

Stamp Collecting for Beginners

The basic rule of stamp collecting is to enjoy what you're collecting and take good care of your stamps. Other than that, you can collect whatever stamps you like and display them in whatever way you like.

What to collect

Some people collect stamps by the country (traditional), and some by the design on the stamps (topical). Some people collect many copies of just one stamp issue or just one type of stamp (specialist), and some people collect every stamp they see (worldwide).

Most people collect a little of everything, so you will find someone who collects US postage due stamps, sports-on-stamps, and Italian stamps.

When you're just starting out in stamp collecting it's best not to narrow your collecting interests. Look at as many stamps and read as much as you can, and you will discover areas and facets of stamp collecting you never knew existed.

The important thing when starting a stamp collecting is to start, and just start with what you have at hand. Somewhere along the line you will find the stamps you really want, but the first lesson you need to learn is how to take care of your stamps.

Care

No matter what else you learn about stamp collecting, learn to always use stamp tongs. They may look like household tweezers, but stamp tongs do not have sharp edges. Tweezers will harm your stamps. Use tongs: that's the second rule of stamp collecting.

Do not pick up your stamps with your fingers or even lay them out on a bare table. The natural oils from your skin and the dust on the table will dirty the stamp over time.

When looking at your stamps, pour them out of their envelope onto a clean piece of white paper or something similar. I use a pad of paper on a clipboard.

The clipboard allows me to pick up all my stamps and move them out of the way if I need to. Sometimes I put my board of stamps into a box or drawer for safe-keeping if I'm going to continue working on them the next morning or so.

Supplies

When you start out you don't need a lot of stamp supplies, but you will need tongs, envelopes and a storage box. The tongs you'll have to buy from a stamp shop or at a stamp show.

You can use clean, plain white envelopes when you start. Write the name of the type of stamps on the envelope to help you organize your stamp collection.

When you're starting a stamp collection it's best to keep it simple and just sort your stamps and label your envelopes by country, unless you've already decided you want to focus on certain stamps, like motorcycle stamps or air mails.

When you're done working with your stamps for the evening, it's good practice to put your stamps into a clean and sturdy container or box. If you have an empty drawer that you can use, that's fine too. Stamp collectors use just about every type of container imaginable, and there are only two rules for stamp collecting and they don't cover containers.

Glassines

After a while, you should try to get a package of glassine envelopes for your stamps. These are semi-transparent envelopes made especially for stamp collecting. They're made out of glassine which is a material that has no harmful chemicals in it that would harm the stamps inside.

Many types of paper have high levels of acidity or other properties that over time can harm the stamps inside. It's perfectly okay to temporarily store your stamps in these regular envelopes for a few weeks or so, but why take chances.

Soon after starting your stamp collection you should have a good pair of tongs and your glassine envelopes filled with stamps stored in a clean container on a shelf in a quiet part of the house away from any pets, food or drinks, or a bathroom shower.

You don't need to think about getting an album for your stamps until you have found out what sort of stamps you really want to collect, but you're going to have to start using a catalog to identify your stamps.

Unfortunately for all of us, good catalogs cost money, but luckily for most of us many public libraries have copies of catalogs on their shelves that you can check out. If they do not, you might be able to pick up a second-hand stamp catalog at a used book store, a stamp show or at an online auction.

Most stamps have their country printed right on the stamp, but some have the country name printed in their native alphabet which might not look like anything familiar. Identifying these stamps will take a little getting used to, but there are several places on the web where you can go for help.

Albums

Albums are for displaying your stamp collection. There are many kinds, but let's start off with the way commercial albums are made.

Pages can be printed on both sides of the page, but those printed on just one side are better. That way, stamps don't rub against each other when the album's closed. Perforations of the stamps can catch onto the stamp on the facing page and bend, tear or mangle the stamp.

Pages can be glued into the spine of the album cover or they can have metal posts in the cover onto which the pages are stacked, just like a common loose leaf binder. Albums with metal posts are better. They allow you to add more pages later (supplements) and allow a small space between the pages of the closed album, reducing wear on the stamps.

These are commercially printed albums and there are many to choose from. They run the gamut from starter stamp albums for children to comprehensive worldwide sets of albums, running several volumes, and everything in between.

Hinges

Now, the only way to attach a stamp to an album page is with a stamp hinge or a stamp mount. Hinges are small pieces of glassine that are coated with a specially made glue that's safe for stamp collections. The little glassine hinge is folded over at the top and attaches to the stamp and the other part attaches to the album page.

Mounts are actually plastic pockets that you slip the stamp into and then attach the mount to the album page.

Hinges are perfect for used stamps. Mounts are perfect for mint stamps that have gum on the backs, but they are more expensive than hinges.

A 1000 hinges cost somewhere around £1.00. A package of 20 mounts might cost £1.00 depending on the size of the mount for different size stamps need different size mounts. With hinges, one size fits all.

If you have a lot of mint stamps with the gum on the back and you don't have any mounts, you should just put those mint stamps aside in a glassine until you can afford the mounts you need.

Getting Stamps

After you start collecting stamps, you'll need to get more stamps for your collection, and this is one of the things that makes stamp collecting one of the best hobbies in the world.

You can trade stamps with other stamp collectors. Trading stamps with other stamp collectors is one of the best ways to grow your stamp collection and make friends.

You can buy stamps from stamp dealers. Each dealer will have their own way of selling or trading, so ask a lot of questions first and only deal with those people you feel comfortable with.

You can buy new stamps from the post office. Just go up to the counter of the local post office when there isn't a long line and tell them you want to buy some stamps for your collection. In many small town post offices, you can ask the clerk if they have any extra stamp posters, like the ones you see in the post office lobby showing the new stamps, and ask for one.

You can get the used stamps from the envelopes that come in your mail. It's one of the easiest ways to collect stamps, and always ask people to send you cards when they go on vacation.

You can ask friends and family to save the stamps on their mail for you. If someone you know works in a large company maybe they can bring home discarded envelopes from co-workers or the mailroom.

On the Web

After you've picked up a basic working knowledge of stamp collecting, you should start thinking about meeting other stamp collectors. There are stamp clubs in many towns around the UK and many other Countries, though they may be hard to find. Local papers often don't carry stamp collecting news. You can ask your local postmaster, or you can go online and see if you can find them that way.

Stamp collecting is the hobby of a life time that embraces young and old, rich and poor, and you'll find that almost every stamp collector is always ready and willing to help out another stamp collector.

- Mrs. Nagalakshmi Tadakaluri, Philatelist.