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 5 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 5 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."

Your first guess

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

My first guess is ___, because ___.

Notes

Reading passage

A tag is not a disclosure

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: Watching on mute

Gia stayed up until 2 a.m. finishing a new novel, and the next day she filmed a review for BookTok, the part of TikTok where people recommend books. Her enthusiasm is real. On Saturday at 1:30 p.m., Caio finishes the edit and sends it back. Gia is ready to post.

Caio is not. He wants to watch the cut once the way a stranger would, on a phone with the sound off. His question is specific. In the first three seconds, where does it say the book was free?

The book was free. Two weeks earlier, the publisher's publicity team emailed Gia: "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." The first cut opens with Gia saying, "You guys, I have to tell you about this book because I literally could not put it down!" There is no on-screen text. The caption reads "@publisher #booktok."

Gia points to the tag. Caio's edit notes answer her. A tag is a brand name, not a relationship. The caption also sits below the video, where most people will not open it. In this case, you are the viewer with the sound off who checks those first three seconds.

Stop and think. Caio says a tag is a brand name, not a relationship. What is the difference?

Opinion, relationship and disclosure

An **endorsement** is a message that shares someone's opinion or experience of a product to promote it. Gia's review is one, and her opinion 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 is a material connection. Knowing about it gives viewers context. It does not prove that Gia's opinion is false.

A **disclosure** is a clear statement that tells people about a relationship or fact they would want to know. Case 1 gave you the idea of **framing**, choosing which parts of a situation a message brings forward. The first cut frames the review around Gia's excitement and leaves the relationship out of view. Caio proposes a three-second fix: "Quick heads-up, the publisher sent me this free." It is spoken and shown on screen, then followed by her hook.

Gia makes a second change that viewers might never notice. She had thought about calling it the best book of the year. Out of the ones she happened to read? She decides to say only what she can support: two nights, and she could not put it down. A disclosure answers one question, which is how she got the book. Viewers can still ask what supports her claims about the book itself.

Caio's test is simple. Someone who has not seen the video watches once, on mute. Then he asks, "Was the book free?" If they have to think about it, the edit is not done. A comment on another creator's review shows the risk of skipping this step: "wait was this sponsored?? kind of feels like an ad now."

Stop and think. Why does Gia cut "best book of the year" even though she loves the book?

What the FTC and researchers say

The Federal Trade Commission's guidance for influencers says a video disclosure belongs in the video itself, ideally both spoken and on screen (Federal Trade Commission, updated December 3, 2024). In November 2023, the FTC warned two trade associations and a dozen influencers about posts promoting aspartame or sugar. The agency said disclosures must be in the video, not buried in a caption (Federal Trade Commission, November 14, 2023).

Research suggests disclosure helps young viewers. A study of 3,149 high school students in Taiwan found that full sponsorship disclosure helped teens recognize a post as an ad (Lin et al., PLOS One, May 27, 2026).

Stop and think. Some viewers may treat a disclosed review as just an ad. How could Gia keep their trust?

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

Real source | PLOS One (Lin et al.) | May 27, 2026

Effects of social media sponsorship disclosure on adolescents' advertising literacy and purchase intention

Notes

Look at the evidence

On your own Read each document. For each one, write what it shows and what it leaves out. About 10 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

What it leaves out

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

What it leaves out

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

What it leaves out

Evidence D | **Viewer comment**

A comment on another creator's review

wait was this sponsored?? kind of feels like an ad now

Look closely: When does this viewer start to wonder about a sponsorship?

What it shows

What it leaves out

What is still missing from the evidence?

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 words “no obligation to post” ___, 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 7 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 7 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!! ❶ #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, ❷ 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 9—10

Your task

On your own Read the steps. Fill in the planner boxes before you start your draft. About 8 minutes.

Write a revised script and caption and a short note on why a tag alone isn't enough.

Use: Case sources plus the FTC Disclosures 101 page.

You'll make: Script (60—90 seconds) plus 100-word note

Time: 50 minutes

1. Reread Evidence A and B. Underline what the publisher gave and where the first cut names it.
2. Fill in the planner: the relationship, where it shows now and the four checklist items.
3. Write the first three seconds of the script, spoken and on screen.
4. Write the rest of the script in Gia's voice. Keep her honest opinion and cut claims she cannot support.
5. Rewrite the caption so it names the relationship.
6. Write a note of about 100 words on why a tag alone is not enough.
7. Check your work with the questions on the Check your work page.

Prefer typing? Scan to open the online workspace.

The relationship to disclose

Where the first cut shows it

Checklist: words, placement, timing, repetition

Your draft

On your own Write your draft in the boxes. Use your planner from the page before. About 22 minutes.

Script: the first three seconds

Spoken: ___. On screen: ___.

Script: the rest of the review

Caption

Note: why a tag alone is not enough, about 100 words

A tag alone is not enough because ___.

Your draft, continued

Note: why a tag alone is not enough, about 100 words, continued

Notes

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 8 minutes.

Does the script name the free copy in the first three seconds?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Is the disclosure both spoken and on screen?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Does your note separate Gia's opinion from her relationship with the publisher?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Does your note describe the FTC guidance accurately?	☐ 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.

Check your work, continued

One change I made after feedback

I changed ___ because ___.

Notes

Questions to discuss

On your own Write a short answer to each question. Then finish My take. About 12 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

My claim: ___.

The best evidence is ___, because ___.

My take, continued

Someone who disagrees might say ___.

I would change my mind if ___.

Notes

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.

See the case online.

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.