

The Border-Ready Checklist

12 things CBSA and CBP expect in your import file — and the 4 most small businesses miss.

Use this before your next shipment crosses the Canada–US border, in either direction. Every item below is something a customs authority, or your own licensed broker, may ask you to show. If you can check it, you're ahead of most importers.

☐ **01 A complete commercial invoice**

Seller, buyer, true transaction value, currency, and terms of sale (Incoterms). The invoice must reflect what was actually paid — discounts, assists, and freight treatment included.

☐ **02 Real product descriptions — not codes**

"What it is, what it's made of, what it's used for." Style numbers and SKUs alone are the #1 cause of broker questions and border delays.

☐ **03 Tariff classification for every product**

The correct HS code, taken to the full digits each country requires (10 in the US, 10 in Canada) — assigned deliberately, not copied from a supplier's paperwork.

☐ **04 Country of origin — determined, not assumed**

Origin is where goods were made or substantially transformed, not where they shipped from. Marking requirements apply too.

☐ **05 Trade agreement certificates on file**

Claiming CUSMA/USMCA or CETA rates? A valid, correctly completed certificate of origin must exist before the claim — and be kept.

☐ **06 A clear importer of record**

Who legally imports — you, your customer, or a non-resident setup? With the right business number (Canada) or importer number (US) active and matching the entry.

☐ **07 A packing list that matches reality**

Quantities, weights, and cartons that agree with both the invoice and what's physically in the shipment. Mismatches invite exams.

☐ **08 Consistent transport documents**

Bill of lading or air waybill details — shipper, consignee, description — aligned with the invoice. Inconsistencies between documents are red flags.

☐ **09 Other agency requirements identified**

Food, health, electronics, textiles, children's products: FDA, CFIA, labeling and safety rules checked before shipping, not after.

☐ **10 Duties, taxes and surtaxes verified**

The actual duty rate confirmed — including any Section 301 tariffs, surtaxes, or anti-dumping exposure on your goods. Surprises here are expensive.

☐ **11 Broker authorization up to date**

A current agency agreement / power of attorney, and written instructions so your broker isn't guessing on your behalf.

☐ **12 Records you could produce tomorrow**

Both countries require import records kept for years after entry. If an auditor asked today, could you retrieve a complete file for any shipment?

THE 4 MOST SMALL BUSINESSES MISS

Where good importers still get caught.

!1 Vague descriptions

"Parts." "Samples." "Gift." These words on an invoice practically invite a hold. Describe goods the way item 02 requires — every time, on every document.

!2 Origin by assumption

Goods shipped from one country were not necessarily made there. If origin is wrong, the duty rate, marking, and any trade-agreement claim built on it are wrong too.

!3 Trade-agreement claims without the certificate

Claiming preferential duty rates "because the supplier said it qualifies" — with no valid certificate on file — is one of the most common findings in customs verifications. The savings get clawed back, with interest.

!4 No retrievable records

The audit letter never arrives on a convenient day. Businesses that pass verifications aren't lucky — they can produce a complete, organized file for any entry within days.

How did your file score?

10–12 checked

You're in strong shape. Keep your records organized and re-run this list whenever you add a new product, supplier, or country.

6–9 checked

You're trading with gaps. Most are fixable in days once identified — the priority is knowing which gaps carry real cost or audit risk.

5 or fewer

You're relying on luck, and luck runs out at the border. Start with items 01–04: invoice, descriptions, classification, and origin — everything else is built on those.

NEXT STEP

Not sure how your file measures up?

Book a free 20-minute Border-Ready Call. Tell me what you're shipping and where it's going — in one conversation you'll know whether you have a quick fix, a real risk, or nothing to worry about.

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