

Task 1

I found something I like in a store. Is it wrong to buy it online for less?

Q: I saw something I liked in a store but bought it cheaper online. Is this wrong?

A: I have been on a long journey with this. My first instinct was no; comparison shopping is completely legitimate. Why are you, the individual of limited means, required to compensate for structural inequities that give large retailers an advantage over small ones? Then I thought, hang on. Consumer power is a powerful weapon, and we should all be shopping more wisely, buying less, paying more, and spreading the wealth around more evenly. Then I rang a friend of a friend, who used to run a small shop in London, and heard what it was like from her side. And in the middle of this, I bought two pairs of ballet shoes online.

I should say from the outset that I shop on Amazon all the time and never feel guilty. Their diapers are even cheaper than Costco's, and given the crippling cost of baby essentials, cheap in my household wins. But you can't buy ballet shoes for babies on Amazon because the likelihood is they won't fit. And so I did what you did, and what a lot of us do.

There is a fancy dance shop a couple streets from my house. It is run by one of the big dancewear companies, so while it is not part of a multinational corporation, neither is it a mom and pop store. It is simply a venerable, old brand vested in a brick-and-mortar outlet that makes customers who aren't prima ballerinas feel uncomfortable while shopping there.

I went in. I asked the sales assistant about their refund policy. I marvelled at the dread still brought on by the words "ballet and tap" and wondered why I was sending my children to dance in the first place. Then I bought two pairs of ballet shoes, knowing full well I was going to take them home, try them on for size, then take them back and buy them somewhere cheaper online. In the store, the shoes were \$20 apiece. That night I found two pairs, box fresh and unworn, on eBay for a total of \$15 including postage.

For a moment, I felt good about this. I had got one over on the man. I had used the power of the internet to connect with individuals who were selling something I wanted to buy. All right, a \$31bn company got a piece of the action, but whatever. This wasn't like taking money from a local bookstore and giving it to Jeff Bezos. It was a victimless crime. In fact – why was I going to these lengths to justify myself? – it wasn't a crime at all. It was just good sense and smart housekeeping.

The next day, I returned the shoes. There is something heartbreakingly about ballet slippers made for a two-year-old. They are tiny, and soft, and vaguely pitiful, and involving them in this dopey con did not give me a sense of wellbeing. The sales assistant remembered me and cheerfully processed the refund, and while I tried to make capital of the fact that the woman behind me in the queue – an elegant, blade-thin ballet teacher, by the looks of things – gave me the once-over, as if scanning me for the detonator under my clothes, I could hardly blame the store for this and felt lousy by the time I walked out. A week later, I still feel vaguely shabby about it.

I'm not entirely sure why and call Ruth, a friend's friend, who used to run a small eco-friendly store in north London. People would come in, she says, and ask her why it was more expensive than Tesco. "It would drive me nuts. They would say 'I can't afford your eco-shop', when they'd just ridden up on a \$2,000 bike. There's such a focus on cheapness; everything has to be cheaper, and discounted – and I'm not talking about buying a loo roll online, I'm talking about luxuries."

Ruth doesn't shop from Amazon and makes a point about the narrow terms in which most of us define value. This is true. I like having stores in my neighbourhood that aren't chain pharmacies or Starbucks. I like the idea of a dance shop on the corner, with a lady who remembers me when I go in and who will measure my children's feet if I drag them in too. For what amounts to a 20 quid difference, I wasted her time and contributed to the demise of something that makes life more livable. "By having shops," says Ruth, "you fulfill a function in your community that goes beyond the transaction. You're facilitating community interaction. If everything moves online, we push out the kind of shops that create these interactions. It's death by 1,000 knives."

If I were stronger, or richer, or less lazy and cheap, I might apply this principle to more of my shopping habits. As it is, making a distinction between essentials and luxuries, or between small stores and giants, or between a trivial price difference and gouging, seems like a good place to start. In answer to your question, if it feels wrong, it probably is wrong.

0. According to the text, shoppers...

- a) exert a mild influence on the balance between large-scale e-commerce and local shops.
- b) have no influence on the balance between large-scale e-commerce and local shops.
- c) have the means to influence the balance between large-scale e-commerce and local shops through shopping.

1. When choosing where to shop the author decides depending most of all on...

- a) price
- b) availability
- c) the impact on the retailer's business

2. The dance shop the author visits is...

- a) a family business
- b) a branch of a franchised firm.
- c) a well-established shop for a niche market.

3. The author buys the ballet shoes...

- a) wondering whether to keep them.
- b) being certain that she'd return them later.
- c) despite the fact they were non-refundable

4. After she bought the ballet shoes online she justified herself by claiming...

- a) no individual had been directly harmed.
- b) her purchase had absolutely no effect on Ebay.
- c) big companies were to blame for lower prices.

5. When the author returned the shoes to the shop...

- a) she felt relieved to be done with this issue.
- b) she felt she was somehow doing something wrong.
- c) she had contradictory feelings, but eventually felt fulfilled.

6. The woman who looked like a ballet teacher in the shop...

- a) looked down on the author because she was not a teacher.
- b) made the author feel like an outsider.
- c) thought the author had hidden something under her clothes

7. Ruth criticizes the fact that her customers...

- a) claimed they couldn't afford her products.
- b) made questions about the shop.
- c) needed discounted products.

8. The author...

- a) appreciates having local shops at hand.
- b) is unaffected by the kind of shops in her area.
- c) dislikes having branches of big companies in her area.

9. What the author likes about local shops is...

- a) quality standardized service.
- b) closer customer care.
- c) value for money.

10. In the last paragraph the author concludes that...

- a) there is nothing wrong in her behaviour.
- b) the feeling is indicative of wrongdoing.
- c) she needs to think over the issue again.

Task 2

Toxic timebomb: why we must fight back against the world's plague of plastic

It's everywhere. From the Mariana Trench to the floor of the Arctic Ocean, (0) It's in wildlife, seafood, sea salt and even on the surface of Mars. The world is blighted by plastic. Up to 12m tonnes of the stuff enters the world's oceans every year, (1) , and it doesn't go to that magical place called "away".

Once in the oceans, it can float around for years, or even decades, before being swallowed by a bird or a whale. During that time, it can travel tens of thousands of kilometres, all the while absorbing contaminants from the sea water, (2) When wildlife ingest plastic, the brew of toxic chemicals can be transferred to the animal's tissues with potentially dangerous consequences.

Often, though, plastic washes up on beaches. Pieces ranging from the size of a grain of sand to large buoys and nets litter the world's beaches, even on the most remote islands. Most of it travels from distant lands, having been washed off the deck of a ship or, (3) , from a storm sewer or waste management facility. Once on the beaches, plastic items can entangle sea turtles, trap land crabs and cut off access to the sand by other beach dwellers. And it just keeps coming. More than 350m tonnes of plastics are manufactured each year and that number is only going up. This is a problem that's only going to get worse if we don't act fast.

Plastic never breaks down, it only breaks up. Sunlight and the ocean waves make plastic brittle with age, (4) Every piece of plastic ever made still exists somewhere in the world. Plastic is with us to stay and (5) But that doesn't mean we shouldn't do something about it.

We must reduce the amount of plastic in the oceans, an imperative noted in the United Nations' sustainable development goals. The best way to keep rubbish from washing up on beaches is to reduce our dependence on plastics, especially single-use items, and to make a commitment to seek out alternative materials where possible. Single-use items, so-called "disposable" items such as razors, cutlery, scoops and toothbrushes, are common on some of the most remote beaches in the world, including Henderson Island. This is an area where we all need to make better decisions (6) and how we dispose of them.

(7) The Ocean Conference at the UN this June will hopefully lay the groundwork (8) But if we've learned anything from international climate strategies, it's that global environmental agreements take a long time to negotiate and even longer to implement. In the meantime, (9) And we need to.

For plastics, marine birds and remote islands are the canaries in the coalmine. We look to them to tell us about the health of the oceans (10) We need bold, decisive action if we are to save the oceans upon which we all depend and its charismatic islands and wildlife that have captivated us for centuries.....