First-Time Importer Guide

Everything you need to know before your first US import shipment — written by licensed customs brokers.

Importing into the United States for the first time can feel overwhelming. Unfamiliar acronyms, multiple government agencies, and a long list of required documents make the process intimidating. This guide breaks everything down into clear, actionable steps so your first shipment goes smoothly.

1. Get an Importer of Record (IOR) Number

Your IOR number is typically your IRS Employer Identification Number (EIN) for businesses, or your Social Security Number for individuals. CBP uses this number to track your import activity and compliance history over time. If you don't have an EIN yet, you can apply for free directly through the IRS website.

2. Choose a Licensed Customs Broker

While not legally required for every shipment, almost all importers use a licensed customs broker. Brokers are tested and licensed by CBP, carry continuous bonds, and are legally accountable for the accuracy of filings made on your behalf. A good broker pays for itself by avoiding costly classification errors and compliance penalties.

3. Determine If You Need a Customs Bond

Any commercial shipment valued over $2,500 requires a CBP bond, which guarantees payment of duties, taxes, and fees. You have two options:

- **Single-entry bond** — covers one shipment only. Best for occasional importers.
- **Continuous bond** — covers all shipments for one year, typically starting at $50,000. More cost-effective if you import more than a few times per year.

4. Confirm Your HTS Classification

Before placing your first order, know your product's correct 10-digit Harmonized Tariff Schedule (HTS) code. This single number determines your duty rate, whether any additional tariffs apply (such as Section 301 tariffs on Chinese goods), and whether your product needs approval from a Partner Government Agency.

5. Check for Partner Government Agency (PGA) Requirements

Many products require review beyond standard CBP processing:

Agency	Commonly Regulates
FDA	Food, drugs, cosmetics, medical devices
USDA / APHIS	Agricultural products, plants, meat
CPSC	Consumer products, children's items
EPA	Vehicles, engines, certain chemicals
FCC	Electronics, radio-frequency devices

6. Negotiate the Right Incoterm

Your Incoterm (EXW, FOB, CIF, DDP, etc.) determines who is responsible for freight, insurance, and customs clearance at each stage of the shipment. First-time importers often default to whatever the supplier suggests — make sure you fully understand the liability you're agreeing to before signing a purchase order.

7. Gather Required Documents

At minimum, you will need:

- Commercial Invoice
- Packing List
- Bill of Lading (ocean) or Air Waybill (air)
- CBP Entry Forms (prepared by your broker)

Depending on your commodity, you may also need a Certificate of Origin, FDA Prior Notice, or other supporting paperwork.

8. File ISF for Ocean Shipments

If shipping by ocean, your broker must file the Importer Security Filing (ISF, or '10+2') at least 24 hours before the vessel departs the foreign port. Late or missing ISF filings carry penalties of up to $5,000 per violation — this is one of the most commonly missed compliance steps for first-time importers.

9. Understand CBP Exam Risk

CBP examines approximately 3–5% of shipments — sometimes randomly, sometimes due to specific risk factors. An exam isn't necessarily a red flag, but it can add 3–10 business days to your timeline. Build a buffer into your supply chain schedule, especially for your very first shipment.

10. Set Up Recordkeeping From Day One

US law requires importers to retain entry records for 5 years. Set up a simple filing system — physical or digital — starting with your very first shipment, so you're never scrambling if CBP requests records later.

Quick Recap

1. Get your IOR number 2. Choose a licensed broker 3. Set up a customs bond
4. Confirm your HTS code 5. Check PGA requirements 6. Agree on Incoterms
7. Gather your documents 8. File ISF (ocean) 9. Plan for exam risk 10. Start recordkeeping

Your first shipment doesn't need to be stressful. Aurora Customs Brokerage works with first-time importers every day and walks you through each of these steps personally — from setting up your bond to filing your very first entry.

Ready to get started? Visit auroracustoms.com/quote for a free instant estimate, or contact a licensed broker directly at auroracustoms.com/contact.