NEWS LESSON

The Long Journey of the Clothes We Send Back



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Would you order three sizes if returns were free?
2. What makes you hesitate before buying clothes online?
3. Would you pay a little more for a shop with a fitting room?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**merchandise**	☐	A	not formally recognised or planned
2	**disposal**	☐	B	the habit of staying faithful to a shop or brand
3	**emissions**	☐	C	gases that are sent into the air
4	**tension**	☐	D	the act of getting rid of something
5	**loyalty**	☐	E	a difficult situation where two needs pull against each other
6	**obligations**	☐	F	goods that are bought and sold
7	**unofficial**	☐	G	aggressive and likely to cause an argument
8	**confrontational**	☐	H	things that you must do by law or duty

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

The convenience of a home fitting room depends on a costly system moving unwanted goods in reverse.

1 The customer's living room has become an unofficial fitting room. Several sizes arrive, one survives the inspection and the rest are sent back at the click of a button. The transaction feels almost risk-free because the returns label is free. Yet the unwanted garment must now travel backwards through a system built to move products towards customers. The item may lose value while the shop keeps paying for transport, staff and storage.

2 The scale is formidable. The US National Retail Federation estimated that 19.3% of online sales would be returned in 2025 and projected nearly $850 billion in returned merchandise across retail. That headline figure is the value of the goods, not the cost of processing them, but it explains why the journey after a return has become a central commercial concern rather than an occasional inconvenience.

3 What happens next is a journey in reverse: collecting goods, checking their condition, deciding whether they can be resold and directing them towards warehouses, discount outlets or disposal. The industry calls this reverse logistics. These activities absorb labour, transport capacity and storage space. A garment that arrives too late for its season may be worth little even if it remains unworn. Research commissioned by the British Fashion Council has linked fashion returns to substantial emissions and waste, while academic analysis of European returned clothing suggests that a significant share never reaches another consumer.

4 There is no straightforward commercial answer. Charging for returns can recover costs and discourage excessive ordering, but it may also put off buyers who reasonably want to check whether an unfamiliar brand fits. Retailers face a classic tension between short-term savings and long-term loyalty. A Guardian business commentary published in October argued that companies should treat the cost of returns as a predictable operating expense, rather than alienating customers with unexpected charges. That approach is not necessarily cheaper, but it may make commercial sense if an easy service encourages repeat purchases.

5 Consumer protection complicates the picture further. Under UK distance-selling rules, customers normally have fourteen days after delivery to cancel most online purchases without giving a reason and a further fourteen days to send the goods back. Retailers must generally refund the original standard delivery charge, although consumers can be required to cover the cost of returning unwanted goods when properly informed. Faulty items involve different rights. A September 2026 investigation by Which? found that several major retailers had failed to provide refunds in accordance with the law, demonstrating that the economics of returns cannot simply override statutory obligations.

6 The most promising improvements may be less confrontational. Better sizing information, accurate product images and more reliable descriptions could reduce the number of purchases that disappoint in the first place. More efficient sorting and resale systems could also preserve the value of goods that do come back, rather than writing off stock that is perfectly wearable. Yet the central contradiction remains: online retailers have encouraged consumers to behave as though their living rooms were fitting rooms with unlimited delivery. Winding back that expectation without damaging trust will require more than adding a charge at checkout.

Sources: The Guardian. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The $850 billion figure tells us how much retailers lose on returns. T F NG
2. The 19.3% return rate and the $850 billion projection both relate to the same year. T F NG
3. A customer who cancels on day fourteen after delivery can still post the goods back. T F NG
4. The Which? investigation found that retailers withheld refunds deliberately. T F NG
5. The writer is confident that treating returns as a predictable expense would cost less. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

absorb	alienating	dwindle	excessive	lenient	override	preserve	projected

1. Aggressive pricing risks _____ loyal customers who have supported the brand for years.
2. Analysts _____ that profits would double within three years, though the company has not confirmed this.
3. A company's own policy cannot simply _____ the duty to inform customers of their rights.
4. The scheme aims to _____ the value of clothing that is still perfectly wearable.
5. The company can _____ a small rise in postage, but not a doubling of its costs.
6. Critics argue that unlimited returns encourage _____ ordering.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Customers who treat returns as a free service show little _____ for the retailer's costs. (CONSIDER)
2. The retailer's _____ to refund customers on time led to a flood of complaints. (FAIL)
3. Too many unwanted purchases make the business model _____ in the long term. (SUSTAIN)
4. Several analysts have criticised the _____ of the new returns policy. (CONSISTENT)
5. Better sizing information could bring about a _____ reduction in returns. (SUBSTANCE)

7 Language focus: collocations

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Verb and noun pairs at this level are often fixed. A close synonym will not work.

bear	cast	impose	play	reap	stem	wage

1. Small independent sellers often _____ the brunt of rising returns.
2. Charging a fee may help to _____ the tide of speculative orders.
3. Regulators can _____ a heavy fine on any shop that ignores the rules.
4. Unpredictable demand can _____ havoc with a retailer's stock planning.
5. Companies that _____ the benefits of free returns must also accept the costs.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. Who should cover the cost when an online size guide is wrong?
2. Would a small return fee change how carefully you choose?
3. What would make online shopping easier without sending so many parcels back?

9 Role-play: should the shop charge for returns?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the shop owner

You run a small clothes shop online. Too many parcels come back and you're losing money. You want to charge a fee for returns. Explain why, and listen to your customer.

Student B · the regular customer

You often order two sizes and send one back. You don't want to pay a fee. Say why returns matter to you and suggest another way to cut the number of parcels.

Useful phrases

I'm afraid we can't afford free returns any more.
I'd rather pay a small fee than lose the service.
That's fair, but I can't try anything on first.
What if we improved the size guide?
I'd be happy to keep ordering if the fee stays low.
Could we find a compromise?

Afterwards, tell the class: did you agree on a fee, and was it fair?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 F · 2 D · 3 C · 4 E · 5 B · 6 H · 7 A · 8 G

4 True, false or not given

1 F · 2 T · 3 T · 4 NG · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 alienating · 2 projected · 3 override · 4 preserve · 5 absorb · 6 excessive

6 Word forms

1 consideration · 2 failure · 3 unsustainable · 4 inconsistency · 5 substantial

7 Language focus

1 bear · 2 stem · 3 impose · 4 play · 5 reap

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