

Have you ever heard the phrase, “Read the fine print?” Basically, the fine print has the details (the terms and conditions) of a deal—often important things you should know about. The law requires “clear and conspicuous” disclosures—which means that the important terms of the deal can’t be hidden in tiny type. But sometimes the fine print has details that might affect your decision to buy.

You can find examples of fine print in ads—whether online, in newspapers or magazines, or on TV. They’re often footnotes, usually at the bottom of an ad, that are used to clarify or explain statements in the ad. They also can be what a fast-talking announcer says at the end of an ad, or what’s in the small print that flashes by on your TV screen.

While the fine print may have some details about the deal, advertisers *can’t* use fine print to contradict other statements in an ad or clear up false impressions the ad might leave. In fact, it’s against the law for businesses to bury important details about a product or service in the fine print. For example, if a cereal ad says “Free mp3 player inside the box,” the fine print should not say “Contest entry required. Not all boxes contain a player.”

You can test the FTC’s Clear and Conspicuous Standard with these questions:

- **Prominence:** Is the fine print big enough for people to notice and read?
- **Presentation:** Is the wording and format easy for people to understand?
- **Placement:** Is the fine print where people will look?
- **Proximity:** Is the fine print near the claim it qualifies?

If the answer to any of those is “no,” it should be fixed. To make sure fine print disclosures are effective, advertisers should use clear language, place important information close to the claim, and avoid using small type or any distracting elements that could weaken the disclosure. Although there is no hard and fast rule about the size of type in a print ad—or the length of time a disclosure must appear on TV—the FTC has taken action when a disclosure was too small, flashed across the screen too quickly, was buried in other information, or was hard for people to understand.



What this means to you

It's important to read and understand the fine print. If you don't understand what it means, ask someone you trust, like a family member, to read it with you. You can always ask the business what the fine print means, but it's what's in writing that matters—not what someone tells you. If you're not satisfied with the business's response, you may want to shop somewhere else.

If you think a business isn't giving you the right information in its ads and fine print, or if the information doesn't pass the FTC's "Clear and Conspicuous" standard, let the FTC know: Complain to the FTC at 1-877-FTC-HELP (382-4357) or visit www.ftc.gov/complaint.

Things to Talk About and Do

- Find examples of ads with fine print. Do they meet the Clear and Conspicuous standard? If not, take it to an adult and consider reporting the ad to the FTC.

Want to Find Out More?

Federal Trade Commission
www.ftc.gov

What a Bargain! (?)

An electronics company advertises a computer as *low-cost*. The company advertises computers for \$269 if the buyer also signs up for 3 years of Internet service. The ad is published in newspapers and online. The online ad includes a small-print footnote with the cost of Internet service and other fees consumers have to pay before they can get their computer and make it work. These charges add up to over \$1000. So the computer that's advertised at \$269 turns out to be more than \$1000. The problem is that the ad in the newspaper doesn't include the disclosure.

When the FTC sued the company over this deceptive print ad, the company agreed to be clear in future ads, not hide information in fine print, and never to mislead people about the price of a computer or Internet service.