



# Comic Book Conditioning Standards



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## Introduction

TCGplayer has constructed this guide for both internal and external use. We have combined our experience and expertise with industry standards, seller feedback, and common definitions and practices to inform and develop this guide.

This guide includes Definitions and Standards for conditioning.

This guide will allow us to communicate our standards, train and measure our team members, and share our standards with the industry. TCGplayer aims to continuously improve these standards and be a thought leader in the industry.

## What is Conditioning vs Grading?

Different sellers, companies, and industries use varying terms for the act of “determining the quality of a product.”

For consistency, TCGplayer uses the term “conditioning” to describe the act of evaluating a product and categorizing it with a non-numeric quality label.

We reserve the term “grading” for the act of certifying or determining numerical measures of quality performed by professional grading services.

When we condition, we evaluate whether a comic falls within a certain condition range. For example, a condition of Near Mint may encompass a grade of 9.5 or 8.5. **While we include imperfection and severity measurements, it is important to note that a seller is not expected to individually and precisely measure each defect, and the time spent to evaluate will be determined by the value and age of each individual comic.** We include these measurements as a guide to create clear standards that are trainable and establish repeatability.

## Conditioning and Subjectivity

One common theme in both conditioning and grading within the comic industry is a lack of clear criteria for different conditions and a willingness to attribute variance to subjectivity. We aim to minimize subjectivity by having the clearest definitions and standards possible.

Consistency can be achieved by clear, usable standards which allow for process and training to be developed to meet those standards. This commitment creates repeatability, and repeatability provides a predictable level of quality for all customers.

## Consistency Across Comics and Printings

Many sources have created different standards for conditioning comics based on their printing, comic age, or manufacturer. There are valid reasons for doing so, but these need to be balanced with the need for consistency. Consistency helps to create unified, trustworthy condition standards.



# Comic Book Conditioning Standards

Consistency should take into account a comic's manufacturing, composition, and overall structure. Comics can show wear differently, have different qualities of printing and binding, and can have natural fading or color loss due to age. Conditioning standards and processes need to allow for these factors. We balance this consideration for manufacturing characteristics with a universal set of definitions and standards.

There are 2 types of criteria: one that relates to the manufacturing or printing process, and another that applies after the production. To allow for differences in comic composition and printing/manufacturing, comics should be judged in the context of their manufacturer and print run for any printing, ink, or manufacturing imperfections. These types of imperfections are a characteristic of the comic and the comic's production inherent to the comic itself.

For any damage or wear that can't be attributed to the comic printing process – imperfections that occur **after** the manufacturing process – the same criteria should be applied universally to all comics, printings, and manufacturers to achieve the highest level of consistency.

## Definitions

### Integrity

There are three aspects to consider when determining integrity:

**Structure: Is it still the intended shape?**

Anything that affects the structural soundness.

**Authenticity: Can it be verified?**

Anything that interferes with verifying authenticity such as misplaced, incomplete, or obscured authentication factors.

**Eye Appeal: Is the ink bright? Are the pages white?**

Anything that impacts the overall attractiveness of the comic book.

## Imperfections

The condition of a comic is determined by the number and extent of imperfections that a comic exhibits. Imperfections are any atypical printing or manufacturing defects and any wear or damage to the comic after that printing process. Imperfections are characterized by both Type and Severity.

### Cover Wear

Faded ink or ink discoloration, along with abrasions or general cover damage.

*Terms: Abrasions, Scratches, Fading/Discoloration*



### Staining/Soiling

Discolorations in the printed material caused by foreign substances or residue.

*Terms: Water/Moisture Stain, Browning/Tanning, Smudging*



### Blunting

Rounded or worn corners.

*Terms: Corner Rounding*



### Tear

A split or rip in the cover or page.



### Spine Roll

A condition where the left edge of the comic book curls toward the front or back, caused by folding each page to the back as the comic was read, rolling it, or by storing it flat and stacked with other comics.



### Stress Lines

Generally short, thin, straight horizontal lines on the spine, most commonly found around the staples, which are often caused by stress to the cover from bending or handling.



### Edge Creases

Creased marks on the edges of the comic book and usually results in a white line.



### Cover Crease

Book-length, vertical front cover crease along the spine, caused by bending the cover over the staples.





## Bindery / Print Defects

The condition of a comic is determined by the number and extent of imperfections that a comic exhibits. Imperfections are any atypical printing or manufacturing defects and any wear or damage to the comic after that printing process. Imperfections are characterized by both Type and Severity.

Some imperfections are printer or manufacturer characteristics. These defects and their severity are judged by their frequency within each manufacturer and print run. Some manufacturers have been able to provide extremely consistent printings, resulting in little variation in their comic population. For manufacturers or print runs that exhibit a greater variety of binding and centering, our condition standards allow for those variations to be evaluated in the context of their manufacturing or print runs.

Bindery / Print Defects are grouped into two categories:

### **Defects that impact the comic's integrity**

Defects such as missing pages, spine splits, and other imperfections that impact the integrity of a comic would qualify as Damaged. Comics with these types of defects need a [Listing with a Photo](#) and can be listed under the condition the comic would qualify for if it didn't have this defect.

### **Defects that do not impact the comic's integrity**

Defects such as miswrapped covers or untrimmed pages, folding, and other imperfections that do not impact the integrity of a comic are evaluated based on their severity. Slight imperfections are ignored in terms of evaluation. Minor and Moderate imperfections would downgrade a comic by one condition level. Major imperfections should be listed as a Listing with a Photo under the condition the comic would qualify for if it didn't have this defect.



# Comic Book Conditioning Standards

## Condition Levels

**Near Mint:** An excellent copy with outstanding eye appeal, generally having the appearance of having been carefully handled. The overall look is like it was purchased and read once or twice.

**Very Fine/Fine:** An above-average copy that shows some minor wear, generally flat and clean, with no significant defects. This condition appears to have been read several times and has been handled with moderate care.

**Very Good/Good:** While a comic book of this condition is still desirable as it has been handled with some care, it is your average and well-used copy. A comic book in this condition will show moderate wear. Eye appeal will be reduced because of the accumulation of defects.

**Fair:** A used comic book showing some substantial wear. These books will have all of their pages and covers. However, there may be some pieces missing while still being completely readable.

**Damaged:** Comics in this condition have been sufficiently degraded to the point where there is little or no collector value. Many collectors may consider this grade as the lowest collectible grade. Books in this condition completely lack eye appeal, may be severely creased, mildewed, or ragged, and may have staining and odor. This is the last grade for which a comic remains generally readable.

## Standards for Conditions

### Imperfection Severity Scale

Within each condition, we must define the guidelines for defect size and the allowable accumulation of defects. If there are more than the allowed quantity of a defect type, then the severity level is increased to the corresponding quantity severity bracket. For example, if a comic has 10 slight defects, it is increased to a “moderate” severity level.

Severity Level	Definition	Max Individual Defect Size	Quantity defect per book
<b>Slight</b>	Impacting a Minimal surface area of the comic.	1/16”-1/8”	1-4
<b>Minor</b>	Impacting a Noticeable surface area of the comic.	1/8”-1/4”	4-6
<b>Moderate</b>	Impacting a Noticeable surface area of the comic.	1/4”-1”	6-10
<b>Major</b>	Impacting the surface area of the comic above the measures for other severities.	> 1”	10-25

### Defect Accumulation Scale

After determining the severity and quantity of each defect type, compare them to a suggested guideline for total defects when grading the comic book as a whole.



# Comic Book Conditioning Standards

## Condition Standards

Category	Comic Book Criteria	Near Mint 0-3 defects allowed	Fine 4-10 defects allowed	Good 8-13 defects allowed	Fair 11-17 defects allowed	Damaged 15-24 defects allowed
<b>Cover Condition</b>	Cover Inks/ Gloss	Bright & Reflective	Moderate reduction	Major reduction	Low reflectivity	Low reflectivity
	Cover Wear	None	Slight	Moderate	Major	May be detached
	Cover Creases	Flat	Minor	Moderate	Major	Major
	Soiling, Staining	None	None	Minor	Moderate	Major
	Foxing	Slight	Minor	Moderate	Major	Major
<b>Edge Condition</b>	Blunting	Slight	Minor	Moderate	Major	Major
	Edge Creases	None	Minor	Moderate	Major	Major
<b>Spine Condition</b>	Spine Roll	None	Slight	Moderate	Moderate	Major
	Spine Split	None	Moderate	Up to 1/2"	Up to 1.5"	2/3 of length
	Staples	Centered, slight discoloration	Slight discoloration	Minor discoloration	Rusted, replaced	May be missing
	Staple Tears	None	Slight	Minor	Moderate	Major
	Rust Migration	None	Slight	Minor	Moderate	Major
	Stress Lines	Slight	Slight	Minor	Moderate	Major
	Centerfold	Secure	Mostly secure	Loose	Loose, detached at 1 staple	May be missing



# Comic Book Conditioning Standards

Category	Comic Book Criteria	Near Mint 0-3 defects allowed	Fine 4-10 defects allowed	Good 8-13 defects allowed	Fair 11-17 defects allowed	Damaged 15-24 defects allowed
<b>Page Condition</b>	Interior Tears	Slight	Minor around margins	Minor	Moderate	Low reflectivity
	Paper Quality / Color	Cream / off-white, supple	Yellowing / Tanning	Brown / Tan, not brittle	Brown, not brittle	May be detached
	Acid Odor	None	None	Faint	Present	Major
	Missing Pieces	None	None	None	½" triangle, ¼" square	¼ of front, entire back, chunks
	None	None	None	None	None	Yes
<b>Bindery / Printing Defects</b>	Tears	Slight 1/16" (Silver Era) 1/4" (Gold Era)	Minor	Moderate	N/A	N/A
<b>Repairs</b>	Amateur Repairs	None	None	None	Yes	Yes

## How to Condition a Comic Book

When value and age dictate detailed conditioning, here are some steps:

### STEP 1

Ensure your working area is well-lit and moisture free. Avoid direct sunlight and internal lighting that may produce UV, such as unfiltered fluorescent light. Normal incandescent lighting is best.

### STEP 2

Before removing the comic book from its bag, remove any tape or adhesive from its packaging. Once the comic book is removed from its bag, place it on a flat surface.

### STEP 3

Review the comic book's general exterior look, and assign it a preliminary condition based on first impression.

### STEP 4

Now carefully examine the exterior of the comic book, both the front cover and the back cover, identifying all of the defects, including the condition of the staples, creases, folds, tears, soiling, staining, discoloration, ink brightness, and cover gloss.

### STEP 5

If any more closely observed defects warrant reducing the preliminary condition you assigned, use the conditioning matrix and the defect criteria to determine the new condition you assigned.

### STEP 6

Inspect the spine of the comic book. Checking for rusted staples, stress lines, tears, and spine roll.

### STEP 7

Once the exterior has been evaluated, move to the inside of the cover pages, looking for additional tears, creases, and yellowing. Please note, do not open the cover of high-grade comic books more than 45 degrees to limit stresses on the book's spine.

### STEP 8

Once the interior covers are inspected, open the book up to the centerfold, ensuring it is tight and that all pages are accounted for.

### STEP 9

Review the pages to evaluate the color and brittleness of the pages. Determining the whiteness or yellowing of the pages as well as their general flexibility/brittleness.

## Glossary of Common Conditioning Terminology

**Abrasion:** Scuff-type marks or areas due to rubbing from handling, shelf-wear, or production/shipping wear.

**Arrival Date/Date Stamp:** The date written (often in pencil) or stamped on the cover of comics by either the local wholesaler, newsstand owner, distributor, or owner, to denote when it arrived for sale, or when it was bought. Ones done with grease pencils are usually considered defects, others are up to the collector's taste, unless they really obscure some art or are very large.

**Bindery Perforations:** Small, evenly distributed holes on the page margins which sometimes occur as part of the manufacturing process. Not considered a defect.

**Bindery/Printing Defects:** Various defects done during manufacture. Includes mistrimming/cutting, miswrapping (cover overlaps front or back too much or at an angle), inaccurate stapling, paper wrinkling, off-registered or even missing color, misbound pages, etc.

**Brittleness:** A severe condition of paper deterioration where paper loses its flexibility and thus chips and/or flakes easily.

**Browning/Tanning:** Covers and pages can become darkened/discolored over the years, which can result in whites becoming tanned or browned typically by oxidation, smoke, moisture/humidity, or other soiling. Browning is worse than tanning. "Yellowing" is another term, and less 'bad' than tanning or browning.

**Chipping/"Marvel Chipping":** A bindery trimming/cutting defect that results in a series of chips and tears at the top, bottom, and right edges of the cover (and pages), caused when the cutting blade of an industrial paper trimmer becomes dull. It was dubbed Marvel Chipping because it can be found quite often on Marvel comics from the late '50s and early '60s, but can also occur with any company's comic books from the late 1940s through the middle 1960s.

**Color Fleck/Flake:** A fleck is a tiny piece of color that has flaked off a cover, making the white paper substrata visible. Flecks are typically smaller than about a millimeter. Flakes are a bit larger versions of flecks.

**Color Touch/Touch-Up:** A restoration process by which colored ink is used to hide color flecks/flakes, and larger areas of missing color. Often a permanent marker is used to cover/fill in broken black lines or spots, usually along the spine.

**Comic Book Repair:** When a tear, loose staple or centerfold has been mended without changing or adding to the original finish of the book. Repair may involve tape, glue or nylon gossamer, and is easily detected; it is considered a defect.



# Comic Book Conditioning Standards

**Corner Rounding/Blunting:** Rounded corners generally occur over time as the corner of a book is damaged/worn.

**Coupon Cut/Missing:** A coupon has been neatly removed with scissors or razor blade from the interior or exterior of the comic, as opposed to having been ripped out (a cut is considered less severe than a tear). Both are generally considered a major defect.

**Cover Gloss:** The reflective quality of the cover inks. Dull covers are considered a defect unless, like many old comics, the cover had little gloss to begin with.

**Crease/Creasing:** Permanent folding, generally where color/structure is damaged resulting in a visible line. Most often on corners, but can be on edges due to thumbing or other bending.

**Dent:** Damage that occurs to a book when sharp pressure is exerted. Generally causes structural damage or damage to ink. "Corner crunch" is another term for a common type of dent.

**Distributor Ink/Stripes:** Color brushed or sprayed on the edges of comic book stacks by the distributor/wholesaler to code them for expedient exchange at the sales racks. Typical colors are red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. Distributor stripes are not generally considered a defect (unless it's excessive with a good amount on the cover).

**Fading/Faded Cover:** Fading and other discoloration can occur when a book is exposed to outside factors such as sunlight or long exposure to artificial light.

**Fold/Folding:** Permanent fold in pages or cover which doesn't result in color/structural damage, i.e., not color breaking or torn.

**Foxing:** Small orange or brown discoloration spots/areas on/inside a cover or pages, caused by mold.

**Migration:** Staining that occurs when rust damage on staples moves onto the cover and/or pages.

**Miswrap/Off-set/Off-center:** A binding defect where the front or back cover rides around to the other side beyond the normal 'spine line'. Can be angled or straight, and often accompanied by misaligned staples.

**Overhang/Hangover/Edge Overrun/Overlap/Over-cover:** The cover extends beyond the interior pages by a 1/16th" or more, sometimes enough to cause bends/tears on the cover edge.

**Printing Errors:** While some other forms of printing may yield valuable or collectable pieces (CCGs) when printing errors occur, errors in printing comic books generally are not collectable. This may include off-center stapling and printing, staples not going through all pages, folding errors, misprinted pages, covers or pages being stapled upside-down, cutting errors where cover or pages are not even, thin fold lines in the cover ("printing creases"), and other similar factory errors. These types of errors may also yield a lower grade.



# Comic Book Conditioning Standards

**Reading Crease:** Book-length, vertical front cover crease along the spine, caused by bending the cover over the staples. Square bound comics often receive these creases just by opening the cover too far to the left. For that reason, to preserve the condition of a comic, it's prudent to avoid opening further than 45 degrees.

**Reading Kinks:** Could also be considered "finger bends" or "thumb breaks", these defects are short small indentations on a cover, often curved, from kinking while handling or reading.

**Repair/Restoration:** Includes any attempt, professional or amateur, to enhance the appearance of an aging or damaged comic book. These procedures may include any of the following actions: recoloring, adding missing paper, tear seals, stain/ink/dirt or tape removal, "repaired" with tape, whitening, pressing out wrinkles, staple replacement, trimming, re-glossing, etc. With the exception of some simple cleaning procedures, a restored book can never be worth the same as an unrestored book in the same condition.

**Rusted Staples:** Staples, particularly in older comics, are prone to rust when exposed to too much moisture or humidity. This may also cause rust staining of the cover and pages around the staples.

**Shadow:** When a portion of a book is covered by other books or other items an exposed portion may become faded or discolored from being exposed to moisture, sun, dust, etc. that the rest of the book is not exposed to. It's therefore important to limit a book's exposure to moisture and UV light in order to preserve its condition.

**Smudge/Smudging, Soiling/Staining:** Soiling generally caused by handling with dirty/wet/oily fingers, or by dirt, dust, or liquids. At times this can also be caused during manufacture from handling before the ink is dry.

**Spine Roll:** A condition where the left edge of the comic book curls toward the front or back, caused by folding back each page to the back as the comic was read, rolling it for carrying around, or sometimes by being stored flat and stacked with other comics.

**Spine Split:** A separation of the covers anywhere along the spine fold, usually at the top or bottom.

**Spine Tick/Bindery Corner:** A small flap or piece on a corner of the spine, usually done during production. Piece may be missing. These aren't usually considered a defect unless you're grading them for a 'mint' condition.

**Spine Wear:** Creasing and other damage occurring on the spine of the comic.

**Staple Wear/Pull/Pop:** The area around the staple is creased or torn, and in extreme cases the staple is pulled through part or all of the book. Loose or detached covers are considered a major defect.

**Stress Lines/Marks:** Generally short, thin, straight horizontal lines on the spine, most commonly found around the staples, which are often caused by stress to the cover from bending or handling. Typically will result in white color breaking, but can also not break color and just have a wrinkle line.



# Comic Book Conditioning Standards

**Subscription Fold/Subscription Crease:** A fold or crease down the center of a book commonly caused by folding during postal delivery of a book. A subscription crease where there are breaks in color are worse than a subscription fold, but both are generally considered major defects.

**Trimming/Trimmed:** Cutting uneven/chipped edges of a book's pages and/or covers to even them up. Considered a defect.

**Water/Moisture Stains:** May be caused by exposure to water or other liquids, which stains the paper by altering its color (usually browns white paper), and/or making it warped, wavy, fuzzy etc., sometimes causing darker rings around the stain, and doing structural damage to the paper. Bad oil stains may cause paper to become translucent.

**Whiteness:** Obviously the amount of whiteness of cover and pages, going from white to off-white, cream, yellow, tan, brown and similar terms. Most modern comics don't have white borders on the pages any more, so this applies to mostly pre-1990's books, except for covers.