

How to Pack a Backpack

written by [Tim Allard](#)

Packing all of this stuff into one pack might seem daunting, but it's an easy process if you follow a few basic rules.

Backpacks are one of the most fundamental pieces of outdoor gear. No other device lets you carry all the items that you need to be comfortable and equipped outdoors. Packing all of this stuff into one pack might seem daunting, but it's an easy process if you follow a few basic rules. Whether you're using a large expedition model or a small, urban daypack, here are some important steps to follow when packing a backpack:

Weight Distribution

Regardless of what you're stuffing in your sack, distributing weight properly is critical to comfort and proper posture. For the most part, it's best to pack heavy items, like a stove, fuel and food, in the middle of the pack and close to your back. Make sure you evenly distribute weight from side to side as well as this will keep the pack balanced. To ensure these heavy items stay in place, tightly pack clothes around the gear to keep it snug. This tactic also maximizes the use of space in your pack.

Underneath the heavy gear, pack light items that you won't need to access during the day, like a sleeping bag. In some instances, packs have separate compartments at the bottom specifically for sleeping bags. To maximize space, consider buying a compression bag to squish your bulky sleeping bag into a smaller size. This might also let you stuff your tent (not the poles) in this bottom compartment as well.

At the top of the pack, above the heavier items, place other gear you might need to access during the day. Layered clothes, a map, flashlight, sunscreen, toilet paper, medical supplies, and a first aid kit are some examples. You'll also want to keep your lunch in the top of the pack as well. Otherwise, you'll end up unpacking half of your bag to access this afternoon meal.

For multi-day packs containing hoops and straps, it's also possible to secure items to the outside of the bag. Tent poles, rope, and sleeping pads are two good examples. Again, just make sure the pack is properly balanced. Don't put too much weight on the pack's exterior or you'll find yourself being pulled backwards from its weight. This will result in you leaning forward to compensate, which leads to poor posture and fatigue.

Once you've got all your gear packed, it's important to tighten the side compression straps. In doing so, you'll keep everything snug in place, minimizing internal movement during travel.



For multi-day packs containing hoops and straps, it's also possible to secure items to the outside of the bag.

Small Pockets for Easy Access

Beyond the pack's main storage space, there are often additional pockets for other items. I like a pack with side mesh pockets to store a variety of items like sunscreen, sunglasses, snacks, and water bottles. Of course, many packs today have sleeves to fit hydration systems, so water can always be at your fingertips.

If you're using a daypack or weekend pack for more than just outdoor activities, there are a lot of extra features to many of these smaller storage spaces. Top pockets are great for keeping wallets or cell phones stored on urban hikes and some packs feature internal pockets with clips to keep keys secure. Other daypacks feature pockets specifically designed to hold CD or MP3 players. Many feature cord ports and hooks to keep headphones wires tidy and out of the way. Another trait to look for in packs is an organizer pocket. These often feature storage designed for small items, like a mesh zipper pocket for loose change or slots to hold pens.

Lastly, loops are a great feature to have on any pack. With dozens of applications, my personal favorite is attaching a carabineer to them. With this done, I always have an easy option to store my ball cap. I clip the carabineer through the hat's adjustable strap. This way my hat stays secure without the beak getting warped, which happens when it's stuffed in the main pack with my other gear.



I like a pack with side mesh pockets to store a variety of items like sunscreen, sunglasses, snacks, and water bottles.

The Importance of Zippers

Zippers are the doors to our gear in the world of backpacks. Although a simple invention, there are a few things worth noting when it comes to zippers. First, always be careful to keep thin material away from zippers. Plastic bags or thin rain gear can easily get caught in zipper's teeth. The result can be a stuck zipper or in worst cases, ruined gear. If looking to get a pack, consider one with side zippers. This design will literally let you open up your pack, making items easily accessible.

For me, side zippers were the selling feature on the daypack I use when cycling. By being able to open up the entire storage space, I can easily pack and access my change of clothes, lunch, and any other items I need. This system is much better, than stuffing all these items down the narrow, tube-like storage space of my old backpack.

Lastly, look for high-quality zippers and opt for ones that feature water-repellant flaps that fold over the zippers. This way, when you do get stuck in a downpour, the flaps will offer some protection from rain and help keep your gear dry. It's also a good rule of thumb to keep moisture-sensitive items away from zippers and wrapped in a plastic bags for extra protection.

These are just a few suggestions on how to pack a backpack. Whether you're setting out for a multi-day hike in the woods or just taking the bus downtown, properly packing a backpack is important. It'll increase your comfort as well as keep things secure and protected during your travels.