

Packing List: The Expediting Document for Gapless Shipment Tracking

The packing list is a commercial and shipping document that itemises the contents of a consignment in detail. It complements the invoice and delivery note and enables goods receipt to check the delivery item by item. For technical buyers it is a key control document for detecting partial deliveries, shortfalls and deviations at an early stage and for keeping the flow of goods traceable through to booking.

Key facts

- The packing list documents the type, quantity, packaging units and composition of a consignment.
- It usually contains no prices, but serves quantity- and identity-related verification.
- Typical mandatory details are the delivery note number, purchase order reference, item numbers, packages, weights and dimensions.
- It forms the basis for goods receipt, customs clearance and reconciliation with the purchase order and invoice.
- In practice, it is often provided by the supplier via EDI or as a PDF/barcode label.
- Deviations between the packing list and the ordered quantity are a typical trigger for complaints and follow-up on outstanding quantities.

Definition: Packing List

The packing list is a document created by the supplier or shipper that itemises the exact contents of a consignment – items, quantities, packages, weights and, where required, batch or serial numbers.

Distinction from delivery note and invoice

The delivery note accompanies the goods and forms the basis for the goods receipt note (GRN); the invoice is the price- and payment-relevant document. The packing list is more detailed than the delivery note: it describes the physical composition of the consignment, e.g. how many cartons, pallets or stillages contain which items in which quantities. Prices and terms are typically omitted so that the document can also be used by freight forwarders, customs authorities and recipients without price information.

Role in the ordering process

The packing list is tied to the purchase order and references its number and line items. At goods receipt it is reconciled with the purchase order and the goods received; deviations lead to a complaint, partial delivery/remainder or a request for the missing quantity. In automated processes with electronic goods receipt, packing list data often feeds directly into the goods receipt booking run and – at the appropriate level of maturity – can form the basis for Evaluated Receipt Settlement (ERS), in which the invoice is generated from the goods receipt.

Content and structure of a packing list

The structure varies by industry and mode of transport, but certain core elements have become established as standard.

Typical mandatory details

Without these details, the packing list loses its function as a control instrument.

- Delivery note or shipment number and date
- Customer purchase order number and line items
- Item number (supplier and customer number), description, quantity
- Number and type of packages (cartons, pallets, stillages)
- Gross/net weight and dimensions per package
- Batch or serial numbers, where applicable conformity and inspection notes

Additional details in export

For cross-border deliveries, details supporting customs clearance and freight documentation are added: country of origin, HS codes (commodity codes), net/gross weights, mode of transport and container or seal numbers. The packing list is then frequently required as a customs document alongside the commercial invoice and certificate of origin. If it is missing or contradicts the other documents, delays in customs clearance loom – in practice one of the most common causes of delays in import deliveries.

Process integration in procurement

The packing list is not an isolated document but part of the order-to-receipt process and the subsequent invoice verification.

From dispatch to goods receipt

After dispatch, purchasing and logistics receive the packing list as a dispatch advice – via email, portal, EDI or as a barcode label on the package. Goods receipt uses it for preparation: acceptance appointments, storage locations and staffing requirements can be planned, particularly for large volumes or call-offs under framework agreements. At physical goods receipt, an item-by-item check is carried out; identified discrepancies are recorded as partial delivery/remainder and followed up in the dunning run.

Reconciliation in the three-way match

In the classic three-way match (purchase order – goods receipt – invoice), the packing list provides the quantity- and package-related detail basis. It explains discrepancies that come to light on the invoice or GRN – for example when several packages are consolidated in one invoice line. With high data quality and automated goods receipt, the match can be reduced to two documents; the packing list then remains as evidence in the digital archive.

Evidentiary function in disputes

In the event of transport damage, shortfalls or incorrect deliveries, the packing list is the key piece of evidence vis-à-vis the supplier and freight forwarder. It documents what was actually shipped and supports complaints, the enforcement of claims for replacement and the creation of a contingency plan for short-term alternative sourcing. Buyers should therefore ensure archival traceability.

Key KPIs around the packing list

Packing lists and their deviations can be measured and translated into supplier management metrics.

Relevant performance metrics

Common metrics are packing list accuracy (proportion of shipments without deviation from the purchase order), the coverage rate of electronic packing list provision (EDI/portal share) and the average goods receipt processing time per consignment. These figures frequently feed into supplier evaluations and have a direct impact on process costs in goods receipt.

Positioning within supplier controlling

High deviation rates at packing list level are an early indicator of process problems at the supplier – for example incorrect master data or insufficient picking quality. They complement classic metrics such as on-time delivery and can be addressed in regular reviews, for example as part of a Joint Business Plan (JBP). In procurement data analysis, deviation patterns by material group or supplier can be analysed systematically.

Risks and controls

Incorrect, missing or inconsistent packing lists cause real costs and risks in the flow of goods.

Typical sources of error

Frequent issues include deviating item numbers (supplier instead of customer numbers), missing line item allocation, incorrect units of measure or undeclared dangerous goods information. Incomplete details on batches or serialisation also prevent traceable booking. Such errors significantly increase process costs in goods receipt and delay part availability for production.

Controls and contractual safeguards

Effective controls include a documented delivery specification (packaging instruction) that mandatorily defines format, content and labelling – ideally anchored in the specification document or the General Terms and Conditions of Delivery. When introducing new items or making amendments, the delivery specification should be updated accordingly. Sample checks and 100% inspection can be differentiated according to the risk class of the material: A-items with high production relevance receive stricter controls than C-items. In the event of repeated deviations, an escalating process including dunning run and supplier corrective action is recommended.

Current developments: digitalisation of the packing list

The physical packing list is increasingly being replaced by structured, machine-readable formats – a contribution to lean procurement and automation.

EDI, portal and barcode

Standards such as EDIFACT DESADV (dispatch advice) or xCBL/OAGIS transmit packing list data electronically in advance, before the goods arrive. Barcode and RFID labels on the packages enable booking-near capture at goods receipt without manual entry. The prerequisite is clean data quality on both sides – in particular synchronised item master data and material numbers.

Traceability and sustainability reporting

Packing lists are gaining importance for traceability along the supply chain: batch and origin data feed evidence and reporting processes, for example in the context of the GRI Standards or company-specific CO and compliance reporting. Those who retain packing list data in a structured manner can later provide evidence more easily to customers, auditors and authorities – an increasingly relevant criterion in supplier selection and risk diversification.

Typical metrics

Packing list accuracy: > 98%

Proportion of shipments without quantity or item deviation from the purchase order

Share of electronic packing lists: typically > 80% for A-rated suppliers

Proportion of dispatch advices provided via EDI or portal

Goods receipt processing time: often < 30 minutes per consignment

Time from acceptance to booking, depending on degree of automation

Deviation rate per supplier: < 2%

Proportion of shipments with a documented discrepancy, as an early indicator of process problems

Practical example

A mid-sized mechanical engineering company sourced frame components from several suppliers and frequently recorded discrepancies between ordered and delivered quantities at goods receipt – with knock-on problems in production planning. The analysis showed: almost all deviations could already be identified from the packing lists, which arrived as unstructured PDFs in varying formats.

- A binding delivery specification with a uniform packing list format and barcode labelling per package was introduced
- Electronic dispatch advices via the supplier portal were prioritised, starting with A-items from critical material groups
- Deviations between purchase order and packing list were automatically flagged in the goods receipt system as partial delivery/remainder and followed up in the dunning run
- Packing list accuracy was included as a criterion in the monthly supplier evaluation with graduated escalation in case of deviations

Conclusion

The packing list is more than an appendage to the delivery note: it is the detail document that makes consignment contents, package logic and purchase order reference fully traceable. For buyers and goods receipt, it is the basis for quantity control, complaint management and efficient reconciliation with the purchase order and invoice. Faulty packing lists generate measurable process costs and risks to material availability. Those who contractually mandate format and content and drive towards electronic provision reduce effort in goods receipt and improve the data basis for supplier management. As part of digitalisation, the structured packing list is becoming a building block of automated, traceable supply chains.

Frequently asked questions

What is a packing list and what is it used for?

A packing list is a shipping document that itemises the exact contents of a consignment: items, quantities, packages, weights and, where applicable, batch numbers. It enables goods receipt to check the delivery, supports customs clearance and allows all parties involved to trace the shipment. Unlike the invoice, it typically contains no price information.

What should a packing list contain?

Core details include the shipment and delivery note number, purchase order reference, item numbers and descriptions, quantities, the number and type of packages, as well as weights and dimensions. Depending on requirements, batch or serial numbers, dangerous goods information and, in export, country of origin and HS codes are added. Format and content should be contractually defined in a delivery specification.

Is the packing list the same as the delivery note?

No, the terms are often used synonymously but denote different levels of detail. The delivery note documents the delivered line items for booking in goods receipt; the packing list additionally describes the physical composition of the consignment, i.e. which items are in which carton or on which pallet. It complements the delivery note but does not replace it.

Must the packing list be submitted to customs?

For cross-border shipments, the packing list is frequently required as an accompanying document to the commercial invoice, for example for the customs declaration or freight documentation. It must be consistent in content with the invoice and other shipping papers. Documentation details depend on the destination country and mode of transport and should be verified case by case.

What to do about discrepancies between the packing list and the purchase order?

Deviations are documented at goods receipt and recorded as a partial delivery/remainder. The purchasing assistant or logistics department raises a complaint with the supplier and follows up on the outstanding quantity via the dunning run. Repeated deviations should be made visible in supplier evaluation and addressed through structured corrective actions.

Can the packing list be transmitted electronically?

Yes, in practice this is frequently done via EDI (e.g. the DESADV dispatch advice), through supplier portals or as a barcode/Rfid label on the package. Electronic packing lists shorten goods receipt processing and improve data quality. Prerequisites are agreed formats and synchronised item master data between customer and supplier.