Hazmat shipping papers require a basic description of the material; an indication of the total quantity and number and types of containers; emergency response information; as well as additional communications when applicable. Small mistakes in the entries of these required elements may result in costly delays or fines and penalties from the Department of Transportation (DOT).

Let’s take a look at the most common mistakes on hazmat shipping papers and how to avoid these pitfalls.
Mistake #1: Using an Incorrect Proper Shipping Name

The DOT specifies exacting requirements for selecting a Proper Shipping Name (PSN). It must come from Column 2 of the 49 CFR 172.101 Table. An allowable name will be indicated in Roman type in the Table and it must be accurate and specific. Although it may seem reasonable to use a commercial or common name for a product, if it’s not one of the 3,000 allowable names on the table, it is illegal to do so. For example, calling a product “heavy duty drain cleaner” instead of sodium or potassium hydroxide or describing a pesticide as rat poison or rodent pellets is incorrect.
Mistake #2: Inserting Extra Information in the Basic Description or Omitting a Required Element

The “basic description” of the material consists of four elements, and they must be in this order:

- UN/NA identification number
- Proper Shipping Name (PSN)
- Hazard class (subsidiary hazard class in parenthesis when applicable)
- Packing group (indicated in Roman numerals)

The regulations clearly state that, with few exceptions, the shipper may not insert additional information into this sequence. Many companies mistakenly add product names, SKU numbers, and package quantities within the description.

Conversely, technical constituent names are commonly omitted. When the letter “G” is in Column 1 of the 49 CFR 172.101 Table, this means the “generic” PSN must be supplemented with the technical name of the constituent that predominantly contributes to the hazard of the material (or at least two, if there are more). The constituent name(s) should be entered in parentheses either after the Proper Shipping Name or following the basic description. One example of this is “Flammable liquid n.o.s. (acetone, toluene).”

This extra communication requirement to add technical names also applies to materials that are hazardous substances or marine pollutants, if the Proper Shipping Name itself does not identify the chemical [49 CFR 172.203].
Mistake #3: Not Identifying Hazardous Substances

According to penalty citations, many companies omit the technical name and forget to add the letters “RQ” for hazardous substance shipments. This information is required when a single package contains a reportable quantity (RQ) (or more) of a hazardous substance. If this is the case, the letters “RQ” can be placed either before the basic description, after the basic description, or in the optional HM (hazmat) column.

This information is required because these packages contain an amount of hazardous substance that, if released to the environment in an accident or spill, would require notifying the National Response Center.
Mistake #4: Listing Domestic Emergency Response Telephone Numbers on International Shipments

Most hazmat shipping papers require an emergency response telephone number. In case of emergency, someone who has detailed knowledge of the hazards of the materials, and who can substantially assist in emergency response operations, must be ready to answer the call the entire time the package is in transit. This is the responsibility of the shipper, and if any part of this system fails to operate correctly, especially during a hazmat incident, there could be serious consequences for the Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), first responders, police officers, and fire fighters. [49 CFR 172, Subpart G]

Lately, there have been several incidents where international shipping papers contained emergency response phone numbers that begin with “1-800.” Toll-free numbers like this are only useful within the U.S. On international shipping papers, these numbers must begin with the extension needed to contact the international operator and connect to the U.S. If you contract with another company to respond to these calls for you, you’ll need to list its international phone number.

As of July 5, 2016, US DOT requires the emergency response phone number to be presented using numbers only on all hazmat shipper papers. Alphanumeric phone numbers (i.e., 1-800-HAZMAT) are no longer permitted.
Mistake #5: Forgetting to Include the Basic Description on Emergency Response Information

One final item must be addressed that causes problems for all involved, and that’s the emergency response information. This information must be printed on or be with the shipping papers and is required for most hazardous material shipments. The first element required on emergency response information is the full basic description. If the shipper uses a modified Safety Data Sheet or a modified page from the current emergency response guidebook, the full basic description would likely need to be added. This is often omitted, and if the shipment contains several different hazards not clearly identified on the emergency response information sheets, it can create multiple problems [49 CFR 172, Subpart G].

AVOID SHIPPING PAPER PENALTIES

These errors and omissions are some of the most common mistakes connected to shipping papers. Shippers are required to retain hazmat shipping papers for two years (or three years for hazardous waste manifests), and they must be available for inspection. Whether things are misspelled, the math is wrong, the quantities are wrong, or the order of the basic description is out of compliance, they all catch the attention of the regulators and are subject to fines.
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