

You're Probably Recycling Wrong

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Recycling bins at a park in Singapore. (Tim Chong / Reuters)

Maybe you've found yourself mystified by the [symbols](#) and rules of recycling. Counterintuitively, the single-stream system—which allows residents to toss any and all recyclables into one bin—hasn't cleared up the confusion. Many people simply throw in anything made out of plastic, glass, or metal and hope for the best. But this assorted jumble can cause big issues once it arrives at the processing plant.

The problem with the anything-goes approach is that non-recyclable materials can get mixed in with and contaminate recyclables, reducing the value of the batch as a whole. This effect increases with the volume of recycling. The *Washington Post* [reported](#) that contamination rose significantly in Washington, D.C., after the city installed larger residential recycling bins in 2014, leading to a 50 percent drop in the share of the city's profit from selling recyclables. Across the country, municipalities are paying more to process and haul away these undesirable outputs. "By pushing to increase recycling rates with bigger and bigger bins—while demanding almost no sorting by consumers—the recycling stream has become increasingly polluted and less valuable, imperiling the economics of the whole system," wrote the *Post*.

The jumble of single-stream recyclables can cause big issues for processing plants.

So what's an eco-conscious consumer to do? CityLab spoke with Darby Hoover, senior resource specialist at the Natural Resources Defense Council, to find out. It turns out there are some things that aren't worth "recycling," because they end up doing more harm than good at the plant. By keeping the following materials (in one form or another) out of the blue bin, you can help support your local recycling program—and not muck up the process overall.

Small scraps of paper

Hoover says it's "virtually impossible" to separate these shreds from the other materials rolling down the conveyor belt. "They end up becoming part of the residue that's left over at the end because they're so tiny," says Hoover. "I can't even pull them out by hand."

However, that doesn't mean paper scraps can't be recycled—just don't dump them directly into the blue bin. Instead, Hoover says, you can place them in a paper bag, staple it shut, and write "SHREDED PAPER" on the outside. A person at the processing plant will recognize the bag, remove it from the rest of the recycling stream, and sort it into the paper products.

Condiment packets

Whether they hold soy sauce, ketchup, mustard, or some other liquid, all these packets are made out of plastic or an aluminum-plastic combination. "There's nobody recycling those right now," Hoover says, so you're better off throwing them in the garbage.

Polystyrene foam containers

These are almost never recyclable because they're extremely lightweight and typically soiled with food residue. (Remember, food contamination is the same reason [you can't recycle a pizza box](#).)

"Paper" cups

Most paper cups are actually coated with plastic, so they can't be recycled with other paper products. Some municipalities can separate the plastic out to recover the paper fiber, while others allow you to toss the cups into compost. Check with your local waste management authority to make sure you're disposing of these properly.

Plastic bags

They're a huge hassle for recyclers because they often fly off or clog sorting machinery. "At the material recovery facility in San Francisco, they have to shut down all the machines every night for at least an hour to go in and manually pick out all the pieces of plastic bag that have gone in there and jammed up the various machines," Hoover says.



But there's an easy way to keep these out of the landfill: Bring them to a local grocery store. Most offer plastic bag recycling by the entrance. Once the bags are sorted together, they can be bundled up and repurposed as [plastic lumber](#).

Tyvek envelopes

These mailers are made out of plastic, not paper, so most municipal authorities won't accept them for recycling. You'd have to go through the [manufacturer](#).

Keep these guidelines in mind before dumping your goods into the bin. And, as always, check with your local waste management authority to make sure that you're not inadvertently clogging up the system.