

Collecting Stamps

How to Buy and Sell Stamps

Stamps won't make the casual collector rich, but as a hobby they're almost unbeatable. They don't take up much room, and your postal carrier brings new opportunities every day--for free!

Buy

🕒 Steps:

1. Decide what you want to collect. Topical collecting (looking for any stamp with a flag, train or other specific item on it) is the latest trend. For example, an extensive collection can be made from collecting the Christmas stamps of just one country, especially if you include all the varieties of each issue. Some people even collect postmarks.
2. Look in the Yellow Pages for a shop that specializes in stamps. The store owner will know of upcoming stamp shows in the area.
3. Ask the shop owner about auction houses that sell stamps. Order an auction catalog. Expect big-ticket items; most auction houses want their lots to sell for more than \$100 to make it worth their while. Look in collector magazines for advertisements by mail-order stamp sources.
4. Search online. Some stamp dealers have opened shop online, and a few auctions feature stamps. The U.S. Postal Service (usps.gov) also has information on starting a collection.
5. Select stamps with a bright color--fading can be caused by sunlight, artificial light, dirt, pollution and natural skin oils. The stamp should not be torn or damaged, and all perforations should be complete. It should be centered inside the white border.

Sell

🕒 Steps:

1. Look through your collection for pre-1940 stamps for investment quality material. Many fewer stamps were printed in the old days, making good specimens more difficult to find. For the most part, today's stamps are not going to greatly appreciate in value over the years because so many are in circulation.
2. Join a stamp club--it's a great way to find fellow collectors looking to buy. Clubs often hold their own stamp shows for members.
3. Ask a stamp dealer to assess your collection if you want your money right away. Face-to-face interactions are best.
4. Keep in mind that auction houses won't even look at your collection if they don't think it will sell for hundreds of dollars, and it may take a month or more to receive the proceeds.
5. Sell your stamps online. This method can be time-consuming: You must submit a photo and description for each stamp or lot.

Overall Tips:

- Glue on the back of a stamp means it has never been circulated. Removing stamps from letters also removes the glue.
- Don't bother trying to soak a stamp off a colored envelope. The ink in the envelope will bleed and ruin the stamp.
- Store your stamps using hinges or mounts on acidfree paper, all available at hobby shops. You'll also need tongs, a magnifier, a watermark detector and a perforation gauge.
- See [How to Buy at Auction](#).

Overall Warnings:

- You can't buy just one collectible stamp at the post office--you have to buy a roll or a sheet. If you don't send many letters, you might prefer to pay double face value at a shop for just one stamp.
- Since it's so easy to sell items online, keep in mind that the seller might not be an expert and could overstate the quality of the item.

What to look for:

- Stamp shops
- Auction houses
- Mail-order sources
- Web sites
- Stamp clubs
- Stamp shows

How to Start a Stamp Collection

Stamp collecting, or "philately," is an interesting way to chronicle the history of the world. Here's how to begin your collection.

Steps:

1. Go to the post office and purchase new stamps.
2. Take used stamps off your old mail. Note that it's sometimes more valuable to collect the entire envelope rather than stripping off the stamp because of a unique postmark date.
3. Ask friends and family for their old stamps. Their saved envelopes also can be valuable.
4. Purchase stamps from dealers, who are often listed in newspaper classifieds and offer stacks of assorted stamps.
5. Order stamps through the mail or via Web sites, either by approval or by want list. "Approval"

is when a dealer sends you assorted stamps and you choose which ones to keep. A "want list" is when a dealer checks his or her stock and quotes prices for specific stamps you want to collect.

6. Bid at stamp auctions or philatelic exhibitions. Take the time to look through the merchandise and make educated deals.
7. Trade with fellow collectors. Do this by meeting other stamp traders at shows, auctions and stamp clubs.

Tips:

- Store your stamps where they will not be harmed. A simple shoebox will do for a beginning collector.
- Check the prices of stamps in the most current price guides, such as the Scott Catalogue or the Blackbook Price Guide. Follow the instructions printed at the beginning of the guide for more information on examining and handling a stamp.

How to Care for Stamps

Stamp collecting (or philately, as it's called) can be interesting and enjoyable. Here's how to take good care of your collection so you can preserve your stamps and participate in your hobby for many years. Have fun!

Steps:

1. Keep food, drinks and tobacco products away from your collection. Keep them off your desk or table when your stamps are there.
2. Use special flat-bladed stamp collector's tongs (not regular tweezers) to handle stamps. Stamps are fragile and require the delicate care that tongs provide. Tweezers can damage your stamps.
3. Use peelable stamp hinges (designed with adhesive backing) to mount your collection's used stamps in an album.
4. Use stamp mounts (clear plastic sleeves with gummed backing) for your "mint" condition stamps. They preserve the original adhesive gum on the backs of your best stamps.
5. Use stamp albums, which are binders with pages specifically designed for storing stamps, or stock books with pockets you can insert stamp mounts into.
6. Buy the highest-quality supplies for your collection. Look for archival-quality materials, especially for album pages that your stamps will be in contact with.
7. Use only one side of an album page for hinged stamps, or insert a separate (archival) sheet between album pages. This keeps stamps from damaging each other.
8. Store your collection in the normal living space of your home, where it's more likely you'll quickly notice any insect problems. Your living space is also better because it's temperature-

and humidity-controlled, unlike basements and attics.

Tips:

- Direct sunlight can damage your stamps. It can cause colors to fade and glue to stick to things.
- If the temperature and humidity in your home are comfortable for you, they're probably all right for your stamps. For more information, visit the Taking Care of Your Stamp Collection Web site (see Related Sites).

How to Examine a Stamp Collection

Knowing how to "read" a stamp's features can help you figure out its condition and value.

Steps:

1. Examine the postmark date on the envelope, or what is visible of the postmark on the stamp. This often plays a role in determining a stamp's value.
2. Check the stamp's denomination, or face value.
3. Examine the frame between the central design of the stamp and the surrounding perforations (the holes that separate one stamp from another on a sheet). Is the design centered?
4. Examine the perforation teeth (the stamp's jagged edges). Use a perforation gauge, which measures the number of holes for each 2 centimeters of surface area; the perforation number is one factor that determines the stamp's value.
5. Examine the margin, or unprinted area, around a stamp.
6. Examine the vignette, or central design, of the stamp. Check for color alterations and fading.
7. Use a magnifying glass to examine the stamp closely. Check for creases, tears, uneven perforation teeth, vivid colors, frail paper, the quality of gum on the backing and signs of repair on the surface.

Tips:

- The grading scale for stamps is similar to that of other collectibles: Mint-condition stamps have never been used, are perfectly centered and have vivid colors, the original adhesive gum on the back, and no creases or tears. The succeeding grades are Extremely Fine, Very Fine, Fine, Very Good and Good.
- Stored stamps are often accompanied by labels. These include Never Hinged (NH), Original Gum (OG), Lightly Hinged (LH) and Hinge Remnants (HR).
- Always check stamp price guides for more information on grading scales and handling stamps; many guides use more elaborate grading scales. Common price guides include the Scott Catalogue, and the Blackbook Price Guide published by the House of Collectibles.