

Case 8: Is it a recommendation or an ad?

Gia loves a novel that a publisher sent her for free, and her video review does not mention the free copy yet.

On your own Read What happened. Underline what the publisher sent Gia and what it asked for. About 6 minutes.



Gia, Caio and Mari set up a camera in a bright studio.

Your role: You're the viewer with the sound off who checks the first three seconds. **New skill:** Spot and disclose a material connection.

What happened

At 1:30 p.m. on Saturday, Caio finishes editing Gia's short video review of a new novel. Gia made the review for BookTok, where people recommend books on TikTok. She stayed up until 2 a.m. to finish the novel, and she loves it.

Two weeks ago, the book's publisher emailed Gia. The publicity team offered her a free copy of its spring novel for review. The email said she did not have to post, but it asked for a tag if she did. In the first cut, Gia never says the book was free. The only sign of the publisher is a tag in the caption below the video.

Caio wants to watch the cut the way a stranger would, on a phone with the sound off. He wants to know whether the first three seconds say the book was free. Gia wants to keep her honest opinion in the video. She also wants viewers to know how she got the book.

Your question: Do Gia's viewers need to know the book was free, and how should she tell them?

Key terms

On your own Read each key term and its example. Then write your first guess in the box. About 6 minutes.

Material connection A material connection is a relationship with a brand, like payment or a free product, that viewers might not expect.

En español: conexión material

In this case: The publisher sent Gia a free copy of its spring novel for review. That free copy is a material connection.

Disclosure A disclosure is a clear statement that tells people about a relationship or fact they would want to know.

En español: divulgación

In this case: Gia's first cut has no disclosure. The tag in the caption names the publisher but never says the book was free.

Endorsement An endorsement is a message that shares someone's opinion or experience of a product to promote it.

En español: respaldo

In this case: Gia's video review promotes the novel with her own opinion: she stayed up until 2 a.m. to finish it.

Who is involved



Gia

Made the video review

"I stayed up till 2 a.m. finishing it. That part's real. The publisher sending it free is also real, and right now it's nowhere in the video."



Caio

Editing Gia's video

"The publisher's email literally says 'free copy for review.' That's the sentence. It's just not in the video yet."

Before you look at the evidence, does Gia need to tell viewers the book was free?

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal blue lines, resembling notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Reading passage

The free book in the first three seconds

On your own Read the passage. At each Stop and think box, pause and answer the question in your head or with a partner. About 5 minutes.

Words to know

- **Material connection:** A material connection is a relationship with a brand, like payment or a free product, that viewers might not expect.
- **Disclosure:** A disclosure is a clear statement that tells people about a relationship or fact they would want to know.
- **Endorsement:** An endorsement is a message that shares someone's opinion or experience of a product to promote it.
- **Framing:** Framing is choosing which parts of a situation a message brings forward.

The story: A review that is almost ready

Gia stayed up until 2 a.m. to finish a new novel, and she loves it. Now she has made a short video review for BookTok, where people recommend books on TikTok. At 1:30 p.m. on Saturday, Caio finishes editing it.

There is one thing the video does not say. Two weeks ago, the book's publisher emailed Gia. The publicity team offered her a free copy for review. The email said she did not have to post, but it asked for a tag if she did.

In the first cut, Gia says, "You guys, I have to tell you about this book because I literally could not put it down!" The only sign of the publisher is a tag in the caption below the video.

Gia is ready to post. Caio asks her to wait and watch it once on mute. Your role is to be that viewer with the sound off. You check the first three seconds.

 **Stop and think.** Why might Gia think a tag in the caption is enough?

What viewers need to know

An **endorsement** is a message that shares someone's opinion or experience of a product to promote it. Gia's review is an endorsement, and her opinion is honest.

What viewers need to know, continued

A **material connection** is a relationship with a brand, like payment or a free product, that viewers might not expect. The free copy is a material connection. It does not prove Gia's opinion is false. It is simply something viewers would want to know.

A **disclosure** is a clear statement that tells people about a relationship or fact they would want to know. Gia thinks the tag is enough. Caio disagrees. A tag says who made the book. It does not say they sent it to her free. And the tag sits in the caption, which many people never open.

Case 1 taught you that **framing** is choosing which parts of a situation a message brings forward. Right now, the video brings forward Gia's excitement and hides the free copy. Caio suggests a new opening: "Quick heads-up, the publisher sent me this free." Gia would say it out loud and show it on screen, so it works with the sound off. Then comes her hook.

Gia also makes one more change. She drops the idea of calling it the best book of the year. She will just say what happened: two nights, and she could not put it down.

 **Stop and think.** How would you test whether a stranger with the sound off can tell the book was free?

The real rules

The Federal Trade Commission, a federal agency, writes guides about endorsements. It says that for a video, the disclosure belongs in the video itself, ideally both spoken and on screen (Federal Trade Commission, updated December 3, 2024). In 2023, the FTC warned a dozen influencers about posts that did not clearly disclose they were paid (Federal Trade Commission, November 14, 2023).

 **Stop and think.** Would knowing the book was free change how much you trust the review? Why or why not?

Sources

Real source | Federal Trade Commission | December 3, 2024

Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers

Real source | Federal Trade Commission | November 14, 2023

FTC Warns Two Trade Associations and a Dozen Influencers About Social Media Posts Promoting Consumption of Aspartame or Sugar

Look at the evidence

On your own Read each document. For each one, write what it shows and what it leaves out. About 12 minutes.

Evidence A | Email

The publisher’s email

“Hi Gia, we love your book reviews! We’d be glad to send you a free copy of our spring novel for review. There’s no obligation to post, but if you do, we’d appreciate a tag. Best, the publicity team”

Look closely: What did the publisher give, and what did it ask for?

What it shows

One question I still have

Evidence B | Video script and caption

Gia’s first cut

Spoken: “You guys, I have to tell you about this book because I literally could not put it down!” On-screen text: none. Caption below the video: “@publisher #booktok

Look closely: Where in this video would a viewer learn about the free copy?

What it shows

One question I still have

Look at the evidence, continued

Evidence C | Edit notes

Caio’s edit notes

“Watch once as a stranger, phone on mute. 0:00—0:03: does anything say free copy? Caption sits below the video; most people won’t open it. Tag = brand name, not relationship.”

Look closely: What does Caio want to test before uploading, and why the first three seconds?

What it shows

One question I still have

What is still missing from the evidence?

Notes

Key idea: material connections

On your own Read the key idea and the FTC guide. Then answer the question in the box. About 8 minutes.

An **endorsement** is a message that shares someone's opinion or experience of a product to promote it. Gia's video review is an endorsement, and her opinion in it is honest. A **material connection** is a relationship with a brand, like payment or a free product, that viewers might not expect. The free copy from the publisher is a material connection. Knowing about it gives viewers context, but it does not prove that Gia's opinion is false.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is a federal agency. Its Endorsement Guides explain how a federal law against deceptive practices applies to endorsements. A **disclosure** is a clear statement that tells people about a relationship or fact they would want to know. For a video, the FTC says the disclosure belongs in the video itself, ideally both spoken and on screen. A tag in the caption only names the brand, and it sits below the video.

A disclosure answers one question: how did Gia get the book? Viewers can still ask what supports her claims about the book itself. A clear disclosure does not make every claim in a review accurate. Do not accuse a real creator of hiding a sponsorship based on a guess.

Professional standards

Real source | Law or regulation | Federal Trade Commission (FTC)

FTC Endorsement Guides (16 CFR Part 255): § 255.5 Disclosure of material connections

“They can include monetary payment or the provision of free or discounted products ... to an endorser, regardless of whether the advertiser requires an endorsement in return.”

In plain words: The FTC says a free product can be a connection that reviewers must clearly disclose, even if the brand asked for nothing in return.

Question: The publisher's email says there is “no obligation to post.” Does that change whether Gia has a connection to disclose?

Professional standards, continued

Your answer

The email says _____. Gia still ____ because _____.

In the news



Real source | NBC News | November 15, 2023

Influencers warned by FTC over ‘inadequate’ disclosures of artificial sweetener promotions

Real creators were warned for not clearly saying they were paid, the exact question this case asks.



Real source | ABC News | November 6, 2019

Popular YouTuber chimes in on federal product disclosure guide for influencers

A creator reacts to the FTC’s disclosure rules, showing how the guidance lands for people who actually post.

Notes

Sort the evidence

On your own Follow each choice to its results. Then write whose view is missing. About 8 minutes.

Follow both choices forward. Which consequences can Gia control, which depend on viewers, and what test tells her the disclosure worked?

Post the first cut with only a brand tag in the caption

Sound-off viewers never learn the book was free

Who is affected

Disclose aloud and on screen in the first seconds

Viewers weigh the recommendation knowing the relationship

Who is affected

Some viewers may discount the review as an ad

Who is affected

Whose perspective is missing?

Whose view is missing from these documents? What would you ask them?

The view that is missing is _____. I would ask _____.

Practice: choose a response

On your own Choose the change that makes the relationship clearest. Then fix the two marked phrases. About 8 minutes.

Gia loves the novel the publisher sent her for free. Which change to her video makes the relationship clearest to viewers?

- ☐ **A** Tag the publisher in the caption.
- ☐ **B** Say and show at the start of the video that the publisher sent her the book for free.
- ☐ **C** Leave the video as it is, since the email said there was no obligation to post.

Why I chose it

Improve a draft

A student's first draft

Okay you guys, I have to tell you about this book because I literally could not put it down!! **1** #ad #booktok @publisher. The characters are so real and the ending destroyed me. I stayed up until 2 a.m. finishing it and then just sat there staring at the wall. Everyone needs to read this, trust me, **2** it's the best book of the year and you won't regret it. Link is in my bio, go get it before everyone else does!

Rewrite each marked phrase so it says only what the evidence supports.

Rewrite phrase 1

Rewrite phrase 2

Grades 6—8

Your task

On your own Read the steps. Fill in the planner boxes before you start your draft.

Add a clear disclosure to Gia's review script and explain where you put it and why.

Use: The review description, the publisher email and three FTC key points.

You'll make: Storyboard plus 3—4 sentence explanation

Time: 45 minutes

- 1 Read the email in Evidence A. Circle what Gia got for free.
- 2 Read the first cut in Evidence B. Underline the only place the publisher appears.
- 3 Choose words from the word bank for a disclosure of one sentence.
- 4 Draw three storyboard frames. Put your disclosure in frame 1, spoken and on screen.
- 5 Write 3 or 4 sentences in the Your draft box. Explain where you put the disclosure and why.
- 6 Test frame 1 with a partner. Could a viewer with the sound off tell the book was free?

Show it your way

Write it: Write 3—4 sentences with the frame “I put it __ because viewers __.”

Say it: Perform or record the first five seconds of the review with your spoken disclosure, then explain why you put it there.

Show it: Draw the three-frame storyboard and show where the words “sent to me free” appear on screen for a viewer with the sound off.



Prefer typing? Scan to open the online workspace.

What Gia got for free

[illegible]

Gia says _____. The screen shows _____.

Your explanation, 3 or 4 sentences

I put it ___ because viewers ___.

[illegible]

Check your work

On your own Answer the Check your work questions and mark your level in each rubric row. Then write one change you made. About 5 minutes.

Does your disclosure say the book was free?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Is the disclosure in frame 1?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Could a viewer with the sound off see it?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Did you keep Gia's honest opinion?	☐ Yes ☐ No

How your work is scored

Mark one box in each row.

Skill	Beginning	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
Evidence	☐ No disclosure or claim support.	☐ Tag only.	☐ Names the relationship clearly.	☐ Names the relationship and supports the product claim.
Reasoning	☐ Treats opinion as a substitute for disclosure.	☐ Discloses but can't explain why.	☐ Explains why placement and clarity matter.	☐ Distinguishes opinion, relationship and product claim.
Audience & purpose	☐ Ignores viewers.	☐ Assumes viewers read captions.	☐ Works for sound-off viewers.	☐ Works across channels with consistent wording.
Revision	☐ No change.	☐ Adds a hashtag.	☐ Adds spoken and on-screen disclosure.	☐ Explains each placement choice for different viewers.

One change I made

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal blue lines, resembling notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Questions to discuss

On your own Write a short answer to each question. Then finish My take. About 10 minutes.

1 Would knowing the book was free change how much you trust Gia's review? Why or why not?

2 Some viewers may treat a review with a disclosure as just an ad. How could Gia keep their trust?

3 Who should make sure disclosures are clear: creators, brands or platforms?

My take

I think Gia should ___ because ___.

The evidence that changed my first guess is ___.

One question I still have is ___.

Talk about this case at home

Case 8: Is it a recommendation or an ad?

In this case, a publisher sends Gia a free novel, and her video review does not say the book was free. Your student read the email and the video script, then rewrote the opening so viewers learn about the free copy.

Questions to talk about

- 1 How can you tell when a video review is also an ad?
- 2 Where in a video would you look for a note that a product was free?
- 3 Why might a review still be honest if the reviewer got the product for free?

Nobody needs to share personal stories or private information to talk about this case.



See the case online.