

BEAUTY & BALANCE

THE FREE LIBRARY · GUIDE No. 09

# The Honest Ingredients Cheat Sheet

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*A pocket-sized guide for reading  
any beauty label like a chemist —  
what to seek, what to skip.*



*A free guide from our library — yours to keep*

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*with warmth,  
the Beauty & Balance team*

INTRODUCTION

## The Quick *Reference*.

*A pocket-sized cheat sheet for reading any beauty label like a chemist — what to look for, what to skip, what is just marketing.*

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Beauty labels are designed to confuse you. The print is small, the chemical names are intimidating, and the marketing words on the front of the bottle are usually unrelated to anything inside it. This cheat sheet is the antidote. Print it. Fold it. Keep it in your bag.

The next time you are standing in a drugstore aisle holding two products that both cost twenty dollars, you will know within thirty seconds which one is worth your money.

*“The brand on the front matters less than the names on the back.”*

THE THREE RULES

## How to *Read* a Label.

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**01 Order matters more than presence.**

*Ingredients are listed by concentration. The first five ingredients make up the vast majority of the product. The last five are often there to put on the label more than to do anything for your skin.*

**02 If it cannot be pronounced, do not panic.**

*Long Latin and chemical names are usually plant extracts and fatty acids — the safe, useful workhorses of skincare. The dangerous stuff usually has a short, friendly name.*

**03 The marketing on the front is almost never on the back.**

*“Brightening,” “clean,” “natural,” “dermatologist-tested” — none of these words are regulated. Read the back. The back tells the truth.*

THE GREEN LIST

## Ingredients *Worth* Your Money.

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These are the proven, decades-researched ingredients that actually do what they claim. If you see them in the first five ingredients of a product, you are looking at something that works.

### **HYALURONIC ACID**

*The hydration heavyweight. Holds up to a thousand times its weight in water. In every great moisturizer.*

### **NIACINAMIDE (Vitamin B3)**

*The all-rounder. Reduces redness, refines pores, evens tone. Almost everyone benefits.*

### **VITAMIN C (L-Ascorbic Acid)**

*Brightening, antioxidant, collagen-supporting. The gold standard for evening skin tone.*

### **RETINOL / RETINOIDS**

*The most-studied anti-aging ingredient in history. Renews skin, smooths fine lines. Start low, go slow.*

### **CERAMIDES**

*The skin's natural barrier ingredients. Crucial for sensitive, dry, or compromised skin.*

### **SQUALANE**

*A lightweight oil that mimics the skin's own. Hydrating without being heavy. Universally tolerated.*

### **PEPTIDES**

*Tiny protein chains that signal the skin to repair and produce more collagen. Great for mature skin.*

### **SALICYLIC ACID**

*The gold-standard exfoliant for oily and acne-prone skin. Cleans inside the pore.*

**GLYCOLIC ACID**

*Surface exfoliant. Smooths texture, brightens, reveals fresher skin underneath.*

**ZINC OXIDE / TITANIUM DIOXIDE**

*The two best mineral sunscreens. Sit on the skin, reflect UV, don't irritate.*

THE YELLOW LIST

## Use With Awareness.

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These are not bad. They simply work for some people and not others. Pay attention to how your skin responds.

### **FRAGRANCE / PARFUM**

*Common irritant. If your skin is sensitive or reactive, look for “fragrance-free.” If your skin is hardy, no issue.*

### **ESSENTIAL OILS**

*Natural, but potent. Lavender, peppermint, citrus — lovely scents, frequent irritants. Patch test first.*

### **ALCOHOL (denatured / SD alcohol)**

*Drying for some, fine for others. Common in toners. If your skin feels tight after use, this is likely why.*

### **COCONUT OIL**

*Beloved as a face moisturizer, but comedogenic for many. Great for the body, hair, and dry hands. Risky for the face.*

### **CHEMICAL SUNSCREENS**

*Avobenzone, octinoxate, oxybenzone — effective, but can irritate sensitive skin and disrupt some marine ecosystems. Mineral is the safer bet.*

THE RED LIST

## What to *Skip*.

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These are ingredients with concerning evidence, redundant function, or much better alternatives readily available. There is no good reason to put them on your face.

### **PARABENS**

*Preservatives with hormone-disrupting concerns. Modern formulations have moved past them. Look for “paraben-free.”*

### **FORMALDEHYDE-RELEASERS**

*DMDM hydantoin, quaternium-15, imidazolidinyl urea. Used as preservatives. Slow-release formaldehyde. Skip.*

### **PHTHALATES**

*Often hidden under “fragrance.” Hormone disruptors. Look for “phthalate-free.”*

### **SLS (SODIUM LAURYL SULFATE)**

*Aggressive foaming agent. Strips the skin barrier. Common in cheap cleansers. Better foamers exist.*

### **MINERAL OIL**

*Cheap, occlusive, comedogenic. Used because it is inexpensive, not because it is good. Squalane is the upgrade.*

### **OXYBENZONE**

*Chemical sunscreen ingredient. Hormone concerns and reef toxicity. Mineral SPF is the easy swap.*

### **ANY VAGUE “FRAGRANCE”**

*Can contain dozens of undisclosed chemicals. If a brand will not tell you what is in their fragrance, take that as information.*

THE MARKETING DECODER

## Words That Mean *Nothing*.

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These words are completely unregulated in the beauty industry. They mean exactly what the brand wants them to mean — which usually is, nothing at all.

### “CLEAN”

*No legal definition. Each brand defines it differently. Ignore.*

### “NATURAL”

*Poison ivy is natural. So is arsenic. Means nothing about safety or efficacy.*

### “DERMATOLOGIST-TESTED”

*A dermatologist tested it. Did not necessarily approve it. Did not necessarily test it on humans.*

### “HYPOALLERGENIC”

*Brand-decided. No regulatory standard. Ignore.*

### “NON-COMEDOGENIC”

*Brand-decided. No standardized testing. Ignore.*

### “ANTI-AGING”

*Means nothing specific. The actual effective ingredients (retinol, peptides, vitamin C) will be on the back. Read those.*

### “BRIGHTENING”

*Look for the actual brightening ingredient (vitamin C, niacinamide, alpha arbutin). The word itself does nothing.*

A FINAL NOTE

## On *Trusting* the Back of the Bottle.

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Once you start reading the back of the bottle, you cannot stop. You will find that the most expensive moisturizer in the store has water and mineral oil as its first two ingredients. You will find that the budget drugstore find has more retinol than the luxury brand at three times the price. The information was always there. You simply needed the key.

*Print this page. Fold it once. Keep it in your wallet or your bag. The next time you are shopping, pull it out without shame — the women who get the most for their money are the ones who refuse to be fooled.*

THE PRE-PURCHASE AUDIT

## Five Questions Before You Buy.

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Print this page. Take it to the drugstore aisle, the Sephora floor, the online checkout. Five questions, asked in order. If a product fails any of them, put it back.

**01. What are the first five ingredients?**

*Read them. Recognize the green-list ones. If the first five are all fillers (water, glycerin, mineral oil) and the actives are at the bottom, the product is mostly filler.*

**02. What is on the red list?**

*Scan for parabens, formaldehyde-releasers, oxybenzone, fragrance/parfum (if you're sensitive), SLS in cleansers. Any of these are an immediate veto.*

**03. Does the marketing on the front match the ingredients on the back?**

*Is it really “hydrating”? Is hyaluronic in the first five? Is it “brightening”? Is vitamin C or niacinamide actually in there? If not, the front is selling you a feeling, not a result.*

**04. Is the price honest?**

*A \$40 moisturizer with the same active ingredients as a \$10 one is not better. Pay for elegant texture and packaging if you want. Don't pay for the molecule itself.*

**05. Do I actually need this?**

*The hardest question. The beauty industry profits from women buying things they already own. Look in your drawer first.*

THE DRAWER AUDIT

# Read Every *Label You Own.*

*Once a year, do this. Take everything out of the drawer. Read the back of every bottle. Sort into three piles: keep, finish-then-replace, donate or toss.*

**How many products did I find I didn't know I owned?**

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**Which products contain red-list ingredients I want to swap out?**

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**Which products am I keeping out of guilt, not love?**

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**What did this audit teach me about how I shop?**

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**What is my one rule for the next time I'm tempted to buy?**

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