Last updated: 6 November 2026

# Before You Pay the Deposit

A practical checklist for your first order from a new supplier. What to agree in writing, what to photograph, and the three points where a good product quietly turns into a bad shipment.

Most of the expensive mistakes on a first order are not manufacturing defects. They are agreements that were never written down. The factory builds exactly what was specified, and the damage happens in what was not.

This checklist is the one we work through with brands before a deposit goes out. It is free, it needs no login, and it is designed to be printed and marked up. If you only do one thing on it, start with the first section — the parts that must be in writing before you transfer money.

## What has to be in writing

### Product identity and materials

"as discussed" is not a specification. A material grade is a number, not a word.

- ☐ SKU / product name, plus the exact version number of this spec and its date
- ☐ Materials with grade and composition (e.g. "100% cotton, 180 gsm, single jersey" — not "cotton")
- ☐ Every dimension that matters, each with a tolerance (e.g. 320 mm ± 3 mm) — not just the nominal size
- ☐ Weight, with tolerance
- ☐ Colour stated as a reference number (Pantone / Pantone TCX / RAL) **plus** the kept physical sample. "Off-white" is not a colour, it is a number.
- ☐ Finish / surface treatment named (matte, gloss, brushed, nickel-plated…)
- ☐ Any component you do *not* want substituted (a specific zipper brand, a specific adhesive, a specific battery cell)

### Acceptance criteria — what "good" means, before you argue about it

If the definition of a defect is written after the goods exist, the discussion becomes an opinion.

- ☐ Defect classification agreed: **critical** (unsafe / illegal / unusable), **major** (not sellable as described), **minor** (cosmetic)
- ☐ Sampling standard named (e.g. ISO 2859-1 / AQL, with the levels agreed per class) or a 100% check agreed for a small run
- ☐ The visual reference: which sample is the "golden sample", who keeps it, and that it is signed and dated by both sides
- ☐ A short written list of the 5–10 defects that matter most for *this* product (stitching, colour shift, burrs, odour, seam strength, print registration…)
- ☐ What happens on a fail: rework, sort, discount, or reject — and who pays for which

### Packaging, labelling and carton data

A perfect product in the wrong bag is still a problem at the warehouse.

- ☐ Retail packaging: artwork file version, print process, and a **printed proof approved before mass printing**
- ☐ Barcode: symbology, the actual number, printed size, quiet zone, and where it sits on the pack (never across a fold or a seam)
- ☐ Marketplace labels if relevant (FNSKU / FBA label position, "sold as set", suffocation warning on poly bags)
- ☐ Carton: material grade, dimensions, max gross weight, master-carton quantity, and carton marks text
- ☐ Inner packing: how units are protected, how many per inner box, desiccant / moisture protection if needed
- ☐ Country-of-origin marking and any legally required text on the product or pack
- ☐ Master carton weight against your marketplace's current limit (commonly around 22–23 kg — verify your marketplace's live rule, it changes)

### Compliance and documents

Certificates are cheap before production and expensive after it.

- ☐ Which test reports or certificates this product legally needs in your market (e.g. CPSIA, REACH, LFGB, CE/UKCA, FCC) — confirmed, not assumed
- ☐ Who pays for testing, which lab, and when the report is issued
- ☐ Documents that must travel with the shipment (test report, declaration, certificate of origin, packing list)
- ☐ Labelling language(s) required by the destination market

### Time, money and change control

The two clauses that most often save a first order are "when" and "no verbal changes".

- ☐ Key dates: sample approval deadline, production start, production finish, ex-factory date, ETD
- ☐ Lead time stated in working days **and** with the Chinese New Year / holiday window written out if it touches your schedule
- ☐ Payment split named: deposit %, balance %, and **what the balance is conditional on** (ideally: a passed pre-shipment check, not a calendar date)
- ☐ Who pays sampling, tooling, mould changes, courier, and re-testing
- ☐ A written rule that **any change to material, component, sub-supplier or packaging requires your written approval** — verbal "we improved it" is not approval
- ☐ The named person on the factory side who is allowed to accept a change

## The evidence file

Keep these in one folder. If a dispute ever happens, this folder is the difference between a claim and a complaint.

- ☐ **The signed golden sample**, sealed, dated, one copy kept by each side
- ☐ Photos of the approved sample next to the colour reference, in daylight, same angle as the production photos
- ☐ The **signed spec sheet** (with version and date) — PDF it and email it to the factory so there is a timestamp
- ☐ The measurement sheet: what was measured, with what tool, and the recorded values
- ☐ Packaging: printed proof photos, and a photo of the barcode being scanned successfully
- ☐ Carton marks and a photo of a sealed, labelled master carton
- ☐ Every written approval you gave (email is fine — a chat message is not)
- ☐ Deposit wire confirmation and the invoice it relates to (amount, currency, beneficiary, order number)
- ☐ The production timeline you were promised, with the date it was promised

## Where a first order actually goes wrong

### Checkpoint 1 — First article (before the run)

**When:** after the line has produced the first pieces, before mass production.

**Why here:** you are still changing a mould, a print file or a spec sheet. This is the cheapest place to be wrong.

- ☐ First pieces measured against the spec, not eyeballed
- ☐ Colour against the reference under daylight, not under factory lighting
- ☐ Packaging proof printed and checked
- ☐ "Is this the product I approved?" asked out loud, in writing

### Checkpoint 2 — During production

**When:** once a meaningful share of the order is finished and packed (commonly after roughly 20–30%).

**Why here:** there is still time to fix tooling, re-cut fabric or reprint packaging — and still time to move the ship date.

- ☐ Output so far checked against the golden sample
- ☐ Packing method and materials as agreed
- ☐ Defects already appearing logged, so the fix applies to the rest of the run
- ☐ Timeline reality-checked: can the rest of the order still make the ETD?

### Checkpoint 3 — Pre-shipment (before the balance)

**When:** when 100% of the order is finished and packed, before the balance payment and before loading.

**Why here:** the only decision left is ship, hold or negotiate — which is exactly why the report matters.

- ☐ Sampling done to the agreed standard, defect classes applied
- ☐ Carton count, carton marks, weights and dimensions checked
- ☐ Barcode scanned, labels checked, packaging intact
- ☐ Photos taken of what was actually found, not of what was staged
- ☐ Report issued **before** the balance is released

| Found at | What you can still change | What it usually costs you |
|---|---|---|
| First article | mould, print file, spec, supplier | A conversation and a few days |
| During production | tooling, materials, packing, ship date | Rework on part of the run |
| Pre-shipment | ship, hold, or negotiate a discount | Rework or a discount on the whole run |
| After it lands | nothing at the factory level | Freight back, storage, returns, a launch date |

## The 10-minute check

Answer these before the deposit leaves your account. If you cannot answer three or more, the order is not ready.

1. Can I name the colour reference number, or is it a word?
2. Does every dimension that matters have a tolerance written next to it?
3. Is there a signed golden sample, and do I hold one?
4. Have I agreed what counts as critical / major / minor?
5. Is the balance tied to a passed check rather than a date?
6. Do I know exactly what the packaging looks like, on paper, approved?
7. Do I know which certificates this product needs in my market, and who is paying?
8. Is there a written rule that no material or sub-supplier changes without my approval?
9. Do I know the ETD, and does it survive the holiday window?
10. Do I know what happens, in writing, if the goods fail?

## Five ways a good product turns into a bad shipment

1. **"Off-white."** The sample was off-white, the bulk was yellow. The factory made what was written — a word. Nobody had given a number.

2. **The barcode on the fold.** The product passed every check. The barcode printed across the seam of the box, scanned badly, and the shipment stalled at the warehouse.

3. **The carton nobody weighed.** Beautiful product, 28 kg per box. The marketplace rejected the delivery before anyone opened it.

4. **"We changed the material, it's better now."** Said verbally, two weeks before shipping. It was cheaper, and it was not what was approved.

5. **The balance paid on a date.** The money went out on the 15th because the 15th was in the contract. The inspection would have been on the 18th.

## What this checklist cannot do

An inspection, and a checklist, tell you what the goods are like on the day someone looks at them. They do not promise the factory will still be there in six months. They do not promise the product will sell. They do not replace your own judgement about whether a supplier is trustworthy.

What they do is move the conversation from opinion to evidence, which is usually the difference between a discount and a total loss. If a supplier tells you none of this is necessary, that is information too.

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Prepared by **Dony Yu**, Founder, CloudSpects — independent third-party inspection, China and wider Asia.

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