

Packing and Shipping for Potters

The Primary Object of Packing is to protect your pots from impact with the world outside the box, or the other pots inside it.

The Secondary Object is to keep your package compact enough that shipping is affordable.

Materials: large cell bubble wrap, packing beads, cardboard boxes, box tape

Your packing material needs to be non-compressible, so it holds your pottery in position safely. Bubble wrap and packing beads (peanuts) are most commonly used.

Crumpled newspaper is too compressible, doesn't hold pots safely in place; it's also surprisingly heavy.

Small bubble wrap doesn't provide enough stand-off between items, leaves them too close together.

I don't re-use air pillows, because I worry about single-point failure. Poke a hole in bubble wrap, and you still have protection. Puncture an air pillow and it's gone.

Recycled packing peanuts are great, if you can get them. If you can't, probably use bio-fill starch rather than styrofoam, but keep it somewhere safe. I had to throw out a bag once because mice had gotten in, eaten some, peed on rest.

Cheap box tape is actually better than name brand. 3M is stiff, which works well on boxes, but not when taping bubble wrap to irregular surfaces. Thinner tape has better flexibility.

Use recycled cardboard whenever you can. Find out when the local trash hauler visits nearby businesses, and come the day before. If you *have* to buy boxes, go to U-Haul. Cheapest prices (89¢ for a 12x12x16"), and they'll buy back any you don't use. remember to tape over the handle cut-outs, inside and out.

Tools: box cutter, straight edge (24-36"), box tape dispenser, digital scale, glue gun (optional)

The handled tape dispenser is generally most useful, though sometimes I wish to a countertop model. Just not enough to buy one.

A digital kitchen scale will work for weighing small boxes, up to 11 lbs. For bigger, you need a postal scale--ordered mine online from Walmart for less than I expected to pay. Necessary if you're going to give accurate estimated shipping costs to your customer.

I re-size a lot of boxes, hence the box cutter and straight edge to take them apart, the glue gun to reassemble.

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Wrapping

With individual items, I like to use a double layer of bubble wrap, with the layers at right

angles. Perforated wrap will have a flat spot that gives no protection, so you'll need a second layer, preferably at right angles to the first. Put the overlapping ends at opposite sides of the piece.

When wrapping multiple items, make sure something separates them: a square of bubble wrap between bowls, bubble wrap and cardboard between plates--I sandwich two, lip to lip, around the cardboard, double wrap them in bubble and pack on edge in the box. With lids, I put a sheet of bubble (or reused sheet foam) between lid and gallery, with the lid upside down, to protect the handle. Wouldn't hurt to tape the lid down before wrapping as well. The most fragile part of a mug is the handle, so I double up the wrap over the handle, and wrap around until there's at least two layers on the rest.

Boxing

Once your pots are swaddled in bubble, it's time to choose a box. You want at least 1-1/2" between pots and box on all sides; 2" is better, but then you start running into the Secondary Object limitations. If you're packing a large, heavy, expensive pot, vessel or sculpture, don't bother trying to save money. Pay what it costs to get it there safely, probably double boxing the piece, one box inside another with 1-1/2" of non-compressible packing in between them.

If your boxes are the wrong size, you can adjust them. A box that's the right height but wrong length/width is easy to reshape by scoring the sides and cutting the flaps where you want the folds to be, then re-folding. Fill the gaps top and bottom with strips of scrap cardboard, and tape securely.

I tape length-wise along the center seam(s), cross-wise across the middle and along both edges. Extra strips of tape to reinforce where the corners used to be can't hurt.

Pour in a layer of packing beads, maybe a piece of scrap cardboard, then position your wrapped pots. Plate sandwiches go on edge, mugs upright, big bowls wide side down, stacked bowls however they'll fit. Prop them away from the edges with scraps of cardboard if you need to, then pour in more beads. Flex the sides of the box to make sure they're getting all the way to the bottom; squish them into corners. Pour a generous layer on top before you close the box. It's better to have a little extra, have the top slightly convex, rather than concave, less likely to get crushed in shipping.

Choosing a Shipper

My rule of thumb is, if the box is small--less than 12" in any dimension--or medium sized, but you're shipping within our local zone--California, Washington, Oregon--U S Mail is probably your best bet. Bigger boxes, traveling further, will probably want to go UPS Ground. How to decide which? Weigh, measure, estimate.

Estimating Cost of Shipping

I used to short-change myself horribly, guessing the cost of shipping something. It will vary by weight, size of package, and how far it's going, sometimes even *where* it's

going--urban addresses tend to get favorable treatment. These days, I hold off with a quote until I've packed the pottery, and gone online.

To estimate cost for US Mail, go to **postcalc.usps.com**. They'll prompt you to enter your zip code, the recipient's zip code, weight and dimensions of the package. (Rounded up to the nearest ounce or inch.) They'll give you a range of options, ranging from obscenely expensive to merely painful. Depending on where you're shipping, your best option will be either Retail Ground or Priority-2/3 Day.

For UPS, go to **ups.com** and click **Quote** in the **Quick Start** menu. You'll be prompted to give much the same information, though UPS rounds up to the nearest pound. After the To and From, click **Update**, then turn off the **Simple Rate** option, and enter size and weight details. **Update** again, and you'll see a range of price options; UPS Ground is going to be the one you pay attention to.

In my experience, Postcalc is always accurate; the price at the UPS Store can vary a few dollars either way. (Sometimes one box will be cheaper, the other more expensive. It's a mystery.)

You can buy and print postage for USPS Priority at **cns.usps.com**, and drop the package in the drop box (if it fits) or hand it over at the Will Call window. USPS Retail Ground and UPS Ground will require standing in line at the Post Office or UPS Store.

I've just been introduced to a website called Shippo, **goshippo.com**, which seems to offer deeply discounted shipping through regular carriers--a comparison I did on a recent UPS shipment saved \$25 on a \$75 box of plates. I've yet to use it on real shipments, however, so don't know how it will hold up.

Insurance

USPS Priority Mail and UPS Ground both insure the first \$50 in value. Whether you want to insure for full value, or accept the risk, is something only you can decide. I usually don't, but occasionally give in to the impulse. If you have to make a claim with the Post Office, their online form is surprisingly clear and easy. I've never had to try with UPS, and if it's anything like their estimate form, I hope I never have to.

What about offering free shipping?

Free shipping is for people who make identical items that can be shipped at flat rate, so they can bump up the price to cover it. Not us, in other words.

Sources

As mentioned, I hit up recycle dumpsters for small and medium-sized **boxes**. For larger ones, I visit U-Haul. Make sure to tape over the handle punch-outs, inside and out.

Box tape is available at Bi Mart. I don't remember where I got my dispenser.

I get **Bubble Wrap** (12" x 250 ft roll for \$24) and starch **Packing Beads/Peanuts** (12

cubic-foot bag for \$17) at Walter E. Nelson in Eugene.

I searched for a **digital postal scale** online; the cheapest one was at Walmart, ordered online and picked up at my local store.

Video links

Wrapping Pots to Ship: <http://www.offcenter.biz/Wrapping.m4v>

Customizing Boxes: http://www.offcenter.biz/Custom_Boxes.m4v

Putting it All Together: http://www.offcenter.biz/Putting_Together.m4v