

Navigating Clean Beauty Claims:

Organic, Green, Natural – what Do They Really Mean?



If you've been a skin care professional for any amount of time, there's no doubt you've been confronted with questions about organic, green, or natural products.

Maybe your stance is that products that use traditional preservatives or other "chemical" ingredients should be considered completely safe based on historic use and data. Conversely, maybe you believe that the formulas we apply topically should be 100% organic or free of anything synthetic. More likely, you fall somewhere in the middle - seeking safe and natural options without compromising on clinical results.

No matter where you fall, it's important to understand the cosmetic labelling and marketing standards surrounding clean beauty claims so that you can reliably inform your clients. Green, natural and organic are a part of today's consumer vernacular - it's our job to help our clients navigate the market and educate them on the true meaning behind these terms. After all, it's not the first time that marketing tactics have led to mass misinterpretation, and it won't be the last!

In this resource the following areas are covered:

1. Thinking Critically about Common Claims
2. Organic vs. Chemical: the Scientific Reality
3. Breaking Down the Big 3: Natural, Organic & Green
4. Finding the Philosophy that's right for you and your clients!

Thinking Critically about Common Claims

To start, let's run through some common terms used by brands (professional and non-professional) in today's skincare landscape...

- Green
- Organic
- Natural
- Clean
- Safe
- Non-chemical
- Non-synthetic
- Food-grade
- Free of...
- Made without...

While we won't cover each of these terms in detail, this will provide you with some basic skills in deciphering the meaning behind these and many other terms used in branding and marketing skin care.

To begin thinking critically about how we are marketed to, here are some questions you can ask yourself when you come across these terms:

- **Is the claim *subjective*?** For example, does "clean" have an objective meaning or can it mean different things in different contexts?

- Does the claim communicate something *valuable*? For example, what does “food-grade” mean in terms of skin care, and is it important or desirable in this context?
- Does the claim communicate something *meaningful*? For example, what does it mean to label a cleanser “free of talc,” when talc is not typically found in cleansers?
- Is the claim *truthful*? For example, is it possible to have a “non-chemical” product?



Organic vs. Chemical: The Scientific Reality

Before we jump in to how these terms are used within the skin care industry, I want to provide you with a few scientific definitions that will help us better navigate some of these formula descriptors.

Organic: Living or once-living material; compounds containing carbon and, often, formed by living organisms

Organic Compound: A molecule built around carbon. An organic molecule contains one or more carbon atoms and usually hydrogen and oxygen.

Inorganic: Unrelated to organic matter or organic life; not animal or vegetable; or, a chemical compound that does not contain carbon

Carbon: An element that is an essential constituent of all living things (organic compounds)

Chemical: Any substance consisting of matter, including any liquid, solid, or gas

Let's discuss chemicals a little further...

A chemical is any pure substance or any mixture (a solution, compound, or gas). Chemicals can occur naturally or be created artificially. Therefore, organic compounds *are* chemical compounds. Without chemical compounds, humans, and the world we live in would not exist. Of course, not all chemicals (organic and otherwise) are healthy. Some are good for us, and some aren't. The tricky thing is, when it comes to skincare, our beliefs, skin type and possible reactions will make what's "good for us" unique to every person.



Here's a few examples to help illustrate how confusing these misconceptions can be...

The active ingredients in physical sunscreen, commonly zinc oxide and titanium dioxide, are considered *inorganic* mineral compounds because they are non-carbon based – though they are *naturally occurring*. On the other hand, Avobenzone, a common *chemical* UV absorption ingredient found in sunscreens, is composed of *organic* (carbon-based) compounds.

Additionally, *synthetic* doesn't mean *inorganic*. In fact, most lab-synthesized ingredients are designed to be bioidentical to the original plant or animal compound.

Lastly, many of the ingredients our clients have been told to avoid through marketing and the media are actually “food grade” and found in a lot of the prepackaged foods we consume on a regular basis.

The takeaway...

We need to learn how to decipher marketing buzz words from accurate information about our products.



Breaking Down the Big 3: Natural, Organic & Green

Let's break down the three terms most commonly used in skincare marketing and labelling.

Green

Marketing or labelling a product "green" typically suggests that the formula, manufacturing, and/or packaging of the product is eco-friendly. This could mean anything from the packaging is recyclable, the product is Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified, or the ingredients were sourced responsibly without harming the environment.

That being said, the term "green" as it relates to the beauty industry is not officially defined or regulated by any governing body. As consumers, our general understanding of this term may lead us to believe that the company is ethically and sustainably sourcing and distributing their products – but that's not always the case.

Without a singular definition or any regulatory oversight to substantiate the claim, any brand can claim to be "green" – and, essentially, make up their own definition.

Natural

Similar to "green" labelling, the term "natural" doesn't hold a lot of weight. "Natural" is often used interchangeably with "clean" in beauty labelling, and it is often meant to convey that the ingredients used are plant-based or derived from nature – often interpreted as free of "harmful" or "toxic" chemicals and ingredients.

It's important to note that **an ingredient's source does not determine its safety**. There are plenty of naturally sourced ingredients that are unsafe for skin and others that are not a good fit for certain skin types. For example, people with sensitized skin often struggle to use pure, cold-pressed plant-based ingredients because their lack of lab manipulation doesn't provide a proper delivery system. This can mean that the minerals, vitamins, and enzymes present in these ingredients cause irritation to their compromised stratum corneum. Similarly, essential oils are naturally derived from plant sources, yet can be highly irritating when applied topically and not properly diluted. It's all about client-specific customization here!

"Clean" labelling in skincare typically refers to the absence of specific ingredients – often ingredients that are approved for use in cosmetics but have varying levels of *perceived* toxicity or inefficiency for treating skin (i.e., fillers). Again, there is no regulation determining what ingredients are considered "clean" or "natural" – it is determined by the manufacturer and individual consumer.



Organic

When a product is labelled “organic”, the assumption is often that the ingredients were sourced where growing and harvesting practices complied with the governing body’s organic standards. But here’s the catch - these standards are different from country to country, and even within the same country. To use the United States as an example: an ingredient may be Certified Organic by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) but not Food & Drug Administration (FDA) approved and vice versa.

Further, there is no agreed upon understanding of the term “organic.” In the United States, the FDA regulates cosmetics under the authority of the [Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act](#) (FD&C Act) and the [Fair Packaging and Labeling Act](#) (FPLA). The term “organic” is not defined in either of these laws or in the regulations that the FDA enforces under their authority.

In simple terms, without a definition for “organic”, the FDA cannot easily regulate the use of the label. This makes it so a brand can easily and legally position their product as organic with very loose justifications.

For example, a brand may label their product as “Organic Squalane Face Oil” while only the Squalane, among 25 other ingredients, is actually organically sourced.



Finding the Philosophy that's right for you and your clients

While not all brands use misleading labelling and marketing, many do. That being said, a little research can help you get to the bottom of things. ***Any professional brand you work with should provide you with all the information you require – so get comfortable asking questions!*** Luckily, most professional-only brands don't make as many of these claims, especially without the support of regulatory governance.

Here's what you can say to your clients to put them at ease and assure them that you're an expert when it comes to skincare ingredient lists.

“Skincare labelling can be very misleading. I'll give you the most current information based on FDA approvals, trial results and research and then you can choose what your personal ingredient philosophy will be moving forward.”

If you know and believe in the products you carry, you can feel confident giving your clients the information they need to make the best choices.

With your expertise, it's likely that they'll feel better leaving the decision to you about what's best for their skin and will trust your recommendations moving forward.

If a client does have particular beliefs about certain ingredients, you can always pick and choose your products to leave these ingredients out of their treatments and home care recommendations. You can only present the facts and then do what makes your client comfortable. After all, we've all seen that client who preaches that they'll only use organic, all-natural products whilst taking a big sip of their Diet Coke, haven't we? It's all about balance!



This is why we lead with ingredient knowledge at [Skin Care Lit](#), instead of brand-specific knowledge – it provides you with the power to instruct your clients based on factual information and not with branded (i.e., biased) marketing so you have the knowledge you need to source products and formulas that are consistent with your personal requirements.

Ask questions, research, and develop your own formula philosophies to follow when it comes to treating your clients. This shows dedication to your craft and helps attract the right clients for you!

Note/disclaimer:

Compared to most other English-speaking countries, the US has some of the least regulated labelling and ingredient usage parameters. Canada, the United Kingdom, most of Western Europe, and Australia tend to have stricter regulations for cosmetic products – however, the above-mentioned marketing terms are often still misinterpreted, overused and undefined.



From SkinCare Lit membership for estheticians and skincare professionals