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Trading Card Grading — A Plain-English Guide to PSA, CGC, and Beckett

PSA, CGC, and Beckett — how to look up a graded card and submit your own

Tech Made Simple. Service Made Personal.

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THE 60-SECOND VERSION

1 The 60-Second Version

The whole idea, if you only have a minute.

Card grading is simple at its heart. You send a trading card to a company like PSA, CGC, or Beckett. Their experts confirm it is genuine and has not been tampered with, then score its condition on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is nearly perfect.

They seal the card in a hard plastic case — collectors call it a 'slab' — with a label that shows the card, the grade, and a unique certification number. That number lets anyone look the card up online and confirm the grade is real.

- Why people do it: a trusted grade can make a card easier to sell, protect it from further wear, and prove it is authentic.
- What it costs: fees vary widely by company and speed, roughly from around fifteen to twenty dollars per card up to much more for fast service or very valuable cards. Always check current pricing.
- The honest catch: grading only makes sense when the graded card would be worth clearly more than the fee plus shipping. For common cards, it usually is not worth it.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> You do not need to grade anything, or even own a graded card, to use the most useful tool here: free online cert lookup. If someone offers you a graded card, you can verify it in under a minute before you trust the grade or pay a dime.

WHAT GRADING DOES

2 What Grading Actually Does for a Card

Three jobs, all at once.

When a company grades a card, it is really doing three separate things, and it helps to keep them straight.

It authenticates

First, trained graders confirm the card is genuine — a real card from the year and set it claims to be, not a counterfeit or a reprint passed off as original. This alone is valuable for older and high-dollar cards, where fakes exist.

It checks for tampering

Next, they look for signs the card has been altered to look better than it is: trimmed edges, re-coloring, rebuilt corners, pressed-out creases, or added gloss. A card found altered does not get a normal number grade, which protects honest buyers.

It scores and seals

Finally, if the card is genuine and unaltered, they grade its condition from 1 to 10 and seal it in a tamper-evident case with a label and cert number. The seal keeps the card from getting worse and makes the grade hard to fake.

> *Grading does not make a card good. It tells the truth about a card you already have — and the truth is worth more than a guess.*

THE 1-10 SCALE

3 Reading the 1-to-10 Scale

What the number on the label really means.

Every major company scores condition on the same basic 1-to-10 scale, with 10 being the best. Graders weigh four things: centering (how evenly the image sits inside the borders), corners, edges, and surface. A single flaw in any one of those can hold a card back a grade or two.

Grade	Rough meaning
10	Gem Mint — looks nearly perfect

9	Mint — excellent, tiny flaw at most
7-8	Near Mint — sharp, light handling wear
5-6	Excellent — clearly used but clean
3-4	Very Good — visible wear, still whole
1-2	Poor to Good — heavy wear or damage

Many companies also give half grades, such as 8.5 or 9.5, on certain service levels, to split the difference between two whole numbers. A card found genuine but altered, or too damaged to score, may come back marked 'Authentic' rather than with a number.

GOOD TO KNOW

Beckett's BGS slabs are known for four small 'subgrades' — a separate score for centering, corners, edges, and surface — shown alongside the overall grade. Some collectors like seeing exactly why a card landed where it did.

WATCH OUT

A 9 is not nine-tenths as good as a 10 in the market. For many cards the jump from a 9 to a 10 can multiply the value several times over, because true 10s are rare. Small condition differences can mean large price differences.

THE BIG NAMES

4 PSA, CGC, and Beckett Compared

Three reputable companies, with different reputations.

Three companies do most of the grading in the hobby, and all three are legitimate. They differ mainly in which cards they are known for, how their slabs look, and how they price service.

PSA

The largest and best-known name, especially for sports cards and vintage. A PSA grade is widely recognized, and PSA-graded cards often sell easily because so many buyers trust the brand. Grading requires a paid membership account.

CGC Cards

Part of the long-established group that also grades comic books and coins. CGC is strong with trading-card games like Pokemon and with modern cards, and is known for detailed, well-documented slabs and online records. A free account is enough to submit.

Beckett (BGS)

A hobby institution for over forty years, famous for its price guides. Beckett's BGS slabs carry the four subgrades and color-coded labels (a gold label for the highest grades). Popular with collectors who value that detail.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> Two more names you will see: SGC, respected especially for vintage sports cards and its distinctive black-framed slab, and BGS, which is simply Beckett's grading brand. Any of these is a safe, recognized grade.

YOUR ACCOUNT

5 Setting Up an Account

The first step before you can submit anything.

You cannot just mail cards in cold. Each company wants you to create an account and start your submission online first, so they know what is coming. This part is free to set up, though PSA charges for the membership tier that lets you submit.

1. Go to the company's website (psacard.com, cgccards.com, or beckett.com) and choose to create an account.
2. Enter your name, email, and a password. Keep the email and password written down somewhere safe — you will need them to track your cards.

3. For PSA, pick a membership level; a paid membership is required to submit cards and may include a number of free gradings per year. CGC and Beckett let you submit with a free account.
4. Add your mailing address and, when asked, a payment method for the grading fees and return shipping.

TIP

Use an email you check often. The company sends updates as your cards move through each step — received, grading, sealed, shipped — and that is how you will know where they are.

WATCH OUT

Only ever create an account on the company's own website. Type the address yourself rather than following a link from an email or a search ad, so you are not fooled by a look-alike site asking for your payment details.

SUBMITTING ONLINE

6 How Online Submission Works

Filling out the form is most of the job.

Submitting is mostly paperwork done on the website, followed by a careful trip to the mailbox. You list your cards online, the site prints you a form, and that form rides along in the box so your cards are matched to your account.

1. Sign in and start a new submission in the company's online submission center.
2. Choose a service level (covered in the next chapter) based on how much each card is worth and how fast you want it back.
3. Enter each card — the year, set, player or character, and card number — and a declared value, which is your honest estimate of what the card is worth.
4. Review the total fee, which the site calculates from your service level and number of cards, then submit and pay.
5. Print the packing slip or submission form the site generates.
6. Pack your cards with the printed form and mail them to the address the site gives you.

GOOD TO KNOW

The 'declared value' is not just a formality. It usually decides which service tier you must use and how much the card is insured for if something goes wrong. Be honest and reasonable — guessing too high can force you into a pricier tier.

> *The form feels fussy the first time. Go slow, enter one card at a time, and double-check the year and card number — that is what trips most folks up, not the grading itself.*

Rather not do this yourself? I'll come to your home and set it up for you — a flat $99 first visit across Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities. Outside the area? I also help remotely by phone or screen-share. Book at billshometech.com/book or call (330) 200-8042.

SERVICE TIERS

7 Service Tiers, Value, and Turnaround

Why the same card can cost very different amounts.

Every company offers a ladder of service levels. The two things that move you up the ladder are the declared value of your card and how fast you want it back. A low-value card on the slow tier is cheap; a high-value card or a rush job costs much more.

What drives the price

- Declared value: most companies set a maximum card value for each tier. A more valuable card must go on a higher, pricier tier.
- Turnaround: faster service costs more. Economy tiers can take many weeks or months; express tiers can be days.
- Extras: autographs, oversized cards, jumbo cases, and reholdering an old slab can each add a charge.

Tier feel	Rough wait
Economy / Base	Weeks to months
Standard	A few weeks
Express	About one to two weeks
Priority / Rush	A few business days

WATCH OUT

Exact fees, tier names, value limits, and wait times change often and differ by company. Treat every number here as a rough shape, not a quote. Always check the company's current pricing page before you commit — look for the figures dated to the time you are reading.

TIP

For ordinary cards, the slowest, cheapest tier is almost always the right choice. You are paying purely for patience, and the grade is identical no matter how fast it comes back.

CERT LOOKUP

8 Looking Up and Verifying a Graded Card

The free tool everyone should know.

This is the single most useful thing in this guide, and it costs nothing. Every graded card has a unique certification number on its label. Type that number into the grading company's lookup tool and it shows you the official record: the exact card, its grade, and often a photo the company took. If the screen does not match the card in your hand, something is wrong.

1. Find the cert number printed on the slab's label (PSA calls its tool Cert Verification).
2. On your phone or computer, go to the right site: psacard.com/cert for PSA, or the verify or lookup page on cgccards.com or beckett.com.

3. Type in the cert number and search.
4. Compare what the screen shows — card, year, grade, and any photo — to the physical card. Everything should match exactly.

Scanning the label instead of typing

Most companies now offer a free phone app that can scan the label — either a barcode or the card itself — and pull up the same record without typing the long number. It is handy at a card show or when buying in person.

WATCH OUT

If a cert number brings up nothing, or brings up a different card than the one you are holding, stop. A mismatch can mean a counterfeit slab or a label swapped onto a lesser card. Walk away from the deal until it checks out.

GOOD TO KNOW

You do not need an account to use cert lookup. It is open to anyone, free, and works right from a phone — perfect for checking a card before you buy it from a stranger.

POPULATION DATA

9 Population Reports — How Rare Is This Grade?

A free window into how many exist.

Alongside cert lookup, each company publishes a 'population report,' or 'pop report' — a running count of how many of a given card it has graded at each grade. It is free to browse and tells you something price alone cannot: how rare a particular card is in a particular condition.

- A high pop at grade 9 but a tiny pop at grade 10 explains why that 10 commands a big premium.
- A very low total pop can mean a genuinely scarce card — or simply one few people have bothered to grade.

- The numbers only count cards sent to that one company, so they are a guide, not a full census.

You do not need to become an expert in pop reports. Just know they exist, that they are free, and that they are the honest answer whenever someone tells you a card is 'rare.'

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> Before grading your own card, peek at the pop report for it. If thousands already exist in top grades, a new one is unlikely to be worth much — useful to know before you pay a fee.

IS IT WORTH IT

10

Is It Worth Grading?

The honest math, done before you mail anything.

This is the question I get asked most, and the answer is usually simpler than people fear. Grading is worth it only when the graded card would be worth clearly more than everything it costs you to grade it. For the great majority of cards, it is not — and that is fine.

Add up the true cost

The real cost is not just the grading fee. It is the grading fee, plus shipping the card there, plus return shipping and insurance, plus any membership. For a single card that can easily total several tens of dollars even on a cheap tier.

Weigh it against the likely grade

Then ask what the card would sell for graded — and at a realistic grade, not your hoped-for 10. A card worth five dollars ungraded and twelve graded is a money-loser. A card worth a few dollars ungraded but hundreds in a high grade can be well worth it, if the condition is truly there.

- Lean toward grading: genuinely valuable, older, or rare cards in excellent condition, or a card with real sentimental worth you want protected and proven.

- Lean against grading: common modern cards, cards with visible wear, or anything where the fee rivals the card's whole value.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> Grading for sentiment is perfectly valid. If sealing your father's favorite card, or a card you and a grandchild chose together, is worth the fee to you as a keepsake, the market math does not have to win.

SHIPPING SAFELY

11 Packing and Shipping Safely

Most grading mishaps happen in the mail, not the lab.

A card can survive decades in a drawer and then get crushed in a flimsy envelope on the way to be graded. Packing is the part most within your control, so it is worth doing carefully.

1. Put each card in a soft plastic sleeve ('penny sleeve'), then into a rigid card holder such as a semi-rigid card saver or a hard 'top loader.'
2. Do not tape anything directly to the card, and do not seal a card so tightly it cannot be slid out — the graders need to remove it.
3. Wrap the protected cards together and cushion them in the center of a sturdy box with padding on all sides so nothing shifts.
4. Include the printed submission form from the website.
5. Seal the box well and ship it with tracking and insurance for the declared value, using a carrier that gives you a receipt.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> Never send valuable cards in a plain paper envelope. Use a box or a well-padded mailer, always add tracking, and insure the package for what the cards are worth. Keep the tracking number until the cards are safely back.

TIP

Photograph the fronts and backs of your cards before you seal the box. If a card is ever lost or a question comes up, those photos are your record of exactly what you sent and its condition.

SPOTTING TROUBLE

12 Spotting Fakes and Altered Cards

What graders look for — and what you can check yourself.

Part of what you pay a grading company for is catching fakes and doctored cards. You can do a surprising amount of that checking yourself before money changes hands, which matters most when buying a card from a stranger.

On a raw, ungraded card

- Trimming: edges that look too sharp, uneven, or slightly short compared to a known-good card of the same issue.
- Re-coloring: borders or ink that look painted-in or an off shade, especially at corners and edges.
- Rebuilt corners or pressed creases: a faint ghost of a crease, or a corner that looks thicker or fuzzier than the rest.
- Reprints and fakes: wrong card stock, blurry printing, colors that are too bright, or a gloss that feels wrong for the card's age.

On a graded card

With a slab, do the easy thing first: look up the cert number. A genuine slab's number pulls up a matching record and photo. Be wary of a case that looks tampered with, a label that seems reprinted, or a cert that does not match the card inside.

WATCH OUT

Counterfeit slabs exist — fake cases made to look like real graded cards. The cert lookup is your defense. A grade means nothing if the number does not check out on the company's own website.

> *Most people selling cards are honest. The cert check is not about mistrust — it is a thirty-second habit that lets you buy with confidence instead of hope.*

GETTING STARTED

13

Common Questions and Getting Started

The things folks ask me before they begin.

Which company should I use?

Any of the three is safe. For sports and vintage, PSA is the most widely recognized. For Pokemon and other gaming cards, CGC is very popular. For the detailed subgrades, Beckett's BGS. If you plan to sell, the most recognized grade for your card type sells easiest.

How long will it take?

It depends entirely on the service tier you choose — anywhere from a few business days on a rush tier to several weeks or months on the cheapest. The website shows the current estimate when you submit.

Can the grade be wrong or disappoint me?

Grading involves human judgment, and a card can come back lower than you hoped, especially on centering. That is the risk, and it is why checking the realistic likely grade before you pay matters.

Do I have to grade at all?

No. Plenty of collectors keep their cards raw in sleeves and binders and enjoy them just as much. Grading is for proving, protecting, or selling — not a requirement for owning.

GOOD TO KNOW

If you would like a hand, I am glad to sit down with you, look up any graded cards you already have to confirm they are genuine, walk through whether a card is worth submitting, help you set up an account and fill out the online form, and show you how to pack a card so it travels safely. No pressure to grade anything — sometimes the most useful answer is that a card is lovely just as it is.

CHEAT SHEET

Everyday Cheat Sheet

Keep this page handy. It points you straight to what to do for each task.

I want to...	Do this
Understand grading	A company scores a card's condition 1-10 and seals it in a case
Read the grade	10 is near perfect; most collectible cards fall in the 7-9 range
Pick a company	PSA, CGC, or Beckett — all reputable; pick by card type and cost
Verify a graded card	Type the cert number into the company's lookup, or scan the label
Submit your own	Open a free account, fill the online form, pack safely, ship
Decide if it's worth it	Compare the grading fee to what the graded card could be worth
Get help	Call Bill: (330) 200-8042

AT A GLANCE

A Picture to Follow Along

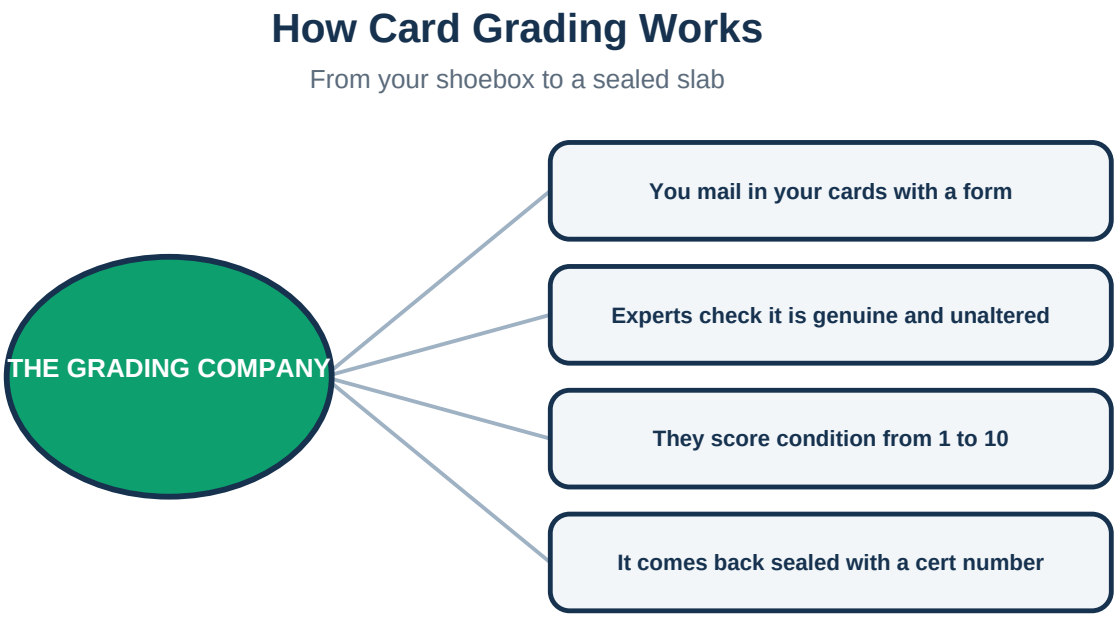


Illustration — a schematic. Set-up screens differ; each takes only a few minutes.

AT A GLANCE

A Second Look

Verifying a Graded Card

A one-minute check, free to anyone

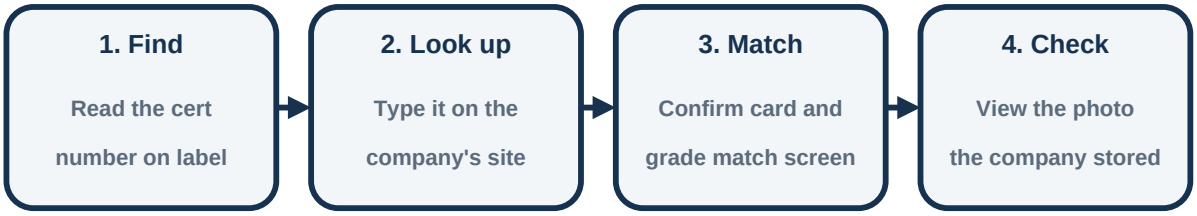


Illustration — a schematic. The order is a suggestion; do one box at a time.

A schematic of the plan — company steps vary; the order does not have to.

BEFORE YOU GO

A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill. I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that results.

HOW I CAN HELP

Your Visit — and My Promise

You don't have to remember all of it — just that a friendly, patient person is one call away, whenever you'd rather have a hand.

KEY SPECS

In your home — $99 flat for the first visit, no contracts and no surprises, with a 30-day come-back-free follow-up. In-home visits cover Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities.
Outside the area? Remotely — $49 for a screen-share session (free for Support Plan members, $39/mo), refundable if I can't fix it — and credited toward a visit if you'd rather have me in person. Book either at billshometech.com/book.

GOOD TO KNOW

My promise — If you're not 100% satisfied with your visit, I'll come back at no charge, or refund the full $99. No questions, no awkwardness. That's how I'd want to be treated.

Whenever you're ready, I'll come to your home anywhere in Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities, at your pace. Too far for a house call? I also help remotely. Book at billshometech.com/book or call (330) 200-8042. — Bill

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