BILL'S HOME TECH

Home & Small Business Tech Solutions

AN EXTENDED GUIDE · NO. 2168

Updated November 2026

Faded, Streaky, or Smeared Printouts

Pages coming out pale, striped, or smudged? Here's how to tell the cause and bring the quality back

Plain-English printer help from:

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Tech Made Simple. Service Made Personal.

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SUMMARY

The 60-Second Version

Faded, streaky, and smeared are three different problems. Faded usually means low ink or a “draft” quality setting — check levels and turn quality up. Streaky white lines on an inkjet mean clogged nozzles — run a nozzle check, then a cleaning or two, and an alignment for fuzzy text.

Smears usually mean the wrong or damp paper, or handling prints too soon; set the correct paper type and let ink dry. On a laser, smears point to the fuser or drum, which is a repair. Regular use and good paper prevent most of it.

1 The Short Version

Faded, streaky, and smeared are three different problems with three different cures. Faded usually means low ink or a quality setting turned down. Streaky — white lines or missing bands — usually means clogged print-head nozzles on an inkjet. Smeared means the ink or toner is not setting properly, often from the wrong paper, a damp print, or a laser printer needing attention. Match the look to the fix below and you will rarely need more than a few minutes.

- Faded: low ink/toner, or a “draft”/economy setting — check levels and quality settings.
- Streaky (white lines): clogged nozzles on an inkjet — run a nozzle check and cleaning.
- Smeared: wrong or damp paper, or a laser needing service — change paper and let prints dry.
- A nozzle check and an alignment are the two maintenance steps that fix most quality issues.

TIP

Before you change anything, print a normal page you know well — a web page full of black text — so you can see the exact pattern of the problem. Streaks that run the same way every time, or a fade that affects one color, tell you a great deal about the cause.

2 Read the Symptom First

The single most useful thing you can do is look closely at what is actually wrong, because the cause is written in the pattern. Spend a moment matching your page to one of these.

What you see	Most likely cause
Pale, washed-out everything	Low ink/toner, or a draft/economy quality setting
White stripes or missing lines	Clogged inkjet nozzles, or a nearly empty color
One color off or missing	That color's cartridge low or its nozzles clogged
Smudges that rub off	Wrong paper, damp print, or laser fuser issue
Repeating marks or spots	Dirty rollers or a scratched drum (laser)

GOOD TO KNOW

Knowing whether you have an inkjet (liquid ink) or a laser (powder toner) matters here, because streaks point to clogged nozzles on an inkjet but to a drum or roller issue on a laser. The fixes diverge quickly, so be sure which kind you have.

3 Faded Pages: Check Ink and Settings

Pale, washed-out printing is most often simply low ink or toner, or a setting that is deliberately using less of it. Rule those out first.

1. Check ink or toner levels on the printer screen or in the maker's app; replace anything near empty.
2. On a laser, take the toner cartridge out and rock it gently side to side to redistribute the powder.
3. In the print settings, look for a “quality” or “media” option set to Draft, Economy, or Toner Save — turn it up to Normal or Best.
4. Print your test page again and compare.

> **TIP**
>
> A “draft” or “economy” setting saves ink on purpose and makes everything look pale. It is a fine default for everyday pages, but if you need crisp output, switch to Normal or Best quality for that print — then switch back to save ink the rest of the time.

4 Streaky Pages: Run a Nozzle Check

White stripes or missing bands across an inkjet page almost always mean some of the print-head nozzles are clogged. A nozzle check shows you exactly which colors are affected.

1. From the printer's Maintenance menu, print a “nozzle check” pattern.
2. Look for gaps or missing segments in any color's block.
3. Gaps confirm clogged nozzles — the cleaning in the next chapter is the fix.
4. Keep this page to compare after cleaning.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> Streaks that appear in just one color point to that one cartridge's nozzles; streaks across all colors suggest the printer sat idle and the whole head dried a little. Either way, a cleaning cycle is the right next step.

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5 Clean the Print Head

A built-in cleaning cycle flushes the clogged nozzles with a little ink. It is made for exactly this, though it uses ink, so run it a step at a time and compare results.

1. From Maintenance (or the maker's app), choose “Clean Print Head” or “Head Cleaning.”
2. Let it finish, then print a fresh nozzle check.
3. Compare with the first — if it improved but is not perfect, run one more cleaning.
4. If two or three cleanings do not clear it, stop and let the printer rest overnight before trying again.

WATCH OUT

Running cleaning after cleaning wastes a lot of ink and seldom helps once the first two or three have not. A stubborn clog is better cleared with an overnight rest, the warm-damp-towel soak, or a fresh cartridge — not by hammering the cleaning button.

6 Align the Print Head

If text looks fuzzy, doubled, or slightly crooked rather than streaky, the print head may need aligning — a quick automatic routine that lines up the nozzles so everything prints sharp and straight.

1. From the printer's Maintenance menu, choose “Align Print Head” or “Printhead Alignment.”

2. The printer prints a page of patterns and either reads it itself or asks you to pick the best ones.
3. Follow the prompts; it takes a minute or two.
4. Print your test page to confirm text is now crisp.

> **TIP**
> Run an alignment after you install a new cartridge or move the printer. It takes two minutes, costs almost no ink, and keeps text and photos looking their sharpest.

7 Smeared Pages: Paper and Drying

Ink that smears or smudges when you touch the page usually means it is not setting into the paper properly. On an inkjet this is often the paper itself or handling the page too soon; on a laser it points to the part that melts toner onto the page.

- Use plain printer/copier paper rated for inkjets or lasers, not glossy photo paper in a plain-paper job.
- Let inkjet prints sit a few seconds before stacking or handling — fresh ink needs a moment to dry.
- Check the paper is not damp from humidity; store paper in a dry place.
- In the print settings, set the correct “paper type” so the printer lays down the right amount of ink.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
> Telling the printer the right paper type matters more than people expect. Set to “plain paper” it uses a modest amount of ink; set to “photo” or “glossy” it floods the page — which smears badly on ordinary paper. Matching the setting to the paper cures a lot of smudging.

8 Smears on a Laser Printer

A laser printer that smudges, or leaves toner that rubs off, points to the fuser — the heated part that melts toner onto the page — or to a worn drum. These are more involved than inkjet fixes.

- Toner that rubs off easily suggests the fuser is not getting hot enough — often a service issue.
- Repeating smudges or marks at even intervals point to a scratched or worn imaging drum.
- Loose toner inside can cause smears — a careful look and a maker-approved clean may help.
- These parts are replaceable but model-specific; it is usually a job worth handing to a pro.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> Laser fuser and drum problems are real repairs, not settings tweaks, and they involve a hot component and fine powder that is easy to make a mess with. If your laser is smearing and it is not the paper, that is a good one to let me diagnose before you buy parts you may not need.

9 Clean the Rollers and Inside

Dust, stray toner, or sticky residue on the paper-feed rollers can leave marks and streaks. A gentle clean, following the maker's guidance, sometimes clears marks that no amount of head cleaning will.

1. Turn the printer off and open it up as the manual or maker's app describes.
2. Gently wipe visible rollers and paper path with a dry or lightly damp lint-free cloth, avoiding electrical parts.
3. Remove any scraps of paper or debris in the paper path.
4. Let everything dry fully, close up, and print a test page.

WATCH OUT

Keep moisture away from electrical contacts and, on a laser, never use water near toner — it sets into a stubborn mess. When in doubt about what is safe to touch inside your particular printer, leave the inside to someone who knows the model.

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10 Adjust Density and Color Settings

If prints are consistently a touch too light or the colors look off, the printer's density or color settings may simply be turned down. These live in the print settings or the maker's app.

- Look for a “density” or “darkness” setting and nudge it up if pages are faint.
- Check you are not accidentally printing in grayscale when you want color, or vice versa.
- Reset color settings to default if someone changed them and photos now look wrong.
- Make sure “ink save” or “eco” modes are off when you want full quality.

11 Photos Print With Bands or the Wrong Colors

Photos are less forgiving than text, so quality problems show up in them first. Banding, color casts, or dull prints usually trace back to the same nozzle and setting issues, plus the paper you are using.

- Horizontal bands across a photo point to clogged nozzles — run a nozzle check and cleaning.
- A color cast (everything too blue, red, or yellow) suggests one low or clogged color.

- Dull, flat photos often mean plain paper and a plain-paper setting; photo paper with the right setting is far richer.
- Set the paper type to match — “photo” or “glossy” — so the printer lays down the right amount of ink.

> **TIP**
>
> For a photo worth printing well, use real photo paper and set the printer to the matching photo-paper quality. The difference between a photo on plain paper at default settings and the same photo done right is night and day.

12 Marks Left by a Paper Jam or Debris

If the marks appeared suddenly rather than creeping in, a scrap of paper, a sticker, or debris in the paper path may be rubbing the page as it feeds through. Clearing the path often ends it at once.

1. Turn the printer off and open the paper path and any rear door.
2. Look for torn scraps of paper, labels, or debris and remove them gently.
3. Check the paper tray for a stray sticky note or label that could transfer marks.
4. Close up, load fresh clean paper, and print a test page.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> A single torn scrap left behind after a paper jam can smear or mark every page that follows. Clearing the whole path — not just the piece you first saw — is what finally stops the marks.

13 Prevent Quality Problems

A little regular use and the right supplies keep most quality trouble from ever appearing.

- Print a page every week or two so inkjet nozzles stay wet.
- Use good-quality paper stored somewhere dry.

- Keep genuine or reputable cartridges fitted and replace them before they run bone dry.
- Run an occasional nozzle check and alignment as routine maintenance.

14 When to Call Bill

Most faded, streaky, or smeared pages come back to life with a nozzle check, a cleaning, an alignment, and the right paper — and this guide gets you through all of those. But stubborn clogs, laser fuser and drum problems, and color that just will not come right can cross from easy fix into real repair, and it is worth knowing when you have reached that line.

I will diagnose exactly what is causing the poor quality, do the maintenance safely — including the inside cleaning many people would rather not attempt — and tell you honestly whether the printer is worth keeping or whether the ink and parts would cost more than a replacement. Clean, sharp pages, or a straight answer about why not.

- Cleanings and alignments have not brought the quality back.
- A laser printer is smearing or leaving marks that are not the paper.
- Colors are wrong and nothing you change fixes them.
- You want an honest read on whether it is worth more ink or a new printer.

CHEAT SHEET

Everyday Cheat Sheet

Keep this by the printer. Match the look of the page to the fix.

I want to…	Do this…
Fix faded pages	Check ink levels and turn quality off “Draft/Economy” to Normal
Fix white streaks	Run a nozzle check, then one or two head cleanings
Fix fuzzy/crooked text	Run the printer's “Align Print Head” routine
Fix smears (inkjet)	Use plain dry paper, set the right paper type, let prints dry
Fix smears (laser)	Suspect the fuser or drum — usually a repair, not a setting
Keep quality up	Print every week or two; run an occasional nozzle check
Get help	Call Bill: (330) 200-8042

BEFORE YOU GO

A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill. I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that results.

HOW I CAN HELP

Your Visit — and My Promise

You don't have to remember all of it — just that a friendly, patient person is one call away, whenever you'd rather have a hand.

KEY SPECS

In your home — $99 flat for the first visit, no contracts and no surprises, with a 30-day come-back-free follow-up. In-home visits cover Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities.
Outside the area? Remotely — $49 for a screen-share session (free for Support Plan members, $39/mo), refundable if I can't fix it — and credited toward a visit if you'd rather have me in person. Book either at billshometech.com/book.

GOOD TO KNOW

My promise — If you're not 100% satisfied with your visit, I'll come back at no charge, or refund the full $99. No questions, no awkwardness. That's how I'd want to be treated.

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