

Concerning Copyright & Intellectual Property

Issues on and Beyond the Internet

Information today flows faster and more freely than ever thanks to advances in libraries and other technologies. While accessing all this information on and beyond the Internet, you should always be mindful of where the content originates, who might actually own the content, and what the terms are for you to access and use that content. Aside from times you need to cite sources for research purposes, there may be times you may need to work with information in ways that require written permission from the copyright holders before you proceed.

Copyrights exist to protect the intellectual property of authors, artists, and musicians and stay in effect for many decades. In the United States, copyright law is defined under Title 17 of the United States Code, which contains America's federal laws. Copyrights are often denoted by the © symbol, although the absence of such a symbol or copyright statement is not necessarily indicative that something is "in the public domain." Things definitively designated as "public domain" are considered to be the property of the public, available to anyone to use as they wish. Such works are no longer protected by copyright.

Copyrights pertain to certain creations. There are other ways ideas and inventions are protected through such things as trademarks and patents. The United States Patent and Trade Office (www.uspto.gov) issues trademarks and patents. Like copyrights, patents and trademarks provide legal protection to items and processes that fall under their domain.

There is also the worldwide concept of intellectual property (IP) – who owns an item. To learn more about IP, visit the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) website at www.wipo.int and follow the link entitled "What is intellectual property?"

If you are an author, artist, or musician in the United States, and are interested in copyrighting your work, visit the Library of Congress' Copyright Office on the web at www.copyright.gov and review the "How to Register a Work" section. While copyrights are automatically granted to material you create entirely yourself, registering your work may entitle you to recuperate legal fees and more if you ever have to legally assert your claim as a copyright owner in a potential infringement case.

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How do you find out about the copyright status of a particular item? When at a website, look for links (sometimes located at the bottom of a web page) such as "Copyright," "Licensing," "Terms of Service" or "Usage Guidelines." If a specific answer to your question is unavailable, you should contact the publisher of the content in question to learn if there are any restrictions placed on the content being made available.

When in doubt, ask! If you download or use the content in any way the provider did not intend, you might run the risk of copyright infringement, which means, among other things, unauthorized use of content and a violation of the rights of the copyright owner. This is a serious offense. Before downloading, copying, or sharing files, creating derivative works, or doing anything else with content in any form, clear your intentions with the copyright owner(s) or you may face legal fees and prosecution.

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