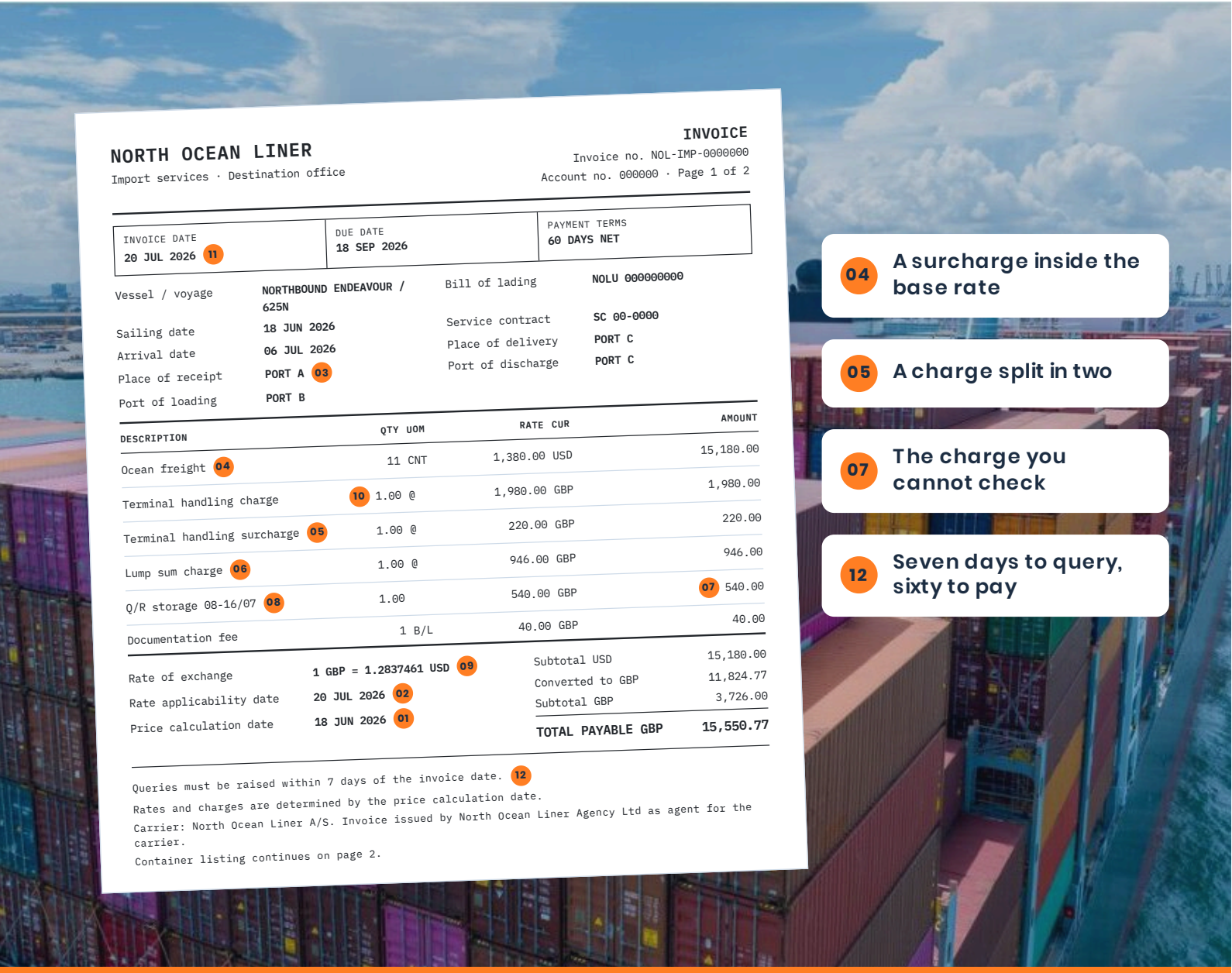


Paying Blind.

Between 6% and 8% of freight invoice value is billed incorrectly.

See where common errors occur in freight invoices, how to find them, and find out what they are worth.

Beacon

A Beacon guide · 2026

Twelve common freight invoice errors, on one invoice.

No single invoice will have all of these at once. We have brought them together from real invoices.

NORTH OCEAN LINER
Import services · Destination office

INVOICE
Invoice no. NOL-IMP-0000000
Account no. 000000 · Page 1 of 2

INVOICE DATE	DUE DATE	PAYMENT TERMS
20 JUL 2026 (11)	18 SEP 2026	60 DAYS NET

Vessel / voyage	NORTHBOUND ENDEAVOUR / 625N	Bill of lading	NOLU 000000000
Sailing date	18 JUN 2026	Service contract	SC 00-0000
Arrival date	06 JUL 2026	Place of delivery	PORT C
Place of receipt	PORT A (03)	Port of discharge	PORT C
Port of loading	PORT B		

DESCRIPTION	QTY	UOM	RATE	CUR	AMOUNT
Ocean freight (04)	11	CNT	1,380.00	USD	15,180.00
Terminal handling charge (10)	1.00	@	1,980.00	GBP	1,980.00
Terminal handling surcharge (05)	1.00	@	220.00	GBP	220.00
Lump sum charge (06)	1.00	@	946.00	GBP	946.00
Q/R storage 08-16/07 (08)	1.00		540.00	GBP	(07) 540.00
Documentation fee	1	B/L	40.00	GBP	40.00

Rate of exchange	1 GBP = 1.2837461 USD (09)
Rate applicability date	20 JUL 2026 (02)
Price calculation date	18 JUN 2026 (01)

Subtotal USD	15,180.00
Converted to GBP	11,824.77
Subtotal GBP	3,726.00
TOTAL PAYABLE GBP	**15,550.77**

Queries must be raised within 7 days of the invoice date. (12)

Rates and charges are determined by the price calculation date.

Carrier: North Ocean Liner A/S. Invoice issued by North Ocean Liner Agency Ltd as agent for the carrier.

Container listing continues on page 2.

Each error explained on the next page →

01 **Five dates, one price.**

Sailing, price calculation, arrival, invoice and rate applicability all appear. Only one determines what you pay, and the small print names a different one from the field labelled for it.

02 **The wrong date to check against.**

Rate applicability is dated 20 July, a month after sailing. Check the rate card against that date and you can approve, or dispute, the wrong rate. The small print says the price calculation date is the one that counts.

03 **Two origins, two rates.**

Place of receipt and port of loading are different ports. Most rate cards hold separate rows for each, at different prices.

04 **A surcharge inside the base rate.**

Ocean freight at 1,380 looks like one number. If the contract says 1,200 base plus a 180 fuel surcharge, they have been merged. The total is right and the surcharge is now invisible, which matters because it moves every quarter.

05 **A charge split in two.**

Terminal handling at 1,980 and a surcharge at 220. If the contract carries a single destination charge of 200 per container, this reconciles perfectly to the total while introducing a surcharge that appears nowhere in the agreement.

06 **A charge with no explanation.**

A lump sum of 946, with no quantity and no basis. A shipment on the same route a month earlier carried no such line. Nothing on this document says what it is for.

07 **The charge you cannot check.**

Nine days of quay rent, expressed as a date range and a total. No discharge, no availability, no free time expiry, no daily rate. Nothing on this document establishes whether it is owed.

08 **Whose free days?**

Quay rent is a terminal charge. Demurrage is a carrier charge. Contracted free days usually cover one and not the other, which is why “we have 21 free days” and “you are billed from day one” can both be true.

09 **A rate of exchange set by the carrier.**

They set it, print it, and apply it on their date.

10 **Eleven containers, one charge line.**

Per container charges are billed in a block. Events are not. If one container of the eleven sat for a week, that is invisible here.

11 **The event predates the invoice.**

The storage period ended on 16 July. The invoice is dated 20 July. The charge describes something that finished before the document arrived.

12 **Seven days to query, sixty to pay.**

The dispute window closes seven weeks before the money leaves, and two legal entities are involved: the carrier on the vessel and the entity issuing the invoice can differ, and the contract may be with only one of them.

WHY ERRORS ARE HARD TO CATCH

You need three data sources to audit a freight invoice.

The three data sources are rarely connected. They arrive at different times, in different formats, from different owners, and aggregating them is most of the work.

The invoice

ANSWERS

What was I charged?

USUALLY LIVES IN

A PDF, or an AP system

The contract

ANSWERS

What did I agree to pay?

USUALLY LIVES IN

A spreadsheet, or last year's tender pack

The shipment data

ANSWERS

What actually happened, and when?

USUALLY LIVES IN

A terminal system, a carrier portal, a forwarder's inbox

Contract + Invoice	Confirms if the rate is correct
Contract + Invoice + Shipment data	Confirms if the rate and all other lines are correct

Matching the invoice to the contract confirms the rate is correct. Adding the shipment data confirms the rate and all other lines are correct.

The distinction only bites on accessorial charges, which exist because of an event: demurrage, detention, storage, quay rent. A rate check cannot test those, because the rate on them is usually correct. What is in question is the timing of the event.

A charge for an event that never happened will pass a rate check, because the rate on it is correct.

WHERE TO LOOK

Seven ways your invoice may disagree.

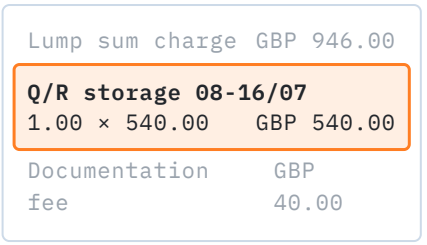
When Beacon automatically reconciles freight invoices, these are the seven most common areas that have errors.



Example of pattern 3, from the invoice on page 2: base rate and surcharge shown as one number.

The pattern	What it looks like	Where to look
1. A charge for an event On the invoice 07 11	An accessorial correctly rated, for an event that did not happen or did not last as long as billed	Every demurrage, detention, storage and quay rent line
2. A split charge On the invoice 05	Two lines that sum exactly to one contracted amount, one of them a product not in the agreement	Small charges next to a large one, usually at destination
3. A merged charge On the invoice 04	A base rate and an indexed surcharge shown as one number	Ocean freight and haulage lines
4. The wrong contract row	The right rate applied to the wrong service, equipment or origin	Place of receipt against port of loading, port to port against port to door
5. An expired rate	A charge priced on a date the rate card did not cover	The price calculation date, not the invoice date
6. A missing entitlement	An allowance, discount or free period in the contract that is absent from the invoice	The contract first, then the invoice
7. No contract at all On the invoice 06	A shipment on a route the contract never covered, so there is no row to compare against	Lines that match nothing

Take one invoice. Time yourself.



Pick a recent invoice with an accessorial charge on it and work through the five steps. Note how long it takes.

Start the clock when you open the invoice. Stop when you could defend a decision to pay or dispute every line. Count the waiting as well as the working.

01 **Find the contract row that governs it.** ≈ 10 min

Match on origin, destination, carrier, equipment size, equipment type and service level. A port to port rate and a port to door rate between the same two ports are different rows at different prices. Then confirm the rate card was valid on the date the charge was priced, usually the price calculation date rather than the invoice date.

02 **Reconcile line by line, both directions.** ≈ 15 min

Take each invoice line and find its counterpart in the contract, then each contract line and confirm it appears on the invoice. Comparing totals will not do it: a merged charge and a split charge both reconcile at the total.

03 **Break block charges down to the container.** ≈ 20 min

Any charge billed per container across a group has to be split before it can be tested, because the events differ by container. You need the container listing, usually on a later page or a separate annex.

04 **Get the events behind each accessorial.** ≈ 30 min of your time, plus waiting

For every demurrage, detention, storage or quay rent line: vessel arrival, discharge date, the date the container became available, free time start, free time expiry, and the daily rate applied. Then the free days the contract grants for that charge type at that location.

Most of this sits in a terminal system or a forwarder's inbox, so the clock here is largely somebody else's.

05 **Check the charge is not billed twice.** ≈ 15 min

Pull every invoice referencing the same bill of lading, from every entity.

Step four is the one that depends on someone else. That is where the elapsed time comes from.

How many minutes of your own time did it take?	How many days did you spend waiting on someone else?	How many lines could you not confirm?

THE ISSUE COMPOUNDS

Now multiply it.

You have a figure for one invoice. Here is the arithmetic that follows.

Payment terms **60 DAYS NET**

Queries must be raised within 7 days of the invoice date.

Minutes per invoice		Invoices per year		Hours
_____	×	_____	=	_____

THE HOURS

Invoices per year	Hours	Working days	Share of one full time person
250	375	50	A quarter
500	750	100	A half
1,000	1,500	200	Most of one
2,000	3,000	400	Two people

Worked at 90 minutes, which is what the five steps add up to when the data comes back promptly. Own time only.

THE MONEY

Annual freight spend	Incorrectly invoiced at 6% to 8%
$1m	$60,000 to $80,000
$5m	$300,000 to $400,000
$10m	$600,000 to $800,000
$25m	$1.5m to $2m

Put the two together and the return is good. At $1m of spend, typically around 500 invoices a year, $60,000 to $80,000 against half a person's year is worth having.

TWO THINGS MAKE IT MORE COMPLEX

The hours have to come from somewhere.
Half a full time person on invoice checking is a hiring decision.

The dispute window is short.
Queries are usually due within seven days. An investigation that takes three weeks misses it.

SO RECOVERABLE AND RECOVERED ARE DIFFERENT NUMBERS

Pay as invoiced	Check a sample	Check everything, on arrival
Nothing	**What clears in 7 days**	**Most of the 6% to 8%**

Reconciliation, on every invoice, inside the window.

With the invoice, the contract and the shipment events in one place, the five steps run the moment the invoice arrives, and an operator gets each discrepancy with the evidence already attached.

THE WIDER RETURN

You now have a deeper insight into forwarder and carrier performance.

You can now answer more complex questions about the performance of your operation.

How your freight actually behaves: what moved, when, under whose terms, at what price.

The question	What it takes	What it gives you
Is this charge correct?	Invoice, contract, events	Recovery, at 6% to 8% of invoice value
Which carrier performs on this lane?	Events over time, by carrier	Measured carrier performance, lane by lane
What does this lane cost, all in?	Every invoice joined to one movement	Total lane cost, including every accessorial
How long does this lane take?	Arrival and delivery events over time	Safety stock set against measured transit
What goes in the tender pack?	All of it, cleaned	A negotiation run on your evidence
Do payment terms match reality?	Measured transit against agreed terms	Cash leaving closer to when product lands
What moved outside the contract?	Invoices matching no contract row	A decision on off-contract spend, before you pay it

Want to know your number?

Beacon reconciles a full year of freight invoices against your contracts and your shipment data, and hands you three things: the share that did not match, what it was worth, and the error types.

Book a working session aj@beacon.co.uk

Based on forensic reconciliation of live commercial invoices and contracted rate data from enterprise food and beverage importers, 2026. Figures rescaled to preserve relationships while protecting commercial confidentiality. Time estimates are indicative and assume shipment data is obtainable. The invoice on page 2 is fictional and composite. Carriers, shippers, vessels, ports, container and contract references removed throughout.