

# A Guide to Export Documentation

Business Information Factsheet

BIF208 · September 2016

---

## Introduction

The documentation required when sending goods to a customer overseas can seem complicated to a new exporter. However, with the harmonising of international trade documentation and standard terms, and the wide range of help and advice available, the process of dealing with the paperwork is becoming easier and more efficient. But it remains vital to get export documentation right, as this is the only way to ensure that goods reach their destination on time and that the exporter receives payment.

This factsheet explains the various documents required when exporting goods overseas.

## Types of export documentation

Export documentation is used for a number of reasons:

- To reduce delays in shipment and delivery.
- To describe cargo.
- To gain customs clearance.
- To indicate the ownership of goods for collection purposes.
- To obtain payment.

The United Nations (UN) Layout Key for Trade Documents provides a standard layout for export paperwork. The standard layout means the same piece of information is in the same place on all documents. This makes the completion, checking and comparison of related documents much easier, as does the use of standard trade terms - known as Incoterms - that are commonly used in international trade. See BIF 184, A Guide to Incoterms, for further details.

Most export documentation falls into one of the following categories:

- Commercial documents.
- Official documents.
- Transport documents.
- Insurance documents.

## Commercial documents

Commercial documents include:

- **Commercial invoice.** A commercial invoice is a bill the exporter prepares for the goods they are exporting. It acts as a basis for the assessment of any import duty the overseas buyer may

have to pay, and is used as evidence of the value of goods in the event of an insurance claim. In some cases, it also forms a contract of sale. The invoice describes the goods and must be completed according to the requirements of the customs authorities in the country to which the goods are being exported.

- **Pro forma invoice.** This refers to an invoice sent in advance of a shipment. This may be needed if an overseas customer has to obtain an allocation of foreign currency or an import licence prior to dispatching the goods. Pro forma invoices can also be used to send commercial samples and other free-of-charge consignments.
- **Export Cargo Shipping Instruction (ECSI).** This is the instruction from an exporter to a freight forwarder or carrier, setting out the terms and conditions for the movement of goods and stating who is responsible for what happens to the goods during each stage of the process.

## Official documents

There are various official documents to be aware of:

- **Single Administrative Document (SAD).** Known as the C88 in the UK, this is an official document used for exports, imports and goods passing through the European Union (EU). It is a standard, universally used form for the passage of goods through customs. Go to [www.gov.uk/declarations-and-the-single-administrative-document](http://www.gov.uk/declarations-and-the-single-administrative-document) for further information.
- **Intrastat Supplementary Declarations (SDs).** If goods are exported to the EU above an annual threshold, or imported from the EU above an annual threshold, exporters are required to make monthly Intrastat SDs to HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) under the Value Added Tax (Amendment) Regulations 2008. Go to [www.gov.uk/guidance/how-to-complete-your-intrastat-supplementary-declaration](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/how-to-complete-your-intrastat-supplementary-declaration) for further information.
- **Export licences.** These are required under the Export of Goods (Control) Orders for certain products to be exported legally, for example, certain drugs, chemicals, antiques, military-related items, high-tech industrial goods and scientific instruments. It is the exporter's responsibility to find out whether their goods require an export licence and to obtain one if necessary. Exporters can ask advisers at the Department for International Trade or their local chamber of commerce for guidance. The Department for International Trade's Export Control Organisation ([www.gov.uk/government/organisations/export-control-organisation](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/export-control-organisation)) can be contacted for further information, as can the Arts Council England (ACE, [www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/cultural-property/export-controls/export-licensing](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/cultural-property/export-controls/export-licensing)) for export licences for antiques and works of art.
- **Certificates of Origin (C/O).** These provide evidence that goods have been obtained, produced, manufactured or processed in a particular country, and are required in some countries when goods are imported. They are available from local chambers of commerce for goods of EU origin.
- **Movement certificates.** These are required when goods are being exported from the EU to a country covered by EU trade agreements. These certificates ensure preferential tariff treatment.
- **Health certificates.** Often required for food, livestock, agricultural and horticultural products, these certificates are issued by a state-appointed veterinary inspector or health board. In the UK, this is managed by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

(Defra, [www.gov.uk/government/collections/guidance-on-importing-and-exporting-live-animals-or-animal-products](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/guidance-on-importing-and-exporting-live-animals-or-animal-products)).

- **Clean Report of Findings (Pre-Shipment Inspection Certificate).** These apply mainly in developing countries where foreign currency is restricted, and where priority may be given to medical supplies, food and other essential goods. The report is issued by an independent inspection house, appointed to check that the goods being shipped are those on the pro forma invoice and that they conform to quality, price and quantity requirements. Checks are also made once shipment is complete. Exporters should contact the inspection agency in the country they are exporting to as early as possible if they think inspection may be required.
- **Import licences and special requirements.** Individual countries have their own very specific documentary requirements. Many require import licences for certain items, and some for all types of goods. Others prohibit certain goods entirely. Although it is normally the overseas buyer's responsibility to comply with import licensing requirements, it makes sense for the exporter to confirm that they are doing so. Export advisers from the Department for International Trade (DIT) or at a local chamber of commerce will be able to advise about documentary requirements in specific countries.

## Transport documents

Transportation documents commonly required include:

- **Bill of lading.** This is issued and signed by the exporter's carrier once the goods being exported have been placed in their care. It serves as evidence of a contract between the exporter or the overseas customer and a carrier to ship the goods. It also acts as a receipt for goods. It may describe the condition of the goods when transferred to the carrier and serves as a document of title, indicating the person or business that has the right to possess the goods.
  - The bill of lading should show relevant information, such as date and point of dispatch, carrier's name and destination port. The reverse side gives details of the terms on which the carrier is shipping the goods, and indicates limitations of their liability. Bills are usually completed in sets of two or three; one may be forwarded immediately and another is sent later in case of loss. If payment is by letter of credit, however, a full set is usually required to be presented, along with other documents such as invoices, packing lists and C/O.
  - Goods can be consigned 'to order', which means the importer can give someone else authority to collect them on arrival. In this case, the bill of lading will be endorsed by the exporter. If the consignee (the exporter's customer) is named, the goods will only be released to them.
  - Bills of lading can be issued in several forms. A 'shipped' or 'shipped on board' bill signifies that the goods have been received and placed on board ship, while a 'received for shipment' bill indicates that the goods have been received by the ship owner, but have not been placed on board. Other types of bills cover combined transport - that is, over land as well as sea - and containerisation.
- **Sea Waybill.** This is a contract between a sea carrier and an exporter to carry goods by sea. It is needed by the importer to take possession of the goods. Although similar to a bill of lading, it does not include information indicating the person or business that has the right

to possess the goods and does not transfer title in the goods. Waybills can be transmitted either on paper or in electronic format.

- **Air Waybill.** This is a receipt issued by an airline when goods are received for carriage, which travels with the goods. It is similar to a bill of lading, but cannot serve as a document of title.
- **CMR/CIM.** The CMR (Convention on the Contract for the International Carriage of Goods by Road) accompanies goods dispatched by road. The CIM (Convention concerning International Carriage of Goods by Rail) accompanies goods dispatched by rail. Neither transfer title in the goods, but both function as receipts and evidence of the contract of carriage.
- **Dangerous Goods Note (DGN).** This is required when shipping hazardous or potentially hazardous goods. The exporter must provide the shipping or freight carrier with full details of the goods, including the official class of danger to which they belong. Exporters should also be aware of packaging and labelling requirements for hazardous cargoes. For air transport, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) Dangerous Goods Declaration should be used. Go to [www.iata.org/whatwedo/cargo/dgr/Pages/index.aspx](http://www.iata.org/whatwedo/cargo/dgr/Pages/index.aspx) for further information.
- **Standard Shipping Note (SSN).** This is usually completed by the exporter and it provides anyone that receives the goods, such as a port authority or container base, with the information necessary to handle the goods. The Note may be used for goods classified as hazardous by a mode of transport other than that for which a DGN or IATA Dangerous Goods Declaration is required.
- **ATA (Temporary Admission) Carnets.** These are particularly useful when exporters are taking goods through a number of countries, for example to a trade fair, but will bring them back to the UK. Carnets are issued by selected chambers of commerce on payment of a fee and they serve as a passport for the goods. Export and import restrictions, including licence requirements, must still be observed under the Carnet system. The maximum period of validity of Carnets is one year, but they can be used a number of times during that period.

## Insurance documents

It is essential to arrange adequate insurance cover for goods being exported. The following documents will be issued:

- **Insurance policy.** A freight insurance policy should be arranged through a broker with a thorough knowledge of exporting. The policy should cover goods for at least their full value (110% is common), carry all details of quantity and route, and provide for time extensions and trans-shipments where necessary.
- **Certificate of insurance.** A certificate is issued by the insurance company or underwriters to certify that cover has been arranged for the goods being exported. It should detail the degree of protection and list the policy number and all relevant details - dates, destination, transport method, route, description of the cargo and the value for which it is insured.

## Using electronic systems

Electronic systems have simplified international trade by speeding up processes and improving accuracy in transcriptions. Systems include:

- **Electronic data interchange (EDI).** The transfer of data through computer networks has become vital to the international exchange of commercial information. It makes document exchange faster and improves accuracy by cutting out transcription errors. EDI systems use conventions and standards of formatting for correct data delivery. International standards have been devised so that documents such as invoices and orders can be exchanged between importers and exporters. Their precise layout makes them simpler to use for trading partners in different countries without a common language. Banks and chambers of commerce provide EDI systems, as does HMRC, which allows for paperless export declarations to be made. The benefits of using EDI include speed, accuracy and the ability to send information to a large number of recipients using one system. Disadvantages include security concerns when dealing with global orders without knowing the integrity of the person or organisation placing the order.
- **The National Export System (NES).** This is an electronic processing system for transmitting all export and transit customs declarations directly to the Customs Handling of Import and Export Freight (CHIEF) computer system. This affects all exports to non-EU destinations. Go to [www.gov.uk/export-declarations-and-the-national-export-system-export-procedures](http://www.gov.uk/export-declarations-and-the-national-export-system-export-procedures) for further information.
- **SPIRE** is the Export Control Organisation's fully automated licence-processing system. Go to [www.spire.trade.gov.uk](http://www.spire.trade.gov.uk) for further information about how to register to use the system.

## Sources of assistance for export documentation

- HMRC can advise on export documentation requirements for UK or EU purposes, VAT, controlled goods and legislation. Customs officers oversee the key aspects of export transactions, namely documentation, legislative standards and duty. Go to [www.gov.uk/topic/business-tax/import-export](http://www.gov.uk/topic/business-tax/import-export) for further information.
- Local chambers of commerce in the UK can help with information and advice about all aspects of export and import documentation, and will usually have experienced staff to advise about specific problems. Go to [www.britishchambers.org.uk/find-your-chamber](http://www.britishchambers.org.uk/find-your-chamber) to find a local chamber.
- The Export Control Organisation can provide information if a particular product is exportable only under licence. It can give details of any restrictions and how to obtain the relevant licence. Go to [www.gov.uk/government/organisations/export-control-organisation](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/export-control-organisation) for more guidance.
- Freight forwarders and documentation specialists can offer a range of services covering the physical shipping of goods for export, usually including packing and documentation. The British International Freight Association (BIFA, [www.bifa.org](http://www.bifa.org)) can help exporters contact freight forwarders and specialists.

## Further information

BIF 184 A Guide to Incoterms

BIF 225 An Introduction to Getting Paid by Overseas Trade Customers

BIF 235 Government Support for Exporters

BIF 238 A Guide to Methods of Entering Export Markets

BIF 396 Choosing and Using a Freight Forwarder

## Useful contacts

HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) is the Government department responsible for the collection of tax. It provides information and advice to individuals and firms.

Tel: 0300 200 3700 (Imports and exports general enquiries helpline)

Website: [www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-revenue-customs](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-revenue-customs)

The British Chambers of Commerce provides a wide range of business services in areas such as exporting, training, information and representation.

Tel: (020) 7654 5800

Website: [www.britishchambers.org.uk](http://www.britishchambers.org.uk)

The British International Freight Association (BIFA) is a trade body representing the UK international freight services industry. It has an online directory of members.

Tel: (020) 8844 2266

Website: [www.bifa.org](http://www.bifa.org)

The British Exporters Association (BExA) is a national trade association representing all sectors of the export community. It has a range of publications for exporters, which are available online.

Tel: (020) 7222 5419

Website: [www.bexa.co.uk](http://www.bexa.co.uk)

The Department for International Trade (DIT) provides a wide range of assistance to UK firms trading internationally, and to firms seeking to locate in the UK.

Tel: (020) 7215 5000

Website: [www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-international-trade](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-international-trade)

Business Wales helps Welsh firms to establish themselves in overseas markets.

Tel: 0300 060 3000

Website: [www.wales.com/business/business-support/export-and-trade](http://www.wales.com/business/business-support/export-and-trade)

Scottish Development International works with partners to help Scottish firms trade internationally.

Tel: 0300 013 2734

Website: [www.sdi.co.uk](http://www.sdi.co.uk)

Invest Northern Ireland can provide support and information to Northern Irish firms wishing to trade overseas.

Tel: 0800 181 4422

Website: [www.investni.com/index/selling.htm](http://www.investni.com/index/selling.htm)

---

**DISCLAIMER** While all reasonable efforts have been made, the publisher makes no warranties that this information is accurate and up-to-date and will not be responsible for any errors or omissions in the information nor any consequences of any errors or omissions. Professional advice should be sought where appropriate.

**Cobweb Information Ltd**, Unit 9 Bankside, The Watermark, Gateshead, NE11 9SY.

Tel: 0191 461 8000 Website: [www.cobwebinfo.com](http://www.cobwebinfo.com)