

# ***How To Make Your Purchase Orders Travel Real Slow***

*(The following guidelines apply to all mail, personal and institutional)*

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You may think that, what with all the hype about B2B and ecommerce, the United States Postal Service will wither away tomorrow morning at nine o'clock and the world will be fully electronic from then on. Wrong.

The USPS will be alive and well for many decades (if not centuries) to come and you will undoubtedly be mailing purchase orders until you retire — lots of them. So it behooves you to understand what the USPS wants in order to move your PO from point A to point B. It's not as simple as you might think.

Do you know what happens to a letter when it arrives at the United States Postal Service Distribution Center? Most people don't. In very general terms, it goes like this.

All letters are automatically right-faced and cancelled by a magnificent machine called an ***advanced facer-canceler*** and fed through an **OCR**. An **OCR** (Optical Character Reader) is actually a machine that reads English, or French, or Swahili for that matter, also a most marvelous machine. The **OCR** actually **reads** the address of your letter, prints a POSTNET Bar Code on the envelope and fires it at lightning speed through a ***high-speed bar code reader***. This machine reads the bar code and then directs the letter to the right state, then to the city, then to a mail carrier route, perhaps even a building or office name. Average **OCRs** process about 36,000 pieces of mail per hour — day after day, processing almost 100 billion pieces of mail a year throughout the nation!

Thus, if all goes well, you can mail a letter in Eugene, Oregon, and the **OCRs** will direct your letter to the Whacker Building in Chicago, without further human viewing or assistance of any kind, — provided, of course, that the **OCR** can read your address.

If it can't read your address, it spits your letter out to ***hand sort*** which, at best, has a throughput of 600 units per hour, and perhaps less. Thus, the clarity and style of your address may well determine whether your PO (or letter) takes one day or one week to cross the nation.

Wonderful as they are, **OCRs** are very skittish machines. They know what they like for breakfast and they don't deal with change very well. If they don't get what they like, they reject it without hesitation. In fact, it matters not to an **OCR** whether it processes or rejects any piece of mail, be it to your next door neighbor or the President of the country.

You might be surprised at what an **OCR** actually likes to see. Here's what it looks like.

LANE COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
ATTN LLOYD RAIN  
4000 EAST 30 AVE  
EUGENE OR 97405-0640

Let me point out a few things about this address block which might seem a little strange.

Firstly, there is no punctuation of any kind. That's right, folks. None. Every time you get the urge to toss in a period or a colon, or even a dash, just to separate a suite number from an address, pull the fingers back from the punctuation keys and beat down the temptation. Absolutely no punctuation of any kind (except the dash in the middle of the zip code which is actually a numeral).

Secondly, all upper-case letters; clear, clean, crisp, precise, single-spaced, capitals — throughout.

Thirdly, but perhaps most importantly, it must be typed (or machine printed). All hand-written addresses and hand-written corrections on addresses guarantee hand sorting (live by the hand, sort by the hand!!!).

If you follow only these three rules, you just about guarantee that 90% of your mail will make it through the jittery jaws of the **OCR**.

Several additional concerns to bring you up to the 95% range.

- Foreign addresses must have the country name **alone** on the last line;
- Where you have a choice of two addresses (some companies show both a street address and a post office box in their addresses) always use the post office box only for mail, the street address only for parcel delivery. If you must use them both, the mail will be delivered to the address directly above the city/state/zip line because, unlike people, the **OCR** reads upward from the bottom of the address until it finds something it can understand.
- Try to use 10- or 12-point, san serif, type, unaltered, i.e., not bold, not condensed, and definitely not italic (good old garden-variety Helvetica is still the best); the Post Office has a list of some fifty fonts that **OCRs** like to see; call for a copy;
- Use dark ink on a light background, black on white being the best. Does this comment sound unnecessary? Well then, do you own any of those fluorescent yellow labels which are being promoted throughout the land? Bad news. Also mauve, brown, dark blue and red. Throw out all your colored labels — black on white only for best **OCR** processing. Reverse printing (white on black) will cause major indigestion in the **OCR** and will be rejected 100% of the time, guaranteed. So will gold print, black on metallic, and any form of scripted font.
- Use a uniform left margin (non-linear left justification gives **OCRs** a headache).
- Avoid preprinted form labels with underlines and tiny words (such as "Name," "Address," etc.) on them; **OCRs** will reject these universally;
- Avoid **frontal clutter**; comments such as "Open Immediately" and "Personal," if they must be used, should be **well above the top line** of the address. The **OCR** scans from the bottom of the envelope just about full width, until it finds things that it can recognize. If it encounters an aberration; that is, anything from an ink blotch to a cute graphic to a barber pole border to a notice that you have just won

a lottery, it immediately stops its scan and sends your envelope to hand sort. If you must place anything on the label, put it well above the address.

- If you can print POSTNET Bar Codes on your addresses it will help your general mail — but not your POs, because the envelope window will probably cover part of the address or the bar code, and the good intention may turn into a rejected letter.

I differ from the USPS on one issue.

The USPS likes (but does not demand) the **attention line** to be at the top and the company or institution name below it. This is because the **OCR** reads upward from the country line to the city/state/zip line, then to the address line, then one-up to look for a company or agency name. If the company/agency name is found, and is matched to a national directory of postal names, the letter goes on for an additional sort. If the name is not found, the final sort level is abandoned. If the **OCR** encounters an "ATTN" where the company/agency name should be, the final sort is abandoned — but everything up to that point remains valid.

On the other hand, for purchase orders, the company or institution name **must be at the top of the address** as shown above. There are several reasons.

We have a lot of different people with different skills filing alphabetical copies of purchase orders. Do you have any idea how many POs we would get filed under "A" if the attention line were the first line of the address? I can tell you — lots. But perhaps you don't file paper copies anymore.

Additionally, data entry would follow suit and most of our orders would soon belong to a burgeoning bundle of "As." Computerized "keyword" searches would be entirely ineffectual if the first ten letters of the vendor address did not correspond to the vendor company name. In fact, our vendor file of almost 100,000 vendors would be rendered almost useless by reversing the top two lines of the address.

There is yet another consideration. Mail legally belongs to the addressee. The addressee is generally construed to be the top line of the address. In most cases, this is of little concern. In those few cases where the individual addressee may be in litigation with an employer, say, for sexual harassment or wrongful discharge, the employer may be very reluctant to open the mail if the first line of the address is the involved individual's name regardless of any obvious characteristics which imply company ownership.

So please, folks, go with me on this one. Make your first letter of the top line representative of the addressee name under which the PO will be filed or searched. Omit indefinite articles such as "THE" and "A." Thus, a PO to **The Computer Store** would be addressed —:

**COMPUTER STORE  
ATTN FRED SMITH  
35 WEST 8 AVE  
EUGENE OR 97401**

***Bottom Line...***

*All upper case  
No punctuation  
Standard font  
Left aligned  
Black on white  
Company name first  
Attention line second  
Centered on space  
Nothing below address*

These additional considerations will bring you into the 95%-plus range for **OCR** acceptance. The last major consideration is placement of the address on the envelope. For POs and other envelopes with window-cuts or preprinted addresses, the location is guaranteed to be within limits. For other items, basically, if you center the address on the envelope and offset it just a touch toward the bottom, you'll be in good shape.

Of course, if you want your POs to travel real slow, just decline any two or three of these guidelines and you may think your envelope circumnavigated the globe to get to its destination.

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