



RETURN GUIDE/SOP TEMPLATE



Handling returns can quickly become a bottleneck for businesses, costing both time and money. But with a structured, easy-to-follow SOP, you can take control of the process, reduce costs, and improve efficiency. This guide will walk you through each step of creating an SOP for returns that fits your 3PL operations and ensures a seamless workflow.

The goal is to simplify the returns process so that your team—and your 3PL partner—can manage returns consistently and with minimal errors. Whether you're processing apparel, electronics, or any other product category, this guide will help you develop a return system that works efficiently at any scale.



STEP 1

IDENTIFY AND LOG ALL RETURN ITEMS

The first step in managing returns is to properly identify and log each item in your inventory system (IRMS). This ensures that every return is accounted for and reduces the likelihood of mistakes or lost products.

- **Log the Order Number and SKU:** Ensure every return is documented with its corresponding order number and SKU.
 - Example: Find the order number on the shipping label or packing slip (e.g., Order #174718).
 - The SKU is typically on the item's hangtag or sticker.
- **Unplanned Receipts:** If the order number is missing but the SKU is available, log the item as an unplanned receipt.
- **No SKU Available?** Take a photo of the item and send it to your team for further identification.



STEP 2

REVIEW THE ITEMS FOR QUALITY ISSUES

This step ensures that returned products are handled properly based on their condition.

- **Sealed and Unopened Items:** If the product is fully sealed and undamaged, log it as “Available.” Be cautious—if there’s any doubt about its condition, mark it as “Opened.”
 - **Example:** Check the product’s packaging for an even seal. If the seal is uneven, mark the item as opened.
- **Opened or Damaged Items:** Any item with signs of opening (e.g., a broken seal or re-bagged product) should be categorized as “QA Hold” or “Damaged.”
 - **Opened Items Example:** Uneven seals or folded edges indicate the product has been opened.



STEP 3

CLASSIFY THE RETURN

Proper classification ensures that products are processed quickly and appropriately.

- **Unopened Products:** If the item is unopened and undamaged, log it as “Available” for restocking.
- **Opened Products:** If opened or damaged, the product should be marked for “QA Hold” or “Damaged” depending on the inspection results.
 - **Unopened Non-Ingestible Products:** Restock.
 - **Opened Ingestible Products:** Mark as “Damaged.”



STEP 4

HANDLE SPECIAL PROCESSING (APPAREL EXAMPLE)

For certain products like apparel, additional processing may be required before they can be restocked.

- **Inspect for Wear and Tear:** For apparel, check for stains, missing tags, or wear.
 - If the tags are missing, re-tag the item.
 - If the item shows signs of wear, clean or steam the item if possible.
 - **Unsellable Apparel:** If the item can't be restored to like-new condition, mark it as "Damaged."



STEP 5

PHOTO DOCUMENTATION

To prevent disputes and ensure transparency, it's important to document each returned item with photos.

- **When to Capture Photos:** If an item is damaged, missing a SKU, or has any issue that requires further investigation, take a photo and link it to the return's RMA number.
- **Storing Photos:** Upload the photos to your returns management system under the corresponding RMA number. This adds an extra layer of security to your returns process and helps reduce fraud.

A white IDS pallet jack is shown in a warehouse aisle, with blue straps and yellow and orange diagonal stripes. The IDS logo is visible on the side. The background shows rows of cardboard boxes on shelves.

STEP 6

LIQUIDATION OR DISPOSAL OF UNSELLABLE ITEMS

Not all items can be restocked. For those that can't, decide on a plan for liquidation, donation, or disposal.

- **Liquidation:** Slightly damaged items may still be sellable through liquidation channels such as eBay or specialized liquidation partners.
- **Donation:** Unsellable items that are in good condition may be donated to charity or used for internal purposes.
- **Disposal:** For items that must be discarded, obtain a Certificate of Destruction for proper record-keeping.



STEP 7

FINAL REVIEW AND CLEANUP

Before closing out the return, perform a final review to ensure everything is logged and handled correctly.

- **Ensure All Items Are Logged:** Double-check that all returned items have been logged in IRMS, with their SKUs, order numbers, and conditions clearly marked.
- **Reconcile Open RMAs:** Close out any RMAs that are older than your specified window (e.g., 6 months) to keep your records clean and accurate.



A WELL-EXECUTED RETURNS SOP CAN DRAMATICALLY IMPROVE YOUR 3PL OPERATIONS.

By following these steps—logging returns, inspecting items, documenting with photos, and managing unsellable goods—you can streamline the process, cut down on errors, and ultimately save your business time and money.

Ready to take your returns process to the next level? Use this guide to build your own custom returns SOP and watch as your operations become more efficient and cost-effective.

For more resources and support on how IDS can help your business optimize logistics, visit [our website](#), contact us directly at (866) 232-6533, or email at sales@idsfulfillment.com.