Shipping Care Packages from Home
via PirateShip.com

Russell D. Brunelle

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1 Introduction

1.1 How does this work?

You weigh your package, measure it, print an adhesive shipping label for it from a web site, and choose an option for pickup.

1.2 Why should I learn to do this?

Practically, you get back the time you would have otherwise spent in line at a USPS Post Office or UPS Store, you get the same rock-bottom pricing commercial shippers do, you can still ship packages even if self-quarantining, and since you always get a tracking number you'll always know where your package is.

Emotionally, since doing this makes sending packages more fun you may find yourself sending more care packages to loved ones, and since you'll always know where your packages are you may feel even better about your packages once they're sent.

1.3 Why haven't I done this before?

Although it has been possible to print USPS shipping labels at home via the web since the late 1990s, until the late 2010s all the major services required a monthly fee. Although even the smallest home-based businesses may have easily justified those fees, they may have dissuaded folks who might not even ship one package in a given month, or who only ship to friends and family.

2 Getting the Necessary Supplies

2.1 Shipping scale

You'll need a way to accurately weigh your package down to the ounce, which usually excludes bathroom scales. You'll need to accommodate the heaviest package you might want to ship, which usually excludes kitchen scales. You should also be able to freeze your scale's display, for the sake of packages large enough to block your view of it during weighing. To meet all these needs I like the Accuteck W-8250-50BS (Amazon `#B00SMHWZ42`), which can measure up to 50lbs and as of early 2022 costs only $20.

2.2   Tape measure

An ordinary carpentry tape measure would be perfect for measuring your packages. If you don't already own one, then the Komelon SM5425 (Amazon `#B008AGWNII`) is one good option.

2.3   Shipping labels

You don't need a special shipping label printer; as long as you can print to letter-sized sheets of labels (as basically all common desktop printers can), you'll be fine. Each sheet of your label paper will be 8.5×11 inches (aka "letter" size), and contain two 5.5×8.5 inch labels (aka "half sheet" format).

Although this is a very common label paper format, and it's made by a variety of manufacturers under a variety of brand names, I've found only one product that's opaque enough to completely block out whatever it's placed over: Avery's "TrueBlock" labels. This is important for non-commercial shippers, who might not want to maintain a standing inventory of completely new cardboard boxes, and instead reuse cardboard boxes they've already received by simply placing their new label over the old label. So, this means I recommend Avery 5126 labels for laser printers, and Avery 8426 labels for inkjet printers. These are available on Amazon, respectively, as `#B000ANJW1U` and `#B092LQ59DK`.

Please note that the shipping labels you print will include your preferred return

address, so you won't need separate return address labels.

2.4 Boxes

Your best option for cardboard shipping boxes is probably to simply start saving for later re-use any which are shipped to you. You can even store them all flat, provided you open them not by cutting through their cardboard, but by cutting through the shipping tape used to hold them together.

2.5 Envelopes

In contrast to boxes, there's one specific type of envelope you should probably purchase a good supply of new, so that you can always have them on hand: size #0 poly bubble mailers with self-seal closures. These are about 6×9 inches, so they're as small as an envelope can get and still have enough surface area for one of your shipping labels. Their poly construction makes them moisture resistant, and their interior plastic bubbles offer further protection.

These envelopes are ideal for small and relatively flat objects like thumb drives, but they also perfectly accommodate both folded-over sheets of standard letter-size paper, and standard-dimension greeting cards (including the thicker 3D-embelished cards Costco sells around the holidays). In other words, you can use these envelopes in conjunction with either the tracking number you always get with your print-at-home shipping labels, or with that number plus the "Signature Confirmation" extra service, to send particularly important communications which you'd otherwise mail in an ordinary envelope affixed with an ordinary stamp.

Although this is a purely cosmetic matter, since you'll be affixing your own pre-printed shipping labels, you don't need envelope designs with pre-printed lines for hand-written destination and return addresses. In the past I've used Office Depot #243036 (heavily discounted if purchased in higher count bundles), which meets all the above criteria including the lack of pre-printed lines, but Staples #813198 is likely equivalent.

2.6 Bubble wrap

Of all the packing material types, bubble wrap probably has the best combination of versatility, effectiveness, and convenience for most non-commercial shippers. It's available in a variety of bubble height sizes, 3/16 inch being both the most common and the most commonly-recommended. I like Duck BubbleWrap Original, a 3/16 inch wrap available as Amazon #B083LGC771, due in large part to its every-foot perforations for easy tearing. When selecting a roll size, keep in mind that what you're purchasing would also be ideal for helping people move. And always remember: when you use bubble wrap the bubbles are supposed to point inside, i.e. *toward* the thing you want them to protect.

2.7   Adhesive tape

2.7.1   For the bubble wrap

If you wrapped the item you want to protect in bubble wrap, then you probably also want to prevent that bubble wrap from unwinding. The only bad answer is using the same heavy-duty shipping tape you use to seal your boxes, as that makes your bubble wrap harder for the recipient to remove and possibly reuse. I instead recommend ordinary Scotch Magic Tape (Amazon #B0009F3P3U), or for cylindrical wraps perhaps just a rubber band.

2.7.2   For the boxes

It's important to have strong and reliable tape for sealing your shipping boxes. The most popular choice right now, which I second based on my own experience, is Scotch Heavy Duty Shipping Tape (Amazon #B000J07BRQ).

2.8 Print-at-home label service

We've now reached the most critical step: choosing, and learning to use, a print-at-home shipping label service. And my wholehearted recommendation is `PirateShip.com`, on the basis of ease of use as well as the complete lack of either recurring fees or setup fees.

The only thing to be aware of with PirateShip is that although it will print labels for both USPS and UPS (and indeed price-compare the two every time you request a label), it will not print labels for FedEx. Frankly, I don't consider that a serious downside; although the difference between USPS and UPS pricing can be vast, particularly for heavier tracked packages, there's typically far less difference between UPS and FedEx, and those areas where FedEx historically has had a clear advantage tend to be associated with business-to-business shipping (e.g. printed contracts or frozen/refrigerated foods).

After creating your free PirateShip account, you'll be presented with a Welcome screen offering a "Getting Started" video. That video is a very good introduction to using their service, and I can't improve on it. Instead, I'm just going to call out a few specific things:

- When you place a box on a table with its top flaps up, what the shipping industry calls "length" is the *larger* of its two horizontal dimensions, and "width" the smaller.

- If you're re-using ordinary cardboard boxes from previous deliveries (e.g. Amazon deliveries), then it's the "Box or Rigid Packaging" packaging type you want to select in PirateShip, and not any of the other USPS-branded or UPS-branded box types mentioned in the video.

- By default, if you optionally provide an e-mail address for a package's intended recipient, PirateShip will e-mail that recipient to let them know a package is on its way. This e-mail will also provide the recipient a link to a tracking page where they can monitor their package's progress and anticipated delivery time. Commercial shippers would presumably *always* want this behavior, and people shipping items to friends and loved ones which those friends and loved ones are expecting to receive would presumably also want this behavior. But one circumstance in which you probably *wouldn't* want this behavior would be if you sometimes send surprise gifts to people in your PirateShip address list, in which case you should uncheck "Enable Tracking Emails by Default" in PirateShip's "Tracking Emails" settings.

3 Learning your Printer's Label Procedure

Since label paper is thicker than ordinary printer paper, and doesn't respond as well to bending, many printers require a preparatory step before printing labels. Often this amounts to opening a special output tray at the back of the printer, and/or opening a special input tray at the front of the printer, so that the label paper can follow as straight a path as possible through the printer. You'll need to look at your printer's user manual to learn how to do this.

4 Deciding Between USPS and UPS

Once PirateShip knows your package's weight and dimensions, it presents you with all the applicable delivery options across both USPS and UPS. But there are a few special cases where you might not want to simply go with the cheapest option.

4.1 Delivery differences

If you're sending something small enough to fit in the recipient's mailbox, and want to be sure the recipient's mailbox is exactly where it's left, then always go with USPS. Two things to know about this:

- Only USPS can put things in mailboxes (or PO Boxes for that matter), and although UPS offers something called "UPS SurePost" which uses USPS for final delivery and hence *can* deliver to mailboxes or PO Boxes, UPS SurePost is not available through PirateShip.

- If the only reason you want your mailing left in a mailbox is that you're concerned it would be stolen if left on a porch, then an alternate solution (for either USPS or UPS) would be selecting the "Signature Confirmation" extra service when creating your shipping label. However, not only is there an extra fee for this service, but then your mailing can't be delivered at all if nobody is willing to sign for it at its delivery.

4.2   Pickup differences

- USPS package pickups are free, but in exchange for the very small fee UPS charges for *its* package pickups you get much more pickup time flexibility. So, if you don't want to leave your outgoing packages on your porch unattended, but also aren't normally at home when your USPS delivery driver comes by, then this might be a reason for you to go with UPS.

- Similarly, USPS won't perform package pickup *at all* if the only packages they'll be picking up are to be shipped via USPS Parcel Select Ground; if there's nothing else you can add to your pickup to make it eligible, then this might be a reason for you to go with UPS Ground for those packages instead.

5   Resizing Your Boxes?

It's always better if your packaging box is no bigger than it needs to be. This reduces rattling, spares bubble wrap, feels more elegant to the recipient, and even saves money if you're paying by dimension. And if you do it the right way, resizing cardboard boxes is far easier than you might expect. PirateShip offers a video teaching cardboard box resizing at `https://vimeo.com/446621947` and the fancy $18 tool they demonstrate at this video's 52 second mark is available as Amazon `#B00OI9RO94`.