The 5-Minute *Label Audit*

CHECKS

5

Five checks I run on any label before I spend a dollar on it. You can do all five standing in the aisle.

Tess Todd · licensed esthetician + holistic health coach

THE 60-SECOND VERSION

Flip it over.

1. **Find the preservative** (phenoxyethanol). Anything after it is a small amount.
2. **Look for a percentage** on the star ingredient. No number? Be suspicious.
3. **Spot the fragrance** words if your skin is sensitive.
4. **Ignore the buzzwords** on the front. They aren't regulated.
5. **Do the per-ounce math** before you decide it's a deal.

1 Find the star ingredient on the back.

Ingredients are listed from most to least, down to 1%. Below that, brands can list them in any order. Phenoxyethanol, a really common preservative, is usually used at 1% or less, so I use it as my 1% line.

Big asterisk: some ingredients work in tiny amounts. Retinal works at 0.1%. A trendy plant extract hiding behind the preservative, though? That one's mostly there for the label.

2 Ask "how much?"

A percentage only means something if it matches the research. Most niacinamide studies used 2 to 5%, so 10% isn't twice the results. It can be twice the irritation.

3 Look for fragrance.

"Fragrance" or "parfum," plus allergens like limonene and linalool (often from essential oils). Fragrance is one of the most common reasons people react to cosmetics. Sensitive skin? Patch test first, or grab the fragrance-free version.

4 Translate the claim words.

"Dermatologist tested" doesn't mean it passed anything. "Clinically proven" has no legal definition, so ask who ran the study and who paid for it. "Chemical-free" isn't a thing. Water is a chemical.

5 Do the price-per-ounce math.

A $45 cream in a 0.5 oz jar is $90 an ounce. The $60 version in a 1.7 oz jar is about $35 an ounce. Tiny jars are really good at making big prices look small.

Okay, let's *run one.*

A made-up serum with a very real-looking label. Five checks, about ninety seconds.

FRONT OF THE BOTTLE

Glow Bright Vitamin C + Peptide Serum

CLINICALLY PROVEN TO BRIGHTEN IN 7 DAYS[4]

1 fl oz · $58[5]

BACK OF THE BOTTLE · INGREDIENTS

Aqua (Water), Glycerin, Propanediol, Niacinamide, Sodium Hyaluronate, Phenoxyethanol[1], Ascorbyl Glucoside[2], Palmitoyl Tripeptide-1, Citrus Aurantium Dulcis (Orange) Peel Oil, Parfum (Fragrance), Limonene, Linalool[3], Ethylhexylglycerin, Xanthan Gum.

Example label for teaching. Not a real product.

1 ### There's the 1% line.

Phenoxyethanol is sixth. Everything after it is a small amount.

2 ### The vitamin C is behind it.

So is the peptide. The two ingredients in the name are supporting cast, and there are no percentages anywhere.

3 ### Four fragrance flags.

Orange peel oil, parfum, limonene, linalool. Sensitive skin? Patch test or pass.

4 ### "Clinically proven" by who?

No study, no sample size, nothing about testing the finished product. That's a slogan.

5 ### $58 an ounce.

For what's mostly a niacinamide serum, which you can find for under $15.

Hard pass for me.

It's a niacinamide serum wearing a vitamin C costume.

Which is fine if you want a niacinamide serum! Just buy one that says so, and pay niacinamide prices.

✂

KEEP THIS IN YOUR WALLET

The 5-Minute *Label Audit*

1. Find phenoxyethanol. Anything after it is a little.
2. Is there a % on the star ingredient?
3. Fragrance, parfum, limonene, linalool?
4. Ignore "clinically proven" + "derm tested."
5. Price ÷ ounces = the real price.

THE FRONT IS THE AD.

The back is *the receipt.*

More label breakdowns in my free newsletter.
theunbotherededit.substack.com · @thetesstodd

Cut on the dashed line, fold down the middle, and slip it in your wallet.

I read the labels *so you don't have to.*

In my free newsletter, The Unbothered Edit, I take apart the products everyone's pushing and tell you what I'd actually buy.

theunbotherededit.substack.com