

OVERVIEW

Shipping documents are the key to international trade and have been used for thousands of years. While some people may consider shipping documentation to be a complex subject, the variety of documents that the exporter needs to complete are intended to ensure that product reaches its destination quickly, safely, and without problems. Documents outline the sale, shipment, and responsibilities of each party so that the full transaction is understood and complete without delay or additional costs. If there are problems, the parties responsible for fixing the situation and their responsibilities should be clearly identified in the documents. Documents also ensure compliance with applicable regulations.

Key considerations

Export documentation is a necessary process that all exporters must pay close attention to, as documentation requirements vary considerably by country, commodity, and situation. Below are some factors you may want to consider when determining which documents are needed for a particular shipment.

- **Country of origin and destination**, as well as transshipment
- **Mode of transportation**: truck, rail, ocean, air
- **Commodity**: agriculture, livestock, defense, end-use
- **Size**: value, volume, weight, dimensions
- **Parties to the transaction**: shipper, consignee, agents, brokers, banks

Some of the more commonly used documents needed when exporting include:

- **Commercial Invoice**: a bill for the company's product in key markets.
- **Packing List**: a detailed breakdown of the items within a shipment prepared by the shipper.
- **Bill of Lading**: issued by the carrier to the shipper for receipt of the goods, and is a contract between the owner of the goods and the carrier to deliver the goods. A B/L can be either negotiable or non-negotiable.

- **Certificate of Origin:** A document prepared by the original manufacturer or exporter and stating the items country of origin. It may be required by some countries for all or only certain products. Some countries require that the c/o be notarized, certified by local chamber of commerce, and/or legalized by the commercial section of the consulate of the destination country.

Learn more

Other export documents to be aware of include export licenses, other certificates for specific goods, Declaration of Dangerous Goods, and the ATA Carnet. For more information on all of these, please refer to the **U.S. Department of Commerce**. WEDC and the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection can provide assistance relating to certain **product specific certificates** that may be required for export.

International freight forwarders arrange cargo movement to an international destination and have the expertise that allows them to prepare and process the documentation and perform related activities pertaining to international shipments. Using an experienced and reputable freight forwarder will help you to avoid problems and secure your relationship with your customers. You may want to consider providing your forwarder with a suitable “letter of authorization” to act as your agent on overseas documentation matters.

For more information, please contact
the global trade and investment team:
intl@wedc.org