

Before you issue a bill of lading: the preparation checklist

How to use it. Work down it once with the file open beside you. Anything you cannot tick is a question for the shipper, the carrier or your own operations **before** the document is prepared — not after. The last block is the one most people skip, and it is the one that causes the most delay.

The parties — who is on the document

- ☐ **Shipper / exporter: full legal name, street address, country, and a contact who can answer a question out of hours.**

WHY The shipper is the party contracting with the carrier, and the cargo particulars are carried as *particulars furnished by the shipper* — that name is where responsibility for them sits.

CLASSIC MISTAKE Entering a trading name, a division, or your own forwarding company instead of the legal entity named on the commercial invoice. Where a letter of credit is involved, a name that differs from the credit by one word is a discrepancy.

- ☐ **Consignee: the exact wording, decided before anyone types.**

WHY This single line decides who can take delivery. Naming a consignee makes the goods deliverable to that party. Wording that makes them deliverable “to order” or “to the order of” a bank means the bill can be transferred by endorsement, and whoever holds a properly endorsed original controls the cargo.

CLASSIC MISTAKE Choosing “to order” from habit on an open-account sale, or naming the customs broker because they handle the file. Whoever this line names is who the carrier will deal with.

- ☐ **Notify party: a separate decision from the consignee, taken on purpose.**

WHY The notify party is who the carrier tells when the vessel arrives. It is an addressee for information. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** Treating notify and consignee as one field. The broker or the warehouse usually belongs in notify; putting them in the consignee line hands them the cargo. The opposite error is leaving notify blank on an import consigned to a bank — nobody receives the arrival notice, and the free time runs out while the file sits.

- ☐ **The issuing company: your own legal name, address and contact, as they appear on the rest of your paperwork.**

WHY A house bill names the party issuing it, and downstream parties match that against the booking and against your invoice. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** A branch address on the bill and the head-office entity on the invoice, so the consignee’s accounts-payable team cannot match the two.

The references — how the document is found again

- ☐ **Bill of lading number, allocated from your own series before you start.**

WHY It is the document’s identity. Every message, amendment and release afterwards keys on it. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** Reusing a number from a booking that was cancelled and rebooked, so two live documents carry the same number in the same trade.

- ☐ **Carrier booking number, copied from the booking confirmation itself.**

WHY It is how the carrier ties your cargo to its allocation on a specific sailing. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** Transcribing it from a forwarded email and losing a prefix or a leading zero. The container then has no booking the terminal can find.

Gather these before you open your carrier’s form. Nothing on this sheet is a bill of lading — it is the list of things you need in front of you so that the document you eventually issue does not have to be corrected. Each entry says what to have, why it matters when the cargo moves, and the mistake that is made most often.

- ☐ **Shipper’s reference, purchase order or export reference.**

WHY It is how the buyer’s warehouse and accounts-payable teams match your paperwork to their own order.

CLASSIC MISTAKE Leaving it out because the field is optional. The invoice then sits unmatched at the far end for weeks.

The route — where the carriage starts and stops

- ☐ **Place of receipt and place of delivery, completed only where the carriage genuinely starts or ends inland.**

WHY They describe carriage beyond the ports, and they are what says whether you sold a port-to-port move or a door move. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** Copying the ports into these lines to fill the space. That describes a through movement you may not have contracted and may not be able to perform.

- ☐ **Port of loading — the port, not the nearest city.**

WHY It is where the carrier takes the goods on board, and it anchors the transit. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** Naming an inland city, or naming a port that exists in more than one country without the UN/LOCODE that settles which one.

- ☐ **Port of discharge — where the sea carriage ends.**

WHY It sets where the carrier discharges, and it drives the arrival notice, the free time and the customs formalities at that port. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** Writing the customer’s inland destination in the discharge line because that is where the goods are ultimately going.

- ☐ **Vessel and voyage, taken from the carrier’s confirmation on the day you issue.**

WHY The voyage number is what manifests your cargo onto one specific sailing. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** Typing a plausible vessel because the line looked empty. Where the vessel genuinely is not yet named, the convention is to say so rather than guess — and to correct it once the carrier names it.

The cargo particulars — what the shipper is furnishing

- ☐ **Marks and numbers, read off the cartons rather than off the last shipment.**

WHY The marks are how a tally clerk, a warehouse and a customs officer identify the goods physically.

CLASSIC MISTAKE “N/M” on the bill while the packing list carries printed marks — or marks that differ from the cartons by a space, a dash or a change of case. Devanning stops while somebody works out whether it is the same cargo.

- ☐ **Number and kind of packages, counted at the level everyone else counts.**

WHY The package count is what the carrier receipts and what the consignee tallies on delivery. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** Counting pallets on the bill and cartons on the invoice, so one document says ten and the other says four hundred. State both — “10 pallets containing 400 cartons”.

- ☐ **Description of goods: the plain commercial description, agreed with the shipper.**

WHY It is the description the carrier receipts and the buyer’s bank reads. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** An internal SKU, a marketing name, or a description that contradicts the commercial invoice. Under a letter of credit it has to agree with the credit. Tariff

classification belongs on the customs paperwork, not in this line.

- ☐ **Gross weight, with the unit written next to it.**
WHY Gross weight is the goods plus all packing, pallets and dunnage — it is what the carrier and the terminal actually handle. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** This one comes in two everyday forms. Putting the net weight — the goods alone — into a gross-weight line understates the shipment by the whole tare of the packaging. And entering a figure in pounds where the line asks for kilos: a number with no unit beside it is not a weight.
- ☐ **Net weight and volume, stated only where you have them and consistent with everything else.**
WHY Volume drives the freight on less-than-container cargo, and it drives the loading plan. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** Quoting the volume of the goods rather than the volume of the packed pieces. Dimensions are measured over the pallet, including the pallet.
- ☐ **Totals that are the sum of the lines.**
WHY Everyone downstream checks the total against the lines before they check anything else. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** A total typed by hand, then a line amended without redoing it. Totals should be derived, never remembered.

If the cargo moves in a container

- ☐ **Container number: four letters and seven digits, with the check digit verified.**
WHY The last digit of a container number is computed from the rest. It exists precisely to catch a transposition.
CLASSIC MISTAKE Two digits swapped in transcription. It looks right, it passes a human eye, and it fails at the gate.
- ☐ **Seal number, size and type, and the tare read off the container's own plate.**
WHY The seal recorded is the evidence that the box was closed on your cargo; the tare is part of the verified weight.
CLASSIC MISTAKE Recording the seal from the booking rather than the seal actually applied at stuffing — and taking the tare from a size table instead of reading the plate.
- ☐ **Verified gross mass, and which method produced it.**
WHY Under the SOLAS container weight requirement, a packed container needs a verified gross mass before it is loaded. That figure is the cargo plus dunnage plus the container's own tare — either the whole packed box weighed on a weighbridge, or the cargo weighed and the tare added. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** Submitting the cargo weight as the verified gross mass, so the figure is short by the tare. The verified mass goes to the carrier on the carrier's own deadline and through the carrier's own channel; the bill is not where it gets submitted.

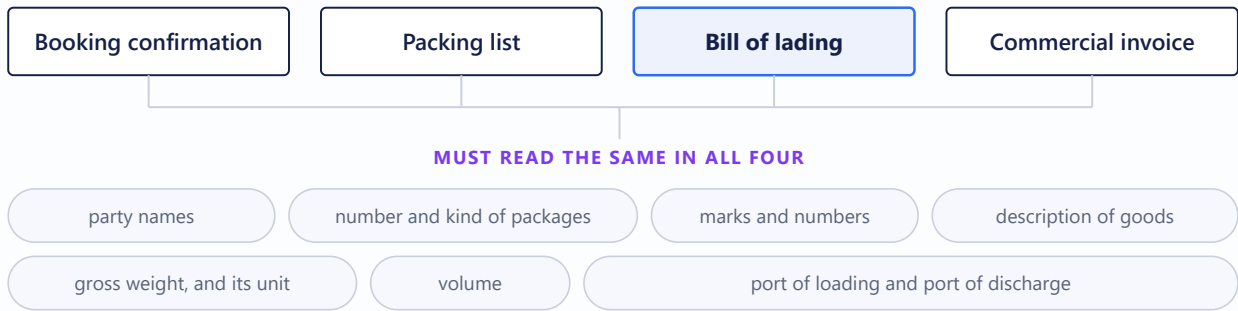
Freight, issuance and condition

- ☐ **Freight terms, and where the freight is payable.**
WHY This says who owes the carrier, and it underpins the carrier's lien over the cargo. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** "Collect" on a sale where the seller has already sold the goods freight-paid. The consignee is asked to pay freight it has already been charged inside the price, and the cargo sits while the two sides argue.
- ☐ **How many originals are being issued — decided with the customer, not at the printer.**
WHY Originals are a physical set. Once one is surrendered against delivery, the rest are spent. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** This one also comes in two forms. Issuing a full set and then couriering the whole set in one envelope, so a single loss takes the lot. Or

issuing originals at all when the customer needed a telex or express release and none should have existed.

- ☐ **Place and date of issue.**
WHY The issue date is when the document is made out. It is not the date the goods went on board. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** Adjusting the issue date to fit a latest-shipment date under a letter of credit. That is not a clerical shortcut.
- ☐ **On-board status and date, where the goods are already loaded.**
WHY A bill that is only "received for shipment" says the carrier holds the goods; an on-board notation says they are loaded on the named vessel. Banks look for it. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** Assuming the issue date does the work of an on-board date.
- ☐ **The condition of the cargo as it was actually received.**
WHY The bill is the carrier's receipt for the apparent order and condition of the goods. A note about damaged or short packaging is the carrier's record of what it took.
CLASSIC MISTAKE Pressing for a clean bill when the tally noted crushed cartons or a wet pallet. That does not repair the cargo; it removes the record of the damage.
- ☐ **The carrier's own form and its terms, confirmed before you prepare anything.**
WHY The carriage terms are the carrier's. They are not reproduced on this sheet, and they differ between carriers and between trades. **CLASSIC MISTAKE** Preparing on a generic layout and finding at the counter that the carrier accepts only its own. Ask which form, and where its terms sit, before you fill in anything.

The same particulars appear on the booking confirmation, the packing list, the commercial invoice and, where there is one, the letter of credit. Put them side by side before you issue, and confirm that each of these reads the same in every place it appears.



One set of particulars, four documents. A disagreement in any one of the fields below is a disagreement the carrier, the bank or the customs officer will find before you do.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ shipper and consignee names, spelled identically | ☐ gross weight, and its unit |
| ☐ number and kind of packages | ☐ volume |
| ☐ marks and numbers | ☐ port of loading and port of discharge |
| ☐ description of goods | ☐ the references you quoted on each |

CLASSIC MISTAKE Correcting a figure on one document under time pressure and not on the other three. A disagreement between the bill and the packing list is one of the most common reasons a consignee’s clearance stalls.

Where this stops being a checklist. Every item on this sheet is a field Linbis already holds on the shipment file, so the paperwork is generated from the file rather than re-keyed: master and house bills, sea waybills, arrival notices, manifests, dock receipts and delivery orders come off the same record, in the commercial flavour you pick — switch, express or telex release, to-order, straight, short form, charter party, combined transport. A carrier update on the master bill writes itself onto every house bill underneath it. **linbis.com**

What this sheet is. This is a preparation checklist published by Linbis, a freight-forwarding software company. It is a working aid for gathering information before a bill of lading is prepared. It is not a bill of lading and it is not any carrier’s form. Nothing here has been issued or signed by a carrier and no goods have been received against it. Use your carrier’s own form and confirm its terms with the carrier; those terms are not reproduced here. Linbis is not a law firm and does not give legal advice — this is general information, not advice about your shipment, and we accept no liability for loss or damage arising from its use.