

Ocean Freight Shipments:

FAQ + Essential Terms



What breaks in real life

Ocean shipments rarely go sideways because the ocean is hard. They go sideways because the work around the ocean is easy to underestimate: documents, timing, handoffs, and local rules at origin and destination.

Why it breaks

Most issues trace back to three things:

- unclear milestones (everyone uses different “arrival” definitions)
- incomplete or late documents
- gaps in communication between parties who do not work for each other

The goal of this guide

This is a practical reference for importers moving freight to the U.S. It answers common questions and defines the terms that show up on quotes, shipping documents, and entry paperwork.

Common Questions

1. How long does it take to receive my cargo?

Ocean transit time depends on origin, destination, sailing schedules, port conditions, and whether the shipment is FCL or LCL. As a rough reference, a main-port China to Los Angeles/Long Beach sailing is often around two weeks on the water. That is not the same as “delivered.” After arrival, the shipment still needs to:

- Discharge from the vessel
- Become available at the terminal
- Clear U.S. Customs (and any partner government agencies, if applicable)
- Move inland to the final location

Option to consider: If you are shipping LCL, expect extra time for consolidation at origin and deconsolidation at destination.



Recommendation

Plan to a milestone schedule (sailing, arrival, availability, clearance, delivery) rather than a single date.

2. Why do ocean freight rates change?

Ocean rates change for reasons that are usually visible if you know what to watch:

- Carrier rate adjustments (often published as general increases on a lane)
- Seasonal demand and equipment availability
- Fuel-related charges and carrier surcharges

Options to consider:

- Spot pricing can work for irregular shipping patterns.
- Contracted pricing can help when volume and frequency are consistent, but terms still matter.



3. Do I need cargo insurance?

Many importers assume carrier liability covers the cargo value. In most cases, it does not. Carrier liability is limited and depends on the facts of the claim. Cargo insurance is a separate decision that can cover loss, damage, and other risks in transit.

Also worth understanding: General Average can require cargo interests to contribute to certain costs after an emergency action taken to protect the voyage. Insurance can matter in those situations.



Recommendation

Treat insurance as a standard part of landed cost planning, especially for high-value shipments.

4. Should my supplier handle shipping?

Some suppliers offer to “handle freight,” often through an overseas agent. That can work in certain situations, but it changes who controls the process.

What typically changes:

- who owns the communication thread
- who is accountable for document quality
- who manages milestones and exceptions
- how inland delivery is arranged after arrival

Options to consider:

- If the supplier arranges freight, confirm who manages ISF filing, entry documentation, and delivery appointment requirements.
- If you designate your own forwarder, you can keep one operating method across suppliers and lanes.



Recommendation

If your team needs consistent updates and a predictable document process, keep the forwarding relationship aligned to the importer.

5. How do I choose between air and ocean?

This is usually a planning decision, not a shipping decision.

Ocean is typically used when:

- inventory can be planned ahead
- cost per unit matters
- volume supports container moves

Air is typically used when:

- the shipment is urgent
- a stockout is more expensive than freight
- the shipment is small and high-value

6. How many pallets fit in a container?

It depends on pallet size and how the cargo is built, but common planning ranges are:

- 20' container: about 9–11 standard pallets
- 40' container: about 21–25 standard pallets

7. Is there a weight limit for containers?

Yes. Limits depend on equipment, carrier rules, and inland trucking restrictions. In the U.S., road weight rules often drive the real constraint, not the container itself.

8. Why do I need a Power of Attorney (POA)?

A POA authorizes a licensed customs broker to act on your behalf with U.S. Customs. It is commonly required to:

- file entries
- pay duties and fees on your behalf (as arranged)
- file the ISF, which must be submitted before the cargo is loaded on a vessel bound for the U.S.



Recommendation

Put POA in place before the first shipment. Waiting until freight is moving compresses timelines.

9. What is a Customs bond, and do I need one?

A Customs bond is a financial guarantee to U.S. Customs that duties, taxes, and compliance obligations will be met.

Most importers need either:

- a single-entry bond (one shipment), or
- a continuous bond (covers multiple shipments over a period)



Recommendation

Choose bond type based on shipment frequency and duty exposure. This is a planning step, not a last-minute fix.

10. When should I ship FCL vs. LCL?

LCL can make sense when volume is smaller and the shipment does not justify a full container. FCL can reduce handling and can be simpler when volume supports it.

Tradeoffs usually include:

- handling and touchpoints (often higher for LCL)
- total transit time variability
- cost at different volume levels



Recommendation

Ask for the breakeven point on your lane with current pricing. It changes.

11. Why are the commercial invoice and packing list important?

These two documents drive clearance and downstream accuracy.

- Commercial invoice: used to assess value, classification support, and entry requirements.
- Packing list: supports counts, weights, carton detail, and receiving.



Recommendation

Treat document accuracy as part of operations. Errors show up later as holds, exams, rework, and cost.

Essential Terms

Landed Cost

Your total cost to bring goods to the point you consider “received” (product cost plus freight, duties, fees, insurance, and related charges). This is the number finance and inventory planning should use.

Consignee

The party named to receive the cargo. If the consignee details don’t match the real receiving party, release and delivery can slow down.

Bill of Lading (MBL / HBL)

The Bill of Lading is the core shipment document set used for movement, release, and recordkeeping. The **MBL** is issued by the ocean carrier, and the **HBL** is issued by the forwarder/NVOCC.

LCL (Less than Container Load)

Cargo that shares container space with other shipments. That shared move adds consolidation and deconsolidation steps, which can affect timing and handling.

FCL (Full Container Load)

A container reserved for one shipper’s cargo. With fewer touchpoints, it can reduce handling risk and simplify delivery planning.

Drayage

Local container transportation, usually between port/rail and a warehouse, CFS, or final delivery point. Many avoidable charges and delays show up here due to terminal rules, appointments, chassis availability, and weight constraints.

Incoterms

Standard trade terms that define who is responsible for cost and risk at different points in the shipment. They affect control and cost allocation, but they do not replace contracts and they do not cover every real-world fee.

Carrier

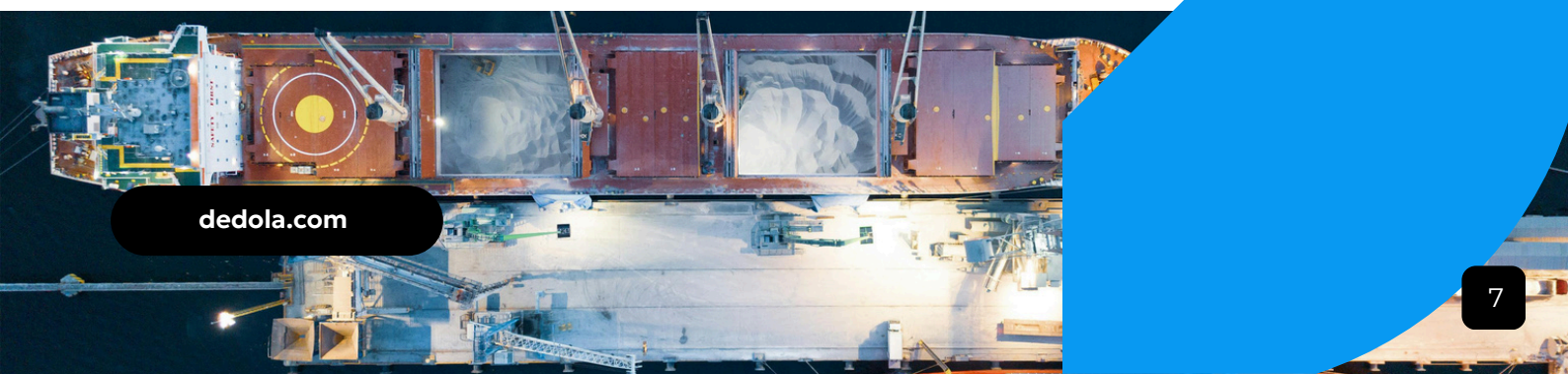
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NVOCC

A non-vessel-operating common carrier that books space with carriers and issues its own bill of lading. This affects documentation, contracting, and who holds the shipment record on the forwarder side.

Marine Cargo Insurance

Insurance coverage for cargo risks during transit. Carrier liability is limited, so insurance is how many importers cover exposure at cargo value.




General Average

A maritime rule that can apply when a vessel faces serious danger and the captain takes a deliberate action to protect the voyage (such as diversion to a port of refuge or emergency services). Even if your cargo is not damaged, you may be required to provide a guarantee or payment before release; cargo insurance often handles the guarantee process and covers the insured share (subject to policy terms).

3PL

A third-party logistics provider that supports parts of the supply chain (transportation, warehousing, or related services). The key is role clarity—a 3PL may support specific legs or services, but responsibilities still need ownership.



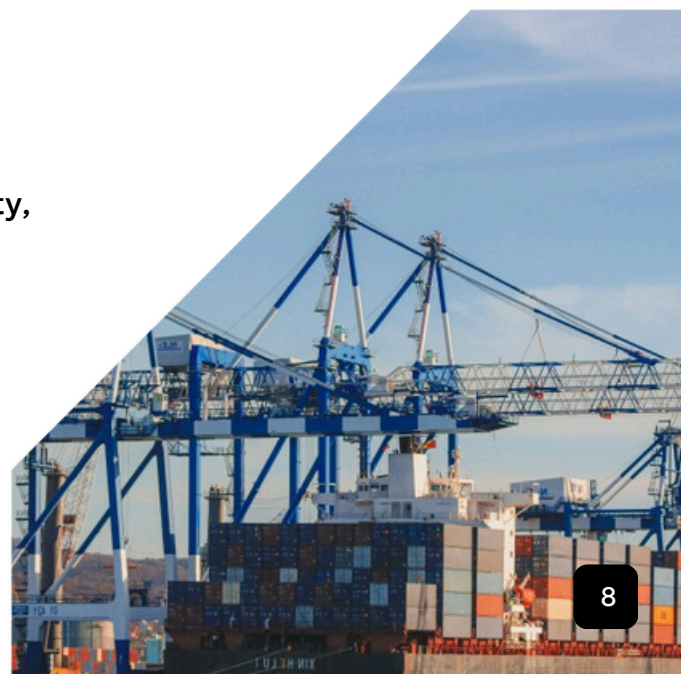
Why Choose Dedola?

DGL coordinates ocean and air imports through a partner network. We manage the communication thread, documents, and milestones so the client has one point of contact for decisions and updates.

Proof in the milestones

When TraktPRO is used, it supports milestone clarity, document organization, and update discipline. It's most useful when multiple parties need to stay aligned without repeated status chasing.

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