

The PSA Grading Process

PSA, which started in 1991, has certified millions of collectibles in its history – making it the largest third-party grading and authentication service in the world. In this guide, we are going to show you how trading cards are graded at PSA. We hope this step-by-step guide will help answer your questions about the grading process and provide insight into what PSA is all about.

Let's get started...

Submission Preparation

Perhaps the most important task in the submission process is completing the submission form and preparing the submission package. Properly completing the form is the first step in ensuring that your order is processed accurately and efficiently.

After filling in all of your personal information, you must then separate your cards based on the type of submission such as Grading, Review or Crossover service. Once that is done, you must also separate the cards by service level based on the declared value and desired turnaround time. Keep in mind that only one type of submission and service is allowed per order.

The submission form is detailed and easy to follow. Once you have followed the instructions and have completed the form, you are ready to package your order.

We recommend that you insert your cards in flexible plastic pouches such as the Card Saver I product. We do not accept cards submitted in hard-acrylic or screwdown holders and do not recommend the use of hard plastic top loaders. In addition, we also recommend wrapping your cards in between two pieces of cardboard for added protection. The use of bubble wrap and/or Styrofoam pellets is also suggested to cushion your prized cards en route to PSA. Also, please remember to mark the outside of your package clearly with the service type requested.

PSA accepts shipments via USPS and Federal Express but we highly recommend that your packages are sent via registered/insured mail for tracking ability and protection. Detailed packaging and shipping instructions can be found in our [Packing Guidelines](#).

It looks like we're now ready to follow your card's journey through the PSA grading process.

Receiving

The receiving step is one of the most crucial steps in the PSA process. This is where all packages are logged in and separated based on their service level. Once the packages have been separated, each package is opened in priority of service and the cards are counted. After verifying the service level and payment, one of the most important steps in the grading process occurs.

The submissions are now assigned a generic order number, removing the identifying information from the order – thus removing the potential for bias. Finally, all of the pertinent data is entered from the PSA submission form, an e-mail confirmation is sent to you and your cards are off to the next stage.

The Sticker Stage

The next step in the PSA process is called the Sticker Stage. At this stage, the cards are counted again and labels are placed on the outside of each card saver. The label or sticker assigned to each card contains information including the order number and individual certification number – that is

the same certification number that will appear on the PSA label once the card is graded.

Once this occurs, the history of that card will be stored in our database as it travels through the process and is eventually assigned a grade. Finally, the information on the stickers is matched against the information on the card itself.

The Spec Department

Once the information has been verified during the Sticker Stage, the order is then off to our Spec department. This is where our research team resides. Once again, the cards are counted, the sticker information is verified and the cards that need additional research, whether there was no information provided or if it is a rare issue, are examined before all of the data is entered into the database.

Grading

The cards are now ready for grading. Each order is distributed to graders based on their particular skill and expertise. For example, a 1956 Topps Mickey Mantle would not be distributed to one of our modern card specialists. While the graders are generally trained to handle cards from virtually all eras, they are assigned cards based on their strengths.

In addition, the sheer number of graders assigned to each card can vary depending on the type of card submitted. In all cases, at minimum, two graders are assigned to every card.

Here's an example – if you were to submit a 1965 Topps Willie Mays – this is how the grading process would work:

Each grader receives the order and they will enter the order number into the computer. Once that is done, the contents of that order will appear on the PSA grading screen. Grader #1 will then enter his grade for the card in question (and for each card within the order until the order is completed if there is more than one card) and close the order on his screen. Once that is done and after redistribution of the order, Grader #2 will do the same – not knowing the opinion of the first grader on any of the cards within that order.

If their grades match in the computer, the card would then eventually reach a 3rd grader for verification of the grade. If the opinion of the first two graders does not match, that card will be assigned to a 3rd grader whose opinion is required to break the tie, so to speak. As with the first example, the card would still be assigned to another grader for verification (a 4th grader in the process) to make sure the grade is accurate and consistent with our standards.

The first stage in the grading process is determining whether the card is authentic. With the values of some trading cards today, counterfeits are not uncommon on some of the hobby's biggest stars – especially rookie cards and reprints that are often submitted as originals.

Once the card has been determined to be authentic, it is then checked for possible alterations. Since the value of a trading card is often linked directly to its condition, some "card doctors" as they are referred to will attempt to enhance the condition of cards in a variety of ways.

For example, they may attempt this by either trimming them to enhance the sharpness of the edges and corners or re-color them to enhance the color or to cover up wear along the surface or edges. There are several ways a card can be "doctored" but, if evidence of such doctoring is present, the card will not be graded by PSA because the card is no longer original according to PSA standards.

So, finally, once the graders have determined the card to be authentic and unaltered, a grade can now be assigned to the card in question. PSA's 1-10 grading scale, with 10 being best, is universally accepted throughout the industry. Graders are now focusing on the characteristics of the card such as the strength and quality of the corners, color, edges, centering, surface, print clarity and overall eye appeal. PSA's grading standards can be found in Sports Market Report, which is the official price guide for PSA certified collectibles, and on our website. We highly recommend that submitters become familiar with those standards, because your improved knowledge may help increase your chances of attaining higher grades.

The PSA Labeling Department

Once the grades have been assigned in the database, the PSA labels are now generated and printed. By entering the order number into the system, our team can now print all of the crucial information for the PSA label including the card number, player and/or subject, manufacturer, grade and the unique certification number mentioned earlier in our video. Each and every collectible certified by PSA receives this unique number which is stored in our database along with that collectible's history.

The Sealing Department

Now that the PSA labels have been printed, our sealing department is given the task of selecting the appropriate custom holders for each card and then carefully placing the card and PSA label within the holder. Once the contents have been assembled by hand, each card is taken to the boom room where cards are sonically sealed in our tamper-evident holders. This sonic weld is strong and helps ensure security of the PSA holder.

Verification Stage (1)

After the cards have been sealed in the PSA holders, they are then sent to the Grading Verification stage. As mentioned earlier, this is where another grader will check the orders for accuracy and consistency in relation to PSA standards. If the cards appear to meet PSA's guidelines, the order is then sent on to the next step in the process. If any of the cards do not appear to meet the standards, the card is then removed from the holder and re-evaluated by our staff.

Verification Stage (2)

Once our grading staff has finalized the grades through the verification process, the orders are then sent to the final verification stage. This stage is PSA's final quality control checkpoint. Here, the order is then reunited with the original submission form and each card is matched against the paperwork.

The cards and holders are examined for defects that may have been overlooked in prior stages such as scratched cases or improper information on the PSA label. Once this is checked and verified, a PSA packing slip is printed so our shipping department is aware of the method of delivery you have selected. Upon completion, the grades are posted and an e-mail confirmation is sent to the customer with the grading results.

The Shipping Department

We are now at the final stage in the PSA process – the shipping department. Now PSA's staff will count the cards within the order once again to ensure that the card count and submission form matches the information in our system.

Once this is completed, the staff members enter the shipping instructions into the computer, package the order and ship it back to the customer – who is eagerly awaiting their cards. Once the order is shipped from our facility, an e-mail is generated automatically to alert the customer that the order is on the way.

Conclusion

That concludes our look at the PSA grading process. We hope you enjoyed this inside look at the journey of a PSA submission and, hopefully, this guide will help answer many commonly asked questions about our service. From all of us at PSA: thanks for your continued support over the years. Your support has made PSA the preferred choice for collectors across the globe and the foundation of all great collections. For additional questions about PSA, please visit other areas of our website or call us toll-free at 1-800-325-1121 and ask to speak with one of our representatives.