use a Japanese single hole punch. I first bought a cheap one which soon blunted so I invested in a proper Japanese one and it's significantly better. You could use a drill, but the elegance of punched holes is hard to beat.



Japanese hole punch and spare 2mm tip

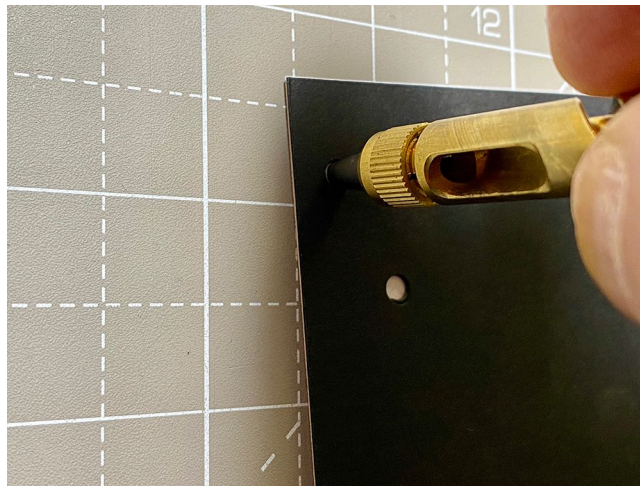
I punch two or three pages at a time so as to not overload the punch (and my palm when using it). The goal is to get the holes in exactly the same place on every page, covers included.



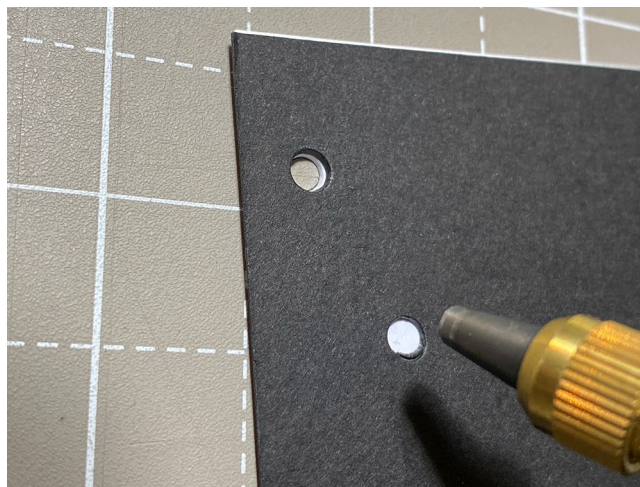
Paper, punch template, punch and clip ready to go



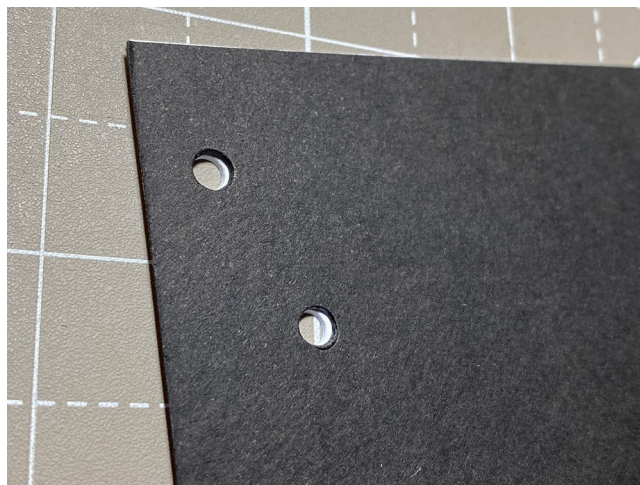
Paper and template held by the clip, ready to punch



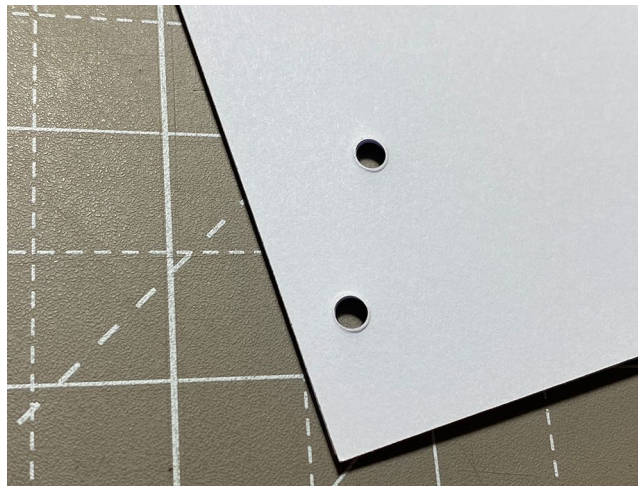
Punching the paper through the template



First hole punched; poised ready to punch the second



Two holes punched



Looking at the punched pages from the back

I punch the *back* cover from the back so that the 'indent' from the punch points inward. A little thing, but it is all about the little things, isn't it?

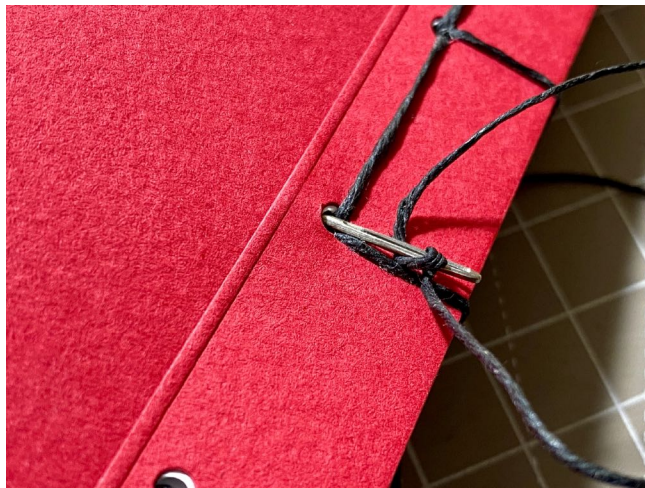
Once all the holes are punched, hold the book together with some large clips (with some scrap paper under them to protect the covers) and you're ready for the final part of the book... binding.



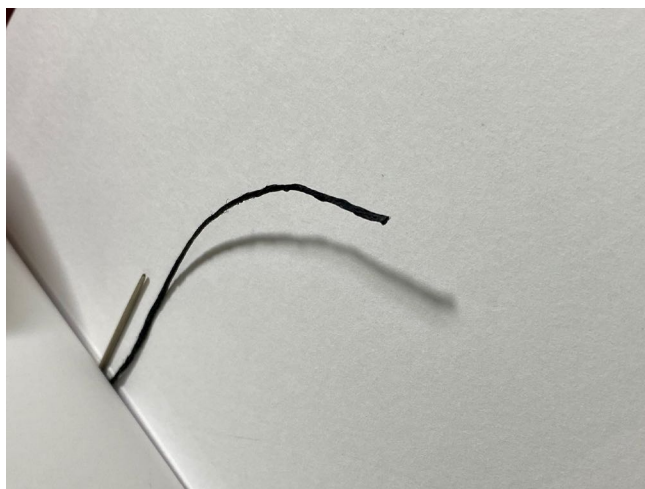
Book clamped ready for binding

I use shop bought waxed linen thread, but you can wax your own with beeswax (I didn't need that level of involvement). That said, you can bind with any thread, string, ribbon. They will all look good; make sure that you punch holes the right size for your thread material. I have three colours of thread and choose the one that I like the look of with the colour of the cover. My threading needle is thick and blunt and has an eye large enough for my thread. The video tutorial I use is linked at the end of this document. It's very good.

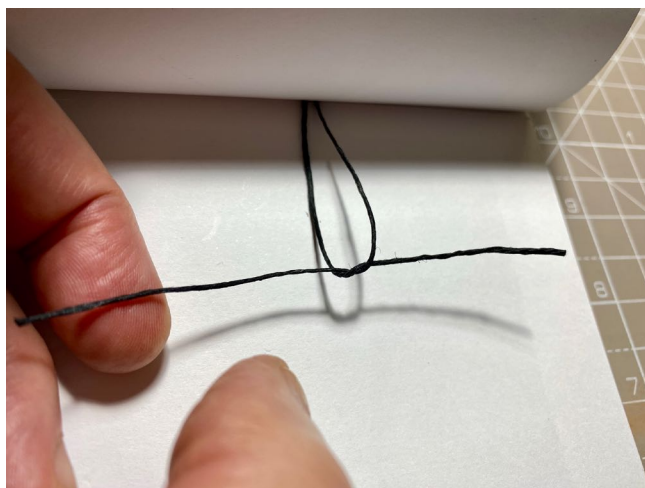
The final part of the binding process is to thread the needle back inside the book so that you can tie up the ends to finish of the binding invisibly. I've found that in a book of 40 or so pages, it helps to start and end the threading towards the end of the book – 5 or so pages from the back. This makes threading the needle back in much easier.



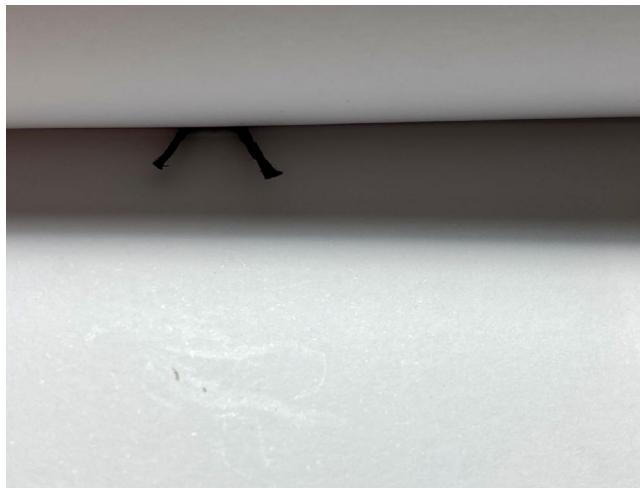
Threading the needle back into the book ready for knotting



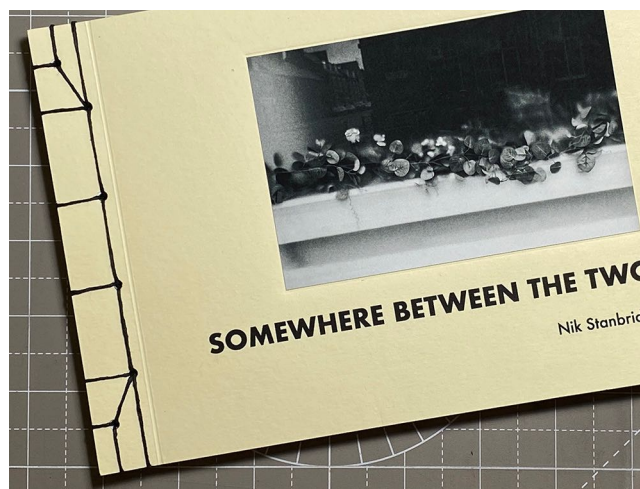
Needle inside the book



Create the knot



Cut the ends of the thread and you're done!



Finished binding

There are many types of Japanese stab binding, and they generally have their own specific hole positioning requirements. Whichever one you use; this binding method is surprisingly tight and robust. This is inherent in the design and execution, but also partly down to using 'grippy' waxed thread. I don't know what the results with, say, ribbon would be like.



Tight binding; perhaps a little too tight

LINKS AND RESOURCES

These are the tools and materials I've used with UK links:

- [Affinity Publisher template](#) (you can use this as a starting point for your A5 book and/or modify it any which way you like)
- [The 170gsm paper I use for the book pages](#) (this is in the UK, similar paper will be available everywhere). You can get mine from Amazon too.
- [300gsm Cover card](#). I get this from Hobbycraft here in the UK.
- The [Dahle 550](#) rotary cutter was the smallest one I could get that had a cutting guide. It's very good!
- Glue. This [Fabri-Tac](#) solvent-based glue prevents paper from buckling.
- Hole punch. I tried a cheap one before getting the [Nonaka Japanese one](#). Big mistake.
- Linen thread. This is the [sort of thread you want](#) – quite thick and natural linen/wax.
- [Score-pal](#) scoring frame. This frame is very well made and worth the investment.
- [Stab binding video tutorial](#) (I refer to this every time!). There are lots of tutorials, but this one is very simple and easy to follow.

POSTSCRIPT

Making a photobook is a multi-faceted process with many steps and many decisions along the way. Whatever the outcome, you will have a book in your hands and that's quite something. And your next one will be better; there will no doubt be many things you've learned making this one that you'll apply to the next.

This guide has been all about the processes, decisions, tools and ideas that I've used in making my photobooks. I hope it's been useful to you. If it has, let me know. And if there's something you've learned when making your books that would be useful to others, let me know that too.

Feel free to share it in its original form.

If you're reading a printed copy, the PDF is freely available for download from my website which is at <https://nikstanbridge.art>

This guide was written by Nik Stanbridge, an analogue photographer and printmaker living and working in Oxford in the UK.

Please send suggestions or edits for future versions to Nik at nikstanbridge@gmail.com

Nik is on [Instagram](#) and [Substack](#). His [website is here](#).