

Carry-On Essentials

Build a bag you can actually use

A packing system starts with access, handling and the rules for your exact ticket.

Work through three decisions before filling a suitcase. First, identify what must stay with you if every other bag is delayed. Second, choose where you will keep it during the flight. Third, check whether that bag is permitted by each operating airline and fare. “Carry-on” and “personal item” may have different limits.

1. Put essential items on a table. Separate documents, medicines, personal aids and charging equipment from replaceable clothing.
2. Choose one easy-access bag for those essentials. Practice opening it while seated, without balancing other objects on your lap.
3. Pack the remaining items in the main case. Measure the outside, including wheels, handles and bulging pockets. Weigh the complete load.

The useful result

You should finish with an essentials bag, a measured main bag, a gate-check removal plan and a record of the rules you checked. This is not a challenge to fit everything into the smallest possible bag.

Worked example: a three-night visit

Example only: Ruth is visiting family and can do laundry at their home.

Decision	Ruth's choice	Why it helps
Clothing	One spare outfit plus mix-and-match layers	Laundry is available; duplicate outfits add weight.
Essentials	ID, medicines, glasses, phone and cable in a small bag	These stay with her if the case is checked.
First night	Underwear, top and basic toiletries together	One pouch opens at arrival.
Heavy extras	Second shoes removed	She will use the shoes she travels in.

Ruth tries the bag while seated and notices her charger is underneath the clothes. She moves the phone and correct cable into the accessible pouch. She then checks the fare allowance; organizing the contents cannot fix a ticket that excludes the bag.

Your equivalent trip: nights / laundry / expected weather

One item you will remove, and what makes it unnecessary

Pack for the first 24 hours

Keep the items that would be hardest to replace in the bag that stays with you.

Start with what you already own

A small, easy-to-open bag and a familiar pouch may be all you need. Buying more organizers does not automatically make packing easier.

1. Write your operating airline and fare below. Check every flight, including the return.
2. Choose one easy-to-reach place for ID, glasses, phone and essential medication.
3. Use pages 4-6 to pack. Finish with the gate-check check on page 7.

Trip / travel date

Operating airline / fare type

My personal-item size and weight limits

My carry-on size and weight limits

Type into the fields in a compatible PDF reader, save a private copy, or print the pages you need. Check that entries are saved before closing the file.

The bag that stays with you

Pack essential items where you can reach them without opening your main case.

Accepted travel ID; passport and entry documents if needed

Boarding pass plus an offline or paper backup

Essential medicines in suitable packaging; prescription details

Glasses, hearing-aid supplies and other personal essentials

Phone, correct cable and wall charger

Payment method and a separate backup, if available

Contact details and the address of your first night

A change of underwear, a light layer and essential toiletries

Keep private details private

Put contact details inside the bag. Keep passport copies and medicine records covered; do not display them on an outside luggage tag.

My three items that must stay within reach

Pack the suitcase with a purpose

Use this page for your own trip length, weather and laundry plans.

Item group	My quantity / notes
Tops and bottoms	
Underwear and socks	
Sleepwear	
Weather layer	
One useful extra pair of shoes	
Personal care items	
Activity-specific items	

- I removed duplicates that do not serve a different purpose.
- I can find the first-night items without emptying the bag.
- I can move the packed bag comfortably and safely.

No strength test required

Do not test your ability by lifting a loaded bag overhead. Plan assistance or a lighter bag if handling it is difficult.

The small details that prevent delays

Confirm the actual rules for your route before finishing your packing.

Measure the outside of the bag, including wheels and handles.

Check the packed weight against each operating airline's limit.

Keep standard carry-on liquids within the applicable screening rules.

Check medical liquids and equipment separately; tell screening staff.

Check batteries and unusual items using official guidance.

Keep documents and necessary personal items accessible.

Save baggage rules with the date and fare that they apply to.

U.S. liquids: a quick reminder

Standard TSA carry-on liquids use containers of 3.4 oz / 100 mL or less in one quart-size clear bag. Medically necessary liquids have exceptions and separate screening procedures. Other countries may differ.

Items I need to check with TSA / my airline

Rule page saved / date checked

If your bag is checked at the gate

Before handing over the case, take a quiet moment to remove what must remain with you.

Remove essential medicines, ID, travel documents and valuables.

Remove power banks and spare lithium batteries; keep them in the cabin with terminals protected.

Keep your phone, glasses, hearing supplies and first-night details.

Ask where you will collect the bag: aircraft side or baggage claim.

Keep the bag receipt; photograph it privately if useful.

My small take-out pouch contains

One last question

Can I manage the first night if this suitcase arrives tomorrow? Add only the missing essentials.

Official sources to check before travel

[TSA: What can I bring?](#)

[FAA PackSafe: Lithium batteries](#)

[TSA: Accepted identification](#)

For current route-specific instructions, also check your operating airline and relevant provider.

When the plan changes at the gate

Prepare a removal sequence before an agent asks to check the case.

1. Pause and ask whether the case is being checked to the final destination or returned at the aircraft. Keep the claim record.
2. Remove medicines, accepted ID, contacts, valuables and personal essentials. Follow FAA and airline rules for spare batteries, power banks and battery-equipped baggage.
3. Keep the small bag within the permitted cabin allowance and stow it as directed. Confirm any mobility equipment separately.
4. On arrival, follow the documented return location. If a bag is missing, report it through the airline before leaving the baggage area.

If the bag will not close

Do not squeeze essential items into an inaccessible compartment. Remove optional clothing, reorganize or choose the correct allowance. Compression reduces volume, not weight.

The removable essentials pouch is kept in

The item I am most likely to forget during a gate-check

Your ten-minute packing rehearsal

Use this page after packing, not as another shopping list.

1. Find ID, itinerary and glasses without emptying the bag.
2. Take out the essentials pouch in one calm movement.
3. Check that the phone cable actually charges the phone.
4. Read the rule record for all flight segments and the return.
5. Repack the first-night items, then measure and weigh again.

Packed bag dimensions including wheels / handles

Packed weight / airline limit / margin

Rule URL and date checked

What was difficult to find, and where I moved it

Privacy

Keep completed travel and medicine records private. Share the minimum information the person assisting you needs.