NEWS LESSON

What Happens to the Clothes You 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	**label**	☐	A	money you must pay for a service
2	**parcel**	☐	B	a package that you send or receive by post
3	**warehouse**	☐	C	keeping things in a place until you need them
4	**retailers**	☐	D	dirty air, water or land caused by people
5	**refund**	☐	E	a big building where goods are kept before they are sold
6	**fees**	☐	F	people or companies that sell things to the public
7	**pollution**	☐	G	money that a shop gives back to you
8	**storage**	☐	H	a piece of paper or card with information on it, stuck on a parcel

3 Read

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

The return costs you nothing. The parcel's journey has only just begun.

1 A jacket arrives at your door. It looked perfect online, but the sleeves are too long, so you put it back in the bag and print a free returns label. For you, the story is over. For the jacket, it has only just begun. A van collects it, a warehouse worker opens it and somebody must decide whether it can be sold again. "Free" describes what you pay at the post office, not what the return really costs.

2 Online returns are especially common with clothes because customers cannot try them on first. According to the US National Retail Federation, almost one in five online purchases was expected to be returned in 2025. Across online and physical shops, retailers expected goods worth nearly $850 billion to come back. That figure is the value of the products, not the cost of checking, storing and moving them.

3 When a parcel arrives back at a warehouse, workers may need to open it, inspect the product and decide whether it can be sold again. Transport and storage also cost money. Some items are damaged or out of season, so retailers struggle to sell them. Clothing returns can also produce extra packaging waste and pollution. If an item cannot be sold as new, the shop may have to lower its price or sell it on to another buyer.

4 To cut costs, some shops have introduced return fees or shorter deadlines. But customers dislike paying to send things back, especially when they cannot try clothes on before ordering them. Retailers must make a difficult choice: save money on returns or risk losing shoppers to another website. They also worry that extra charges might stop people shopping online altogether.

5 Customers also have legal rights. In the UK, people buying most goods online usually have 14 days after delivery to cancel their order, followed by another 14 days to send the goods back. Rules differ in other countries. They may have to pay return postage if the seller explained this clearly beforehand. A 2026 investigation by consumer organisation Which? found that several major retailers had not followed all the refund rules.

6 Better size guides, accurate photos and helpful reviews could prevent some unnecessary returns. Shoppers can help by checking sizes carefully instead of ordering several versions automatically. Free returns are convenient, but they are not truly free. The question is who should cover the cost without making online shopping unfair or too expensive.

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 writer says a free return costs the shop nothing. (T) (F) (NG)
2. Customers return a lot of clothes bought online because they cannot try them on first. (T) (F) (NG)
3. Most people who return a jacket order the same one in a different size. (T) (F) (NG)
4. Shops worry that extra charges might stop some people shopping online. (T) (F) (NG)
5. The $850 billion figure shows how much it costs shops to process returns. (T) (F) (NG)

5 Vocabulary

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

cancel	convenient	damaged	deadlines	inspect	reliable	struggle

1. The zip was _____ when the parcel arrived, so I sent the jacket back.
2. A worker must _____ each item carefully to see if it can be sold again.
3. Some shops now have shorter _____ for sending goods back.
4. Many small shops _____ to compete with the big online sellers.
5. Online shopping is _____ because you can order from your sofa.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. Last week I _____ a jacket that was too small. (BUY)
2. She _____ the parcel back to the shop on Monday. (SEND)
3. If a jacket _____ too long, I send it back. (BE)
4. Yesterday the worker _____ the box and checked the shirt. (OPEN)
5. The jacket _____ by a van and taken to the warehouse. (COLLECT)

7 Language focus: collocations

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Some words go together naturally. Learn the pair, not just one word.

cut	hold	make	packaging	print	rights	run

1. Retailers must _____ a difficult choice between saving money and keeping shoppers.
2. To _____ costs, some shops now charge for returns.
3. Customers have legal _____ when they buy goods online.
4. You can _____ a returns label from the shop's website.
5. Clothing returns can produce extra _____ waste.

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

4 True, false or not given

1 F · 2 T · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 damaged · 2 inspect · 3 deadlines · 4 struggle · 5 convenient

6 Verb forms

1 bought · 2 sent · 3 is · 4 opened · 5 was collected

7 Language focus

1 make · 2 cut · 3 rights · 4 print · 5 packaging

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