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How to read and check a container number

CSQU 305438 3: four letters, six digits and a check digit. Catch a mistyped number in seconds.

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Online interactive version: **https://ozgurkonakci.com/en/guide/container-number-check-digit/**

SHORT ANSWER

Under ISO 6346, a container identification number has 11 characters: a 3-letter owner code, a 1-letter equipment category (U for freight containers), a 6-digit serial number and a check digit. The check digit is found by multiplying the numerical values of the first 10 characters by powers of 2, adding them up and taking the remainder after dividing by 11; a remainder of 10 gives a check digit of 0.

The four parts of the number

Every container carries an 11-character identification number on its doors and sides, written under ISO 6346. For example, **CSQU 305438 3**:

Part	Example	Meaning
Owner code (BIC code)	CSQ	Three letters identifying the owner or principal operator. The international register is kept by BIC.
Equipment category	U	**U:** freight container · **J:** detachable container-related equipment · **Z:** trailer or chassis
Serial number	305438	A 6-digit number chosen by the owner.
Check digit	3	A verification digit calculated from the first 10 characters.

A single wrong letter in the bill of lading, VGM declaration, customs declaration or a tracking system can make a container "disappear". The check digit exists to catch these errors.

How is the check digit calculated?

1. **Give each letter a number.** Start at A=10 and skip 11 and its multiples: A=10, B=12, C=13 … K=21, L=23 … U=32, V=34 … Z=38. Digits keep their own value.
2. **Multiply each value by a power of 2 according to its position.** The first character by 1, the second by 2, the third by 4 … the tenth by 512.

3. **Add the products and divide by 11.** The remainder is the check digit. If the remainder is 10, the check digit is **0**.

Example: CSQU305438 C=13, S=30, Q=28, U=32 and the digits 3, 0, 5, 4, 3, 8. The products add up to 6,185. 6,185 ÷ 11 leaves a remainder of **3**, so the number is **CSQU3054383**.

Check tool

Letter values

Letter	Value
A	10
B	12
C	13
D	14
E	15
F	16
G	17
H	18
I	19
J	20
K	21
L	23
M	24
N	25
O	26
P	27
Q	28
R	29
S	30
T	31
U	32
V	34

Letter	Value
W	35
X	36
Y	37
Z	38

Common size-type codes

Code	Meaning
22G1	20' general purpose, 8'6" high
42G1	40' general purpose, 8'6" high
45G1	40' high cube, 9'6" high
45R1	40' high cube reefer, 9'6" high

The size-type code

A 4-character **size-type code** is usually marked next to the identification number:

- **1st character:** length (2 = 20 ft, 4 = 40 ft)
- **2nd character:** height and width (e.g., 2 = 8 ft 6 in, 5 = 9 ft 6 in high cube)
- **3rd and 4th characters:** type (e.g., G1 = general purpose, R1 = reefer)

Common examples: **22G1** (20' standard), **42G1** (40' standard), **45G1** (40' high cube), **45R1** (40' high cube reefer). See the container types topic for dimensions.

Test yourself

1. In MSKU1234565, what does the fourth letter show? *(Answer: U, a freight container.)*
2. If the remainder after dividing by 11 is 10, what is the check digit? *(Answer: 0.)*
3. How long is a container with the code 22G1? *(Answer: 20 feet.)*

Frequently asked questions

What is the last digit of a container number?

The last digit is the check digit. It is calculated from the first 10 characters and confirms the number has been written correctly. If a letter or digit is mistyped, the calculated check digit usually does not match.

What does the U in a container number mean?

The fourth letter is the equipment category: U is a freight container, J is detachable container-related equipment and Z is a trailer or chassis.

What does 45G1 mean?

It is a size-type code: a 40-foot general purpose (high cube) container, 9 ft 6 in high. The first character gives the length, the second the height and width, and the last two the type.

SOURCES

BIC — Container identification number (owner code, category, serial number, check digit) — https://bic-code.org/identification-number/
BIC — Container check digit calculator — https://www.bic-code.org/check-digit-calculator/
Wikipedia — ISO 6346 (check digit method, letter values, CSQU3054383 example, size-type codes) — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ISO_6346

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