

The Many Classes of Postage

A Guide for the Application of USPS Postal Classes

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Introduction

The USPS offers a large number of postal classes. Each is suitable for a particular type of letter or package. Here we will discuss those classes of mail most suitable for “letter type” mailings. This includes First Class Letter rate, First Class Postcards, Standard Mail and Non-profit Standard Mail. Each of these will be discussed in some detail below.

First Class Letter Rate

Everyone has been exposed to First Class Letter Rate mail. The stamps you put on a letter at home represent the single piece rate of this class of mail. This is the “catch all” for anything that can’t be mailed some other way. The first alternative is bulk rate First Class Mail. If you have at least 500 pieces in a mailing, you qualify for bulk rates. If you process the mailing through CASS, apply the proper bar codes, etc, you can easily get to the “automation” rate. Instead of paying 37 cents for a stamp, you can pay 27.5 to 30.9 cents per letter.

All of the rates we’ll be discussing vary in this way based on the density of mail going to particular regions. The more concentrated the mail is, the lower the rate. If you build a mailing list by selecting 5 digit zip codes, you are almost guaranteeing access to the lower postage rates. However, if your list is formed from “random” responses from a national source (such as a web page), you will need to have a large volume of mail to have enough pieces going to each zip.

The charges quoted are also all “automation” rates. To qualify for this, you or your mailer must perform certain address cleanup and sorting activities. The end result of this is to print a “Postnet” bar code on your piece. There are other rates for each of these classes that don’t require as much effort on the mailers part. However, the more work you do for the Post Office, the less you have to pay them to deliver your mail.

There are several advantages to using First Class Mail. The timing of the mail is more predictable than Standard Mail. It will generally take about three days for a First Class letter to be delivered. The post office will make a greater effort to deliver the piece. For example, they will forward a letter that has been sent to an old address. They will also return any pieces that cannot be delivered.

First Class Mail is more private than other classes. For this reason, certain personal data can only be sent by First Class. If you are mailing an invoice or statement, or otherwise discussing confidential data, you must use First Class.

The biggest disadvantage to First Class Mail is its sensitivity to weight. The rates quoted above apply to mail pieces weighing one ounce or less. Anything greater than 1 ounce, but less than 2 will cost between 50 and 53.4 cents. From there up to 3 ounces goes for 68.4 to 71.8 cents.

First Class Postcard Rate

Technically, a postcard is a mailpiece consisting of a heavy card with a maximum size of 4.25" x 6". You may have noticed that you've received cards larger than this. These would have been handled as letters under First Class or Standard Mail. The main advantages to using one of these oversize cards are to save on production costs, and in an attempt to "stand out" in your recipient's mailbox.

Unless you qualify for Non-profit, Postcard rate is the cheapest postage you can get. It ranges from 17.6 to 19.4 cents per card. Meanwhile you preserve all the advantages of First Class.

A postcard is not completely limited to a single layer card. You can use a "double-card". This is formed of a card twice as large as normal, which is then folded, and sealed. This closure is typically a "wafer seal" type "tab".

Standard Mail

Standard Mail is a very economical way to send many different types of mailings. The two main questions to ask are...

- 1 – Are you sending anything of a personal or confidential nature?
- 2 – Does your mail need to arrive in a specific time frame?

If you answered "yes" to either of these questions, Standard Mail will not work for you. You cannot send private information in this class. It is also less predictable in its delivery times. Standard Mail usually takes about 10 days to arrive. However, it can take more, or less. You can expand your lead times and otherwise compensate for this factor. It's not so much the length of time as the variable nature of the delay. If you're aiming at a particular week, it's all right. Don't try to hit a given day though.

That said, Standard Mail is cheaper. It costs 19 to 21.9 cents to mail a piece under this rate. It's also much less sensitive to weight. Your letter can weigh as much as 3.3 ounces before the rates change.

Some people don't like Standard Mail because the public does have some perception of this class being associated with bulk mail. However, this can be offset through the use of metered postage, or pre-cancelled stamps.

One quick side note. If you're mailing a newsletter or other item that is published on a regular basis, you may qualify for "Periodicals" rate. This is one of the classes of mail not discussed here. It deserves an article all its own. If you do qualify, it can provide faster delivery than Standard Mail, for postal rates that fall somewhere between First Class and Standard.

Non-Profit Standard Mail

Non-Profit rates are provided by the USPS as a form of support for certain types of non-profit organizations. Generally, schools, churches and philanthropic organizations can qualify for these rates. Other non-profits (such as Credit Unions) cannot receive these discounts. There are also limitations as to the types of pieces that can be mailed as non-profit. For example, you cannot offer a credit card or other debt vehicle. To determine if you qualify, obtain a copy of USPS form number 3623, and turn it in to your local post office. There is no charge to apply for non-profit status. However, you or your mailer must still have a postal permit in order to present bulk mail. If your mailer does not use the same post office where you filed your 3623, you will also need to provide them with a form number 3624. They will give this to their local post office, and they will then recognize your status. Again, there is no charge for this service.

Now that all the paperwork's out of the way, you can use the non-profit rates. You can mail a piece for 11.4 to 14.4 cents. As you can see, it's hard to beat these rates. You can even use the non-profit letter rates to save money mailing postcards.

As a subclass of Standard Mail, non-profit is limited in all the same ways. You can save a lot of money with it, but you have to use it wisely.

Conclusion

You have a lot of choices when you begin to plan a mailing. The design of your mailpiece can have a dramatic effect on the amount of postage you have to pay. By balancing your goals against the postal regulations, you can create the effect you're looking for, and spend as little as possible on postage at the same time.