

# Pack your house like a pro

**Here are some basic guidelines as you get ready to move, along with expert tips on packing everything from artwork to lampshades.**

By Marilyn Lewis of MSN Real Estate – 9.8.09



Two professional movers can pack up your 2,000-square-foot home in a day. But you? No way. Count on 50 to 60 hours.

A homeowner can pack about one room a day, experts say. But that's a squishy rule: It really depends on how much stuff is in each room, on how quickly you work and on how easily you get sidetracked. Here's one rule you can count on, though: You'll inevitably underestimate the job.

It can't hurt to get going even months in advance, packing the rooms you use the least, says Christy Urdal, a professional organizer whose Seattle company, [NextStep Transitions](#), helps people with their moves. If you pack storage areas first — the garage, basement, attic and closets — you can get a lot of the work done while leaving your home intact.

## **Think like a pro**

You may not be able to hire a pro to organize your move, but you can still pack like one, says Urdal, who managed moving companies for 24 years. As packing experts work, they're also thinking ahead to the unpacking. For example, Urdal uses a black felt pen to write on each box in big letters its destination and its contents. For example, "John's room: top 3 bureau drawers."

## **Read: What to do after the movers leave**

You can't always know what your next home will be like when you're packing. But if you do, you can minimize work by following the advice of Laura Leist, another organizer and move specialist whose company, [Eliminate Chaos](#), is in the Seattle area:

- Label boxes with the names of rooms in the new place, not the old home. That way boxes can be unloaded from the truck and placed right where they belong.

- Map out the location of furniture ahead of time. During unloading, Leist leaves the map in the room for movers to see, or she uses it to direct them where to place things. Boxes can be deposited where they won't have to be moved again.
- Post signs above the entrance to each room in the new house to help keep movers on track.
- If you're using movers but also are packing some items yourself, label boxes to say who packed them.

This approach requires forethought. Organizing before moving day will speed and smooth the job. For example:

- Suppose you have a hall closet with things that, in the new home, will live in closets in a guest room, the kitchen and the boys' rooms. "Don't put that stuff in one box labeled 'hall closet,'" Leist says. Instead, get four boxes and label them with the names of the rooms these items will end up in.
- If Jill and Sarah share a room in the old house but will have individual rooms in the new house, segregate their belongings in different areas before packing begins, so each girl's belongings go into the correct boxes.
- If your old home has a combined kitchen-great room-dining room and the new place has a separate kitchen, dining room and den, sort and plan well ahead of moving day.

To inventory or not to inventory? Many people assume they must inventory their belongings for a move, but that's often unnecessary. If movers do your packing, they'll make an inventory, numbering each box and labeling it with the room it came from. (It's up to you to label it with its destination and detailed contents, which requires you to work alongside the movers.)

Otherwise, you need an inventory only when your belongings will leave your hands. If someone else is driving, shipping or storing your stuff, use the inventory to check off items as they leave and return to your possession.

Otherwise, an inventory is not necessary. Nevertheless, some people just like the idea, Urdal says. "In a perfect world, yes, you should probably have a list that you have packed 78 boxes and these are the contents of them. But I've never seen anyone who had it together enough to do that," she says. It's more important to organize your move by getting rid of things you don't need and labeling boxes with location and general contents.

### **Packing materials**

While you'll find free boxes at liquor, grocery and appliance stores, their odd sizes make loading a truck difficult and inefficient. Standard-sized moving boxes are safer, considerably easier to use and ultimately cheaper, as you'll pack more into a tight space. Find moving boxes cheap or free by starting your search early. People who have recently moved often sell or give them away.

Find free boxes:

- Classified ads in newspapers and on [eBay](#) and [Craigslist](#).

- [MSN City Guides](#) (Type “free moving boxes” and your city’s name for results from classified-ad sites and commercial companies).
- Van lines, truck rental companies and other moving companies often receive used boxes from customers and give them away on a first-come, first-served basis. Phone around to learn which companies in your area participate.
- [U-Haul’s online box exchange](#) (free) hosts regional forums that let people sell or give away used moving boxes.

You may find that you need to purchase at least a few specialty boxes for fragile things like china, glass and electronics. Besides the usual small, medium, large and extra-large cardboard boxes, moving companies and truck-rental agencies offer specialty boxes designed to safely move just about anything, from electronics to fine china. For example, among boxes for sale at U-Haul.com are: a flat-screen TV moving kit (\$89.95 and up) and boxes for shipping wine (\$6.95 and up), lamps (\$4.95), dishes (\$4, \$5.45 or \$10.20), stemware (\$10.20), fragile items (\$5.95), electronics (\$5.30), microwave ovens (\$7.15 and \$9.75), clothes (\$7.95 and \$11.95) and legal documents (\$4.35). To picture your needs more clearly and get a handle on costs, pay an exploratory visit to a company that sells boxes before buying, just to take a look.

Merchants will help you figure out how many to buy. Or use the packing calculator at [Moving.com](#). (Moving.com is an MSN Real Estate partner.) It says, for example, that a five-room home with two adults who have lived there more than five years and have “the usual amount of stuff” requires 20 medium, 12 large, eight extra-large and three “bulky” boxes; six wardrobe boxes; plus bubble wrap, tape, pens, twine and labels (enough to pack a 20-foot rental truck).

Shop around when buying boxes:

- [Used Cardboard Boxes.com](#) sells used moving boxes and various-sized “kits” that include a selection of box sizes, markers, tape and packing materials. For example, the “pack rat” one-bedroom kit (\$114, including shipping) includes boxes in three sizes: 29 medium, 10 large and nine extra-large; four rolls of packing tape; 100 sheets of packing paper; two markers; and two box cutters. That may or may not be a savings over new boxes.
- Check costs by searching for “moving boxes” to find online sellers who will deliver to your home.
- Add your city’s name — “moving boxes St. Louis” — to find local suppliers.
- [MSN City Guides](#) lets you search for “moving boxes” in a particular city.

When it comes to filler, crumpled newspaper and your shredded documents make excellent, free padding. (Downside: Newspaper ink is messy, and you may have to clean things wrapped in it.) Also, save money using soft things from your household — stuffed toys, sheets, towels, comforters, rags and blankets — to wrap fragile items.

You can purchase or scavenge bubble wrap (about \$20 for 150 feet), biodegradable foam “peanuts” (\$5 for 1.5 cubic feet), clean newsprint (about \$9 for 10 pounds) and “paper pads” — big, three-ply padded paper sheets (about \$5 for three), tape and felt pens. Don’t forget an inexpensive back-support belt (\$14-\$30 at hardware stores).

## Guidelines for packing

If you have professionals do nothing else, have them pack fragile items, the experts say. They do the best job and they'll be responsible if something breaks. Here are more tips for packing:

- Use a variety of box sizes. Don't pack them too full. Put heavy items like books in many small boxes for easy handling. "If you care for the people who are helping you move, use smaller boxes," advises Bob Wesson, spokesman for U-Haul.
- Label boxes on a couple of sides. For fragile items, use a felt marker to draw arrows on the box showing which end is up. Write instructions like "Fragile," "This end up" or "Top load only" (to indicate a box should be on top of a stack).
- Place a cushion of several sheets of crumpled paper at the bottom of every box and at the top before closing. Use plenty of materials. Wrap breakables in two or three sheets of bubble wrap. Stabilize and secure boxes with plenty of tape.
- Don't pack liquids, flammables and aerosols, including propane tanks and gas cans. Movers won't accept them, and leaks make a big mess. On long trips, "those trucks get really, really hot," Urdal says. "You've got a ticking little bomb there that could just go poof." Also, plants frequently die in moving trucks.
- Hand-carry boxes of your CDs, DVDs and other electronic data. The heat inside moving trucks (and closed cars) can warp discs, destroying data.
- Don't waste box space on comforters, linens and stuffed animals. Put them in big, heavy-duty trash bags and stuff them between pieces of furniture as corner protectors, says Kay Lynn Clay, manager of business development for ABF U-Pack Moving.

The pros have a system for packing each and every household item. Here's their best advice for:

**Electronics:** Be meticulous. If you're just moving across town, you might get away with wrapping a computer, DVD player, stereo equipment or gaming console in a blanket and carrying it on your lap in the car. But for a long-distance move, use a container built for the particular item. Hopefully, you saved boxes and foam from your purchases. If not, check electronics stores for boxes from floor models that might fit. Or buy a specialty electronics box for the correct fit. These boxes are hellishly expensive, yet cheaper than replacing a computer or flat-screen TV. If you haven't got an electronics box, pad the box bottom with a blanket or towels. Use bubble wrap or peanuts — not newspaper — to fill all empty spaces so the gear sits tightly — no rattling — and the box won't get crushed. Before unplugging electronics, label cords to help with the setup. Wrap and tie cords. Put instructions, diagrams and manuals in the box.

**Dishes:** Use a "dish pack" box with slotted partitions. Wrap each dish in two or three sheets of paper or in bubble wrap (buy perforated rolls so you can tear off pieces) before sliding it into the slot. (Dishes should travel standing on end.) Pack wrapped glasses and stemware rim down into specialty boxes with corrugated dividers.

**Furniture:** Wrap and tape bubble wrap around wooden legs. Clay says that a heavy coat of furniture wax on good furniture protects wood during a move. Don't buff it until you arrive at your destination. Remove legs and disassemble any furniture that you can to prevent damage and save space. Put the

hardware in a zip-top plastic bag and tape it to the back side of furniture. Protect furniture in the truck with lots of rented furniture pads.

**Clothes:** It's easiest to hang clothes in "wardrobe" boxes that have a bar across the inside top. Fill the empty space in the bottom of the box with shoes and purses. When unpacking a dresser into a box, separate each drawer's contents with a layer of paper with a note on what it is and where it's going so that anyone who opens the box will know where the contents belong.

**Appliances:** Clean and dry your washer and dryer. Movers will not disconnect or connect equipment or appliances. Have a professional disconnect gas or propane appliances. The washer hose must be drained, removed and placed inside the machine. Appliance stores sell rigid foam "stabilizers" that fit in the agitator to prevent movement. If your refrigerator has an ice-maker, get a professional to disconnect the water line. Tape electrical cords to the backs of appliances.

**Little stuff.** For the kitchen junk drawer, the bathroom cosmetics drawer or medicine cabinet, the desk drawer and other repositories of odds and ends, place the drawer contents onto several sheets of packing paper, roll, wrap and tape it and label with the contents and destination. For small bottles of liquids, use an appropriately sized zip-top plastic bag.

**Art:** Frames and glass are easily broken, leaving art vulnerable to damage. Use a box made for pictures and mirrors or cut and reconstruct a larger box to fit the frame, wrapping the art in bubble wrap, padding the box with paper or peanuts and taping it securely.

**Lampshades:** Put them in boxes, even if it's just one to a box. "The general rule is: If it can fit into a box, it should go into a box," Urdal says.