

THEY SAID IT WAS NOT SPONSORED

The Receipts x Case Notes

A free product, a creator code, and the claim a viewer actually hears

Grades 9-12 / 45-minute core or 90-minute extended session

[The Why Files](#) · [Case Notes](#) · [The Receipts](#) · [Save This](#) · [Make It](#) · [What Changed?](#) · [Behind the Case](#)

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Student packet

Sol and the headphone brand are fictional. Practice transcripts and commercial records were written for this case. Real FTC and TikTok sources explain relevant guidance; this activity does not decide a real creator's legal liability.

What you will work out

- Distinguish a sincere opinion from disclosure of a commercial connection.
- Evaluate what a viewer can learn from a video, caption, and creator agreement.
- Repair a recommendation so its relationship and limits are understandable.

The story

Sol, a fictional high school creator, posts a desk-setup video. A headphone company has sent a free pair. Sol has used them for a week and likes the fit. At the start of the video, Sol says, "Not sponsored. I would tell you if these were bad." A code appears on screen. In the caption, after several lines about studying, Sol writes "gifted" and adds shopping links.

A classmate sends the video to Gia with a question: "Does not sponsored mean they bought it?" Another viewer says a code always proves that a review is a lie. Those explanations point in opposite directions, and neither has opened the creator agreement.

Sol means that the company did not pay a flat fee or dictate a script. But viewers cannot hear an unspoken definition of sponsored. The question is what information they receive about this specific recommendation. Liking the headphones, receiving a gift, and earning a commission can all be true at the same time.

You are reviewing the post before it is shared on a student publication's account. Your task is to identify the documented relationship and make it understandable. You are not rating Sol's character, deciding whether followers should buy the headphones, or proving that every product claim is accurate.

Words we need

Material connection / relación relevante: A relationship or benefit that could affect how an audience weighs an endorsement.

Affiliate commission / comisión de afiliación: Money earned when a purchase is attributed to a creator's link or code.

Disclosure / aviso sobre la relación comercial: Clear information about a connection the audience might otherwise miss.

The receipts

A / The video and caption

NPW fictional practice record

Sol, fictional student creator | September 22, 2026

Scope: One fictional 24-second recommendation

0:00-0:04: “Not sponsored. I would tell you if these were bad.” 0:05-0:12: Sol describes comfortable ear pads. 0:13-0:19: “Use SOL10 if you want ten percent off.” 0:20-0:24: product close-up. Visible caption preview: “My desk finally makes sense.” Expanded caption: study notes, shopping links, then “gifted.” No spoken explanation of the gift or commission appears.

Establishes: The relationship information visible or audible in this authored version.

Does not establish: Sol’s intent, actual buyer experiences, or how every platform display presents the caption.

While you read: What does someone watching without opening the caption learn?

B / The creator arrangement

NPW fictional practice record

Fictional headphone brand and creator | September 15, 2026

Scope: This invented campaign only

The brand sends Sol one pair to keep. Sol receives no flat fee and may express an independent opinion. Purchases attributed to SOL10 earn Sol an 8 percent commission on the qualifying sale price. The brand requests one video but does not approve its script. No laboratory performance evidence is attached.

Establishes: A free product, a posting request, and a financial incentive connected to the code.

Does not establish: That the opinion is false, that a sale occurred, or that the product performs as described for every buyer.

While you read: Which parts would matter to a viewer even without a flat payment?

C / Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers

Primary-source summary written by NPW

Federal Trade Commission | November 2019

Scope: FTC staff guidance for endorsements affecting U.S. consumers

A brand relationship can involve payment, free products, or other benefits. The FTC advises clear disclosure with the endorsement; a profile note or buried caption can be missed. For video, it

recommends disclosure within the video, using sound and visible wording to reach different viewers. A platform label should not be assumed sufficient by itself.

Establishes: Relevant FTC advice about connections and placement.

Does not establish: A legal judgment about this fictional post.

While you read: Where would a viewer need to see or hear the relationship information?

<https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/resources/disclosures-101-social-media-influencers>

D / FTC's Endorsement Guides What People Are Asking

Primary-source summary written by NPW

Federal Trade Commission | Revised June 2023

Scope: FTC staff answers about U.S. endorsement guidance

An honest opinion and a commercial relationship can coexist. The FTC explains that free products can matter to an audience even when the creator was not required to post. Viewers need to understand relevant connections in the endorsement they encounter. Disclosing a connection does not establish that every product claim is true.

Establishes: Why sincerity does not remove the need to explain a relevant connection.

Does not establish: Independent proof of headphone quality or a creator's motivation.

While you read: Which two claims can both be true: honest opinion and commercial relationship?

<https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/resources/ftcs-endorsement-guides-what-people-are-asking>

E / About the Commercial Content Disclosure Setting for Creators

Primary-source summary written by NPW

TikTok for Business | Updated April 2026

Scope: TikTok platform guidance

TikTok instructs creators promoting a brand, product, or service to enable its commercial-content disclosure setting. The setting communicates commercial status on the platform. The page also recognizes that legal requirements differ by country. It describes platform rules; it is not an independent assessment of a creator's truthfulness or a product's performance.

Establishes: TikTok's stated commercial-content setting requirement.

Does not establish: A guarantee of legal compliance or proof of what any individual actually enabled.

While you read: Why would you check platform rules as well as the wording viewers encounter?

<https://ads.us.tiktok.com/resources/help/article/about-the-content-disclosure-setting-for-creators>

Case Notes

Audit the viewing path

Read A once as a sound-on viewer, once as a silent viewer, and once as someone who opens the caption. For each path, record what is actually disclosed and what you had to infer. Do not count information from B as something the original audience saw. Output: A three-row viewing-path audit.

Separate three questions

Use B to answer: Was there a flat fee? Was something valuable supplied? Could a purchase benefit Sol? Then sort these claims as supported, contradicted, or unresolved: “Sol paid full price”; “Sol can earn a commission”; “Sol secretly dislikes the headphones”; “The code generated 100 sales.” Cite the record that decides each label, or explain why none does. Output: Three answers and a four-claim evidence sort.

Repair the recommendation

Write a replacement opening of 25-40 words, a visible text disclosure, and a caption lead. Name the brand's gift and the commission relationship in plain language. Keep Sol's honest personal reaction, but do not add a product guarantee. Describe where the platform setting fits. A paper storyboard is enough. Output: A revised script, screen text, caption, and platform note.

Explain the edit

Write a 100-150 word editor's note using B and at least one official source. Explain what information the original presentation obscures, why your placement helps, and one question about product performance that still needs evidence. Avoid diagnosing intent or declaring a real person guilty. Output: A source-based edit explanation.

Put your reading to the test

Which conclusion best fits the complete record?

- A. No flat fee means there is no relationship to disclose.
- B. The commission means every positive statement must be false.
- C. Sol can genuinely like the product while viewers still need clear information about the gift and commission.
- D. Enabling a platform label proves every performance claim is supported.

Exit ticket

- Name two documented benefits Sol receives or may receive.
- Why is the profile alone an unreliable place for this post's relationship information?
- Name one product claim the disclosure cannot establish.

Take the conversation further

Choose an ordinary recommendation together: a restaurant, a game, or a pair of shoes. What would you want to know if the recommender received it free or earned money from a sale? Discuss what information helps you weigh the recommendation. No purchase, account access, or disclosure of household spending is required.

Paper and offline route

All media in A is an original written simulation, not an unavailable real TikTok. Print the timed transcript, arrangement, source summaries, and three blank storyboard panels. The complete activity works from these pages; official links are supplied for checking and extension.

Behind the Case

EDUCATOR AND FACILITATOR EDITION

Teaching in 45 minutes

5 minutes: Read A; collect interpretations of not sponsored.

8 minutes: Open B; separate payment, gift, and commission.

10 minutes: Use C-E to complete viewing-path audit.

17 minutes: Draft revised post and short editorial rationale.

5 minutes: Exit ticket and one partner comment.

Teaching in 90 minutes

10 minutes: First interpretations and vocabulary with concrete examples.

15 minutes: Viewing-path audit in groups; compare what each path hides.

15 minutes: Claim sort using the arrangement, then official-source check.

10 minutes: Practice question and discussion of sincerity versus incentives.

20 minutes: Create paper storyboard and editor's note.

15 minutes: Peer audit in silent, sound-only, and caption-open modes; revise.

5 minutes: Exit ticket.

Answer guidance

- Task 2: no flat fee; free product supplied; commission possible. Full-price purchase is contradicted; commission eligibility supported; secret dislike and sales volume unresolved.
- A strong opening explains what the brand provided and what the creator earns. It does not need to use an unnatural legal label.
- Evaluate whether a viewer can understand the connection. Do not reward a student for condemning or defending influencer marketing.

Practice answer

C. B documents a relationship, not dishonesty. The official sources help assess communication of that relationship. Product performance remains a separate evidence question.

Model response

I would replace the opening with: “The fictional brand sent me these headphones for free. If you buy through SOL10, I earn a commission. I have used them for a week, and this is my experience.” The screen text should carry the same relationship information while it is spoken, and the caption should start with it. B supports both the gift and commission; C explains why viewers should encounter that information with the recommendation. I would also check the current platform setting in E. None of this proves the headphones will feel comfortable to everyone, or that Sol’s opinion was purchased. We can repair the missing information without inventing either conclusion.

Misconceptions

- Disclosure makes a relationship visible; it does not certify the product or cancel all possible bias.
- A promotional code may offer viewers a discount, pay a creator, do both, or do neither. This case’s agreement is what establishes its function.

Language support

Offer the glossary and let learners draft in their audience’s language. Spanish rehearsal: “La marca me regaló estos audífonos. Si compras con mi código, recibo una comisión.” Ask the learner to explain both relationships, rather than grading one exact translation.

Access and response options

Supply the timed transcript and written visual descriptions. Do the three viewing-path checks on paper; do not require a TikTok account or hearing/vision test. Permit a narrated explanation with transcript instead of designed video.

Challenge route

Write two revisions: one for a 24-second video and one for a static carousel. Explain what changes about placement and what evidence remains necessary. An optional public example must be supplied by the educator with a stable source and context; do not investigate classmates’ accounts.

Rubric

Score each criterion 0-3, for a total of 12. A 0 indicates missing or unsupported work. Score the quality of evidence and reasoning, not agreement with a preferred decision.

Relationship accuracy

- 3: Identifies gift and commission without inventing a flat fee.
- 2: Identifies both but leaves ambiguous wording.
- 1: Identifies only one relationship or assumes facts.

Viewer access

- 3: Disclosure is understandable in silent and sound-on paths and leads the caption.
- 2: Clear language but one path loses key information.
- 1: Information remains buried or vague.

Evidence and limits

- 3: Uses arrangement and guidance; separates opinion, incentives, and product proof.
- 2: Uses relevant evidence with one blurred distinction.
- 1: Treats incentive as proof of lying or label as proof of quality.

Editorial explanation

- 3: Explains specific revisions and an unresolved product question.
- 2: Explains revision with a general uncertainty.
- 1: Offers a verdict without a reasoned edit.

Exit ticket key

- A gifted product and possible commission.
- Someone can encounter the individual post without opening the profile.
- Examples: universal comfort, durability, noise reduction, or suitability for a particular user.

Primary sources

Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers

Federal Trade Commission / November 2019

Checked 2026-09-29. FTC staff guidance for endorsements affecting U.S. consumers

<https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/resources/disclosures-101-social-media-influencers>

FTC's Endorsement Guides What People Are Asking

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