**WHAT IS LETTERBOXING?**

Letterboxing is an activity that has been around for many, many years. It started in England around the 1850’s & then spread to the U.S. during the 1990’s. It is a nice blend of enjoying the outdoors, stamp collecting, puzzle solving, orienteering & fun. A letterbox can be almost any non-glass container that can hold at least a rubber ink stamp & some paper as a logbook. It may also include a pen or pencil, a note about letterboxing & an inkpad. A person uses clues to find a letterbox, and then they take an impression of the stamp that is in the letterbox & stamp it into their personal logbook. Then, they use their own ‘signature stamp’ & mark it in the logbook of the letterbox.

**WHERE ARE LETTERBOXES HIDDEN?**

Letterboxes can be found all over the world hidden by others who love the hunt and find that this game provides. The ‘traditional’ type boxes are typically hidden in public parks, but they can also be hidden in urban areas, along highways or even on private property when given permission. There are other types of boxes as well including ‘virtual letterboxes’, ‘mystery boxes’ ‘hitchhikers’ and ‘cooties’.

**WHERE ARE LETTERBOX CLUES FOUND?**

Once a letterbox is planted, clues need to be made available so that others can find it. In the age of the internet, the most common way to find clues to letterboxes is to look on [atlasquest.com](https://www.atlasquest.com/) or less commonly, [letterboxing.org](http://letterboxing.org/). Once planted, the owner of the box submits clues to the web site and publishing them for others to find.

Traditionally, letterbox clues were made available to others strictly by word of mouth. Before the internet existed, this was the only way to pass along clues, and DSA still uses this method for boxes planted on our property in Michigan.

Clues can be straightforward and lead you right to the box. Other times they are cryptic, giving you some sort of puzzle to solve. Most clues fall somewhere between these two examples. Some clues require you to use a compass. Find instructions for reading a compass [here](https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/navigation-basics.html).

**WHAT SUPPLIES ARE REQUIRED FOR LETTERBOXING?**

1. **A ‘signature’ stamp.** This is the image you will leave behind in the logbooks of the letterboxes you fine. You can go to a store and find a rubber stamp that you like and/or represents you and your dog, or you can carve your own stamp. Carving is fun and addictive and you don’t have to be an artist to make a really great stamp. There is quite a bit of information about carving on [atlasquest.com](https://www.atlasquest.com/) and in many other places on the internet.
2. **A logbook and ink pen.** Any unlined book will work as a logbook, but most people prefer a book that is small enough to carry easily but big enough for the stamped images to fit on. Most letterboxes are smaller than 3”x 5”. Those that are generally are identified in their clues. Make sure your book has a type of paper that will absorb ink without smearing or bleeding through. A stiff backing on the book is helpful and makes it easier to get a good image transfer.
3. **An Inkpad.** Though some letterboxes contain inkpads, most don’t. There are a number of different types of ink that can be used but dye-based inks dry quickly. This allows you to close the book quickly after stamping without the ink smearing.
4. **A compass.** Some letterbox clues require a compass. Be sure to get one that has a movable ring with the degrees marked on it. A clear base is a plus because it can be set on a map to help determine direction. Its not hard to find an inexpensive compass that meets these requirements.
5. **A bag, pouch or pack.** All of your supplies need to be collected in something that makes them easy to carry. If you and your dog are going to earn the Letterboxing badges, the dog will be the one to carry all of the supplies in his pack. Having all your supplies in a small pouch allows you to pull them out of your dog’s pack easily.
6. **Clues to boxes.** To find clues for boxes in your area go to [atlasquest.com](https://www.atlasquest.com/) and run a search on the area you want. Some areas of the country have more boxes planted than in others, but generally you will find some clues close by. The eastern and midwestern US tend to have more letterboxes than others, but as more people get involved in letterboxing more boxes are available to be found.
7. **A trail name.** This is the name that identifies you on [atlasquest.com](https://www.atlasquest.com/) and is kind of a ‘code name’. Have fun in choosing a name that fits you and your dog.
8. **Carving tools.** As you learn more about letterboxing and find you really enjoy it, you’ll almost certainly want to carve some of your own stamps. Maybe you want to carve a signature stamp for yourself or your dog. In order to carve stamps, you’ll need some basic supplies:
	1. A carving medium available at most craft supply store, or a large eraser
	2. A Speedball carving tool with multiple blades
	3. Exacto knives or a Dremel

**WHAT IS NEEDED TO PLANT A BOX?**

* A **waterproof container** like a lock-n-lock type. Never use a container that is made of glass.
* **Camouflage paint** or **tape** to help disguise your box when it’s hidden. Matte black paint works well for hiding a box almost anywhere.
* A **stamp**, either hand carved or store bought.
* A **logbook** that fits well into the container.
* **Plastic bags** to hold the stamp and logbook. These are placed inside the container to make sure the box contents stay dry.
* A **card** or **sticker** indicating that the box is a letterbox and not trash. This helps to keep your box from being thrown away by someone who does not find it intentionally and may not know what it is.
* An [**atlasquest.com**](https://www.atlasquest.com/) **account** to record the clues and publish the box.

**ARE THERE RULES?**

* The biggest rule is to **‘leave no trace’**. This means that when you go looking for a box, no one should be able to tell that you have passed through the area. If you find that a letterbox is placed in such a way that you have to trample a lot of vegetation or disturb the area, consider passing it up.
* Be sure to **pick up your trash** & any other trash you find on the trail.
* Always **clean up after your dog.**
* **Don’t harass wildlife.**
* **Be careful.** Watch for steep drop offs, snakes, poison ivy, hunters, wild animals, traffic, etc.
* There should be **no digging** involved in finding a letterbox, but you may need to pick up a rock or two.
* **Be discrete** when looking for & replacing boxes so that non-letterboxers don’t see where they are hidden.
* **Have fun!!** Even if you can’t find a box, the walk and the time spent with your dog in searching for the box is most often well worth the trip.
* **Don’t publish or share other people’s clue solutions** without their permission.
* **Don’t post spoilers** when commenting on other people’s boxes.
* Leave a letterbox as good or better than the way you found it.
* If a box is damaged, let the owner of the box know. If you can fix it (new baggie or box) do so, but let the placer know. They may want to change the location of the box.
* **Never break the law!** This includes leash laws, trespass laws or any other laws that apply in the area. Also, **follow any rules** of the park or trail where you are going including rules about dogs on the trail.

**Note:** In some areas, the public parks and communities are banning or putting restrictions on letterboxing activities. They are doing this, because a few ‘bad apples’ have not respected the ‘leave no trace’ rule. People have placed boxes in places where they present a hazard to endangered vegetation & off trail areas. Be sure to respect the area and don’t be a ‘bad apple’.

**HITCHHIKERS, COOTIES, MYSTERY BOXES AND VIRTUAL BOXES:**

There are other types of letterboxes besides the traditional ones hidden in containers in specific locations. Though these types of boxes may be more difficult to find, it can be quite satisfying to find them.

* **Hitchhikers:** These are stamps that travel from one letterbox to another. Most have their own logbooks & are bagged or contained separately from the contents of the letterbox they are hiding in. If you find a letterbox that has an ‘extra’ stamp, check to see if it is a hitchhiker. If it is, you have the option of leaving it where you found it or taking it with you & putting it in another letterbox. If you move it, be sure to stamp it into the box where you leave it. You should also stamp into your own logbook and stamp your signature stamp into the hitchhiker’s log.
* **Cooties:** These are similar to hitchhikers, except that they travel on a person from one place to another. Usually these are small stamps glued onto a clothes pin. They are popular at letterbox events and are often attached to a person’s clothing or bag secretively, to be discovered later. Cooties do not have logbooks, but they do have their own listings. The name of the cootie can usually be found printed on the clothes pin so that you can easily locate it and record your find. If you find that a cootie has attached itself to you, you need to be sneaky in passing it along to someone else, but only after stamping into your own logbook.
* **Mystery Boxes:** These boxes have very limited clues or very cryptic puzzles. They are generally difficult to solve, but once solved, the box can be easily found.
* **Virtual Boxes:** These are listed on the website as well. Usually, they require you to solve clues & go to a specific location. Once you have found the location, you answer questions about the area to ‘find’ the box. Then you send the box owner a note with your answers and mark the box as found on the web site. Sometimes the owner of the box will send you the image of a stamp in return. This type of box makes the activity available to people who don’t have time to maintain a real ‘box’ or who are physically unable to get out & hide or look for boxes. They are also appropriate for areas, like some National Parks, where actual boxes are not allowed.

Letterboxing can be very addictive! DSA provides 3 levels of Letterboxing badges so that you and your dog can continue enjoying the activity well into the future. Additionally, our Trail Dog Title program has titles for letterboxing that can be earned after your dog has earned all 3 of the badges available.