European Commission

A step-by-step guide to copyright in education

Simplifying lawful (re)use in classrooms, schools and e-learning across Europe

Learn & Share

#DigitalEU

Why does copyright matter for education?

Educators and learners rely on accessing a vast collection of sources, such as textbooks, journals, articles, monographs, datasets, images, audio and video recordings and more. These materials are essential for studying, teaching and designing engaging lessons, and supporting student learning and research.

Understanding copyright unlocks knowledge: it enables teachers to lawfully reuse and share content with confidence while respecting creators' rights. Because most educational works are protected by copyright, a basic legal understanding is key for educators to secure rights and share resources responsibly.

⚠ **This is a general guide based on the EU legal framework. Important details are set at the national level and may vary. Always consult your country's legislation or a qualified expert before publishing or reusing digitised third-party content.**

Real-world scenario

A teacher wants to use a third-party work (e.g. a film clip, book/article extract, image or piece of music) for teaching in class or via a secure digital platform. What is allowed under copyright exceptions and limitations, and when is a licence from the rightholder(s) required? Follow the steps below.

STEP 1

Identify the work and the rightholder(s)

What kind of material do you want to use and who owns the rights?

What kind of work are you using?

Teachers and learners work with a wide range of materials: books, journals, poems, newspapers, articles, databases, spreadsheets, interactive modules or manuscripts. These may contain embedded elements, e.g. illustrations, a foreword by another writer, photographs inside the book, recordings, text or video excerpts, maps and multimedia or other material owned by other rightholders.

Who are the creators or contributors involved?

- Authors
- Additional contributors (rightholders) such as publishers, producers, broadcasters, performers.

Why this matters

Copyright is a bundle of rights. Key rights include:

Author's economic rights

- **Right of reproduction:** to create copies of a work
- **Right of distribution:** to distribute physical copies of a work
- **Right of communication to the public:** to make a work available to the public, including online distribution
- **Right of adaptation:** to modify a work

Author's moral rights

- **Right of attribution:** to be credited as the author of the work
- **Right of integrity:** to object to alterations that could harm the author's reputation

An author maintains moral rights even after having transferred economic rights of a work. In some countries, they may remain in perpetuity after the expiration of economic rights.

Neighbouring or related rights

- Rights held by producers
- Rights held by broadcasters
- Rights held by performers and other contributors
- Rights held by press publishers

MOVE TO STEP 2 ⇢

STEP 2

Check

In the EU, copyright usually lasts **70 years** after the death of the author*, however, moral rights may still apply. After that period, protection expires and the work enters the **public domain** – meaning you can use it without needing

copyright status of the work

Is the work still protected by copyright or has it entered the public domain?

permission.

If the work is no longer under copyright protection (public domain) you may use the work, but follow good practices:

- **Respect moral rights:** Always credit the author and avoid distortions of the work.
- **Label clearly:** Mark as 'public domain' and include a short rights statement ('Moral rights may still apply').
- **Verify lawful source:** Use works from trusted archives or repositories and apply standard public domain tools such as the Public Domain Mark - Creative Commons.

If the work is in the public domain and you've followed these practices

→ JUMP TO STEP 5

If the work is still protected by copyright (or copyright status is uncertain), treat it as protected until proven otherwise and MOVE TO STEP 3 ⇢

*Always check national laws since protection terms for particular types of works and/or circumstances may vary.

⇠ BACK TO STEP 1

Rights in a single work may be held by multiple people. In such cases, permission may be required from each rightholder.

STEP 3

Decide how you will use the work and check existing licences or exceptions

How do you plan to use the work and is there already a licence or exception that allows it?

What you are allowed to do depends on how you plan to use the work and whether your school or institution already holds a licence covering that use.

Choose the option that best reflects your intended use.

- **Show in class (face-to-face)**

Display text/images on screen, play short films or music excerpts for your class only while in the room.

This is usually allowed under a teaching exception or by a school licence. Do not record or share further.

- **Share on a school's secure network (intranet)**

This is often allowed under an exception for digital and cross-border teaching, provided that access is limited to enrolled students and is password-protected. As a good practice, remove content from the network when it is no longer needed.

- **Provide short extracts or handouts**

This is normally permitted under educational exceptions or reprography school licences (but only for physical formats). However, reproducing an entire work generally requires a licence.

- **Quote short passages for explanation**

This is permitted under the quotation or teaching exception.

- **Adapt, remix or translate**

Editing images, music or videos, or making translations may require permission unless the licence allows modification.

- **Post openly on the internet or social media**

This is usually not covered by exceptions – use only public-domain or openly licensed content, or content for which your institution holds a licence.

Check for existing institutional licences or exceptions

Before relying on an exception, verify with your school, university, or library whether an existing licence already covers the works you are planning to use.

Many institutions hold agreements with publishers or collective management organisations (CMOs) that allow teachers to reproduce or use specific materials under defined conditions.

If a licence covers your use, follow its terms precisely → JUMP TO STEP 5

If no licence applies, check whether your use qualifies under an exception.

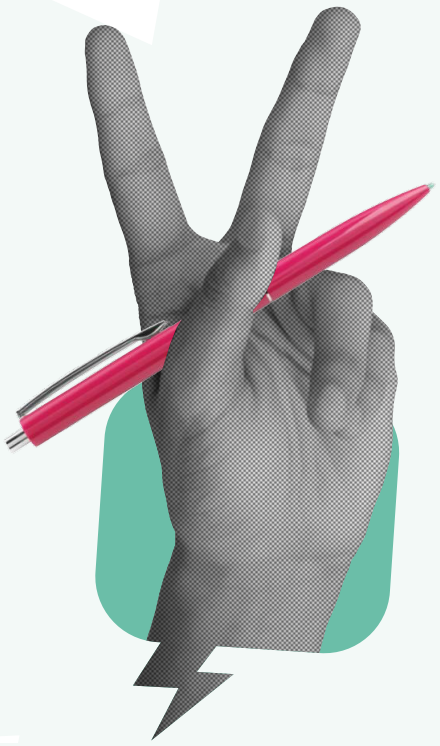
Normally, exceptions allow the use of copyright-protected content for illustration in teaching, provided all of the following are met:

- the use is non-commercial and strictly educational;
- only short extracts or portions necessary for illustration are used;
- access is restricted to students and staff (on site or secure digital network);
- the author and source are properly cited;
- local copyright regulations are followed (some countries define extract length or set extra limits).

If your use meets these conditions, you may → JUMP TO STEP 5

If not, MOVE TO STEP 4 ⇢

⇠ BACK TO STEP 2



STEP 4

Obtain permission

If no licence or exception applies, how can you get permission to use the work?

If neither an institutional licence nor a teaching exception covers your use, permission must be obtained before you use the work.

Contact your institution (school, university, library).

They can check existing agreements or contact the rightholder or the relevant CMO on your behalf to obtain a licence, ensuring written confirmation for the uses identified in Step 3.

Keep clear records of permissions, licences and correspondence!

Once you have permission → JUMP TO STEP 5

⇠ BACK TO STEP 3

STEP 5

Share with students, safely

Now that you have confirmed an exception applies or obtained a licence, share materials with learners responsibly and transparently.

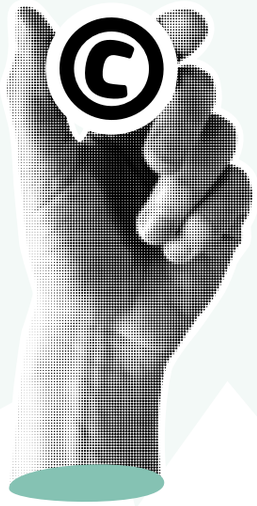
Good practices (where relevant)

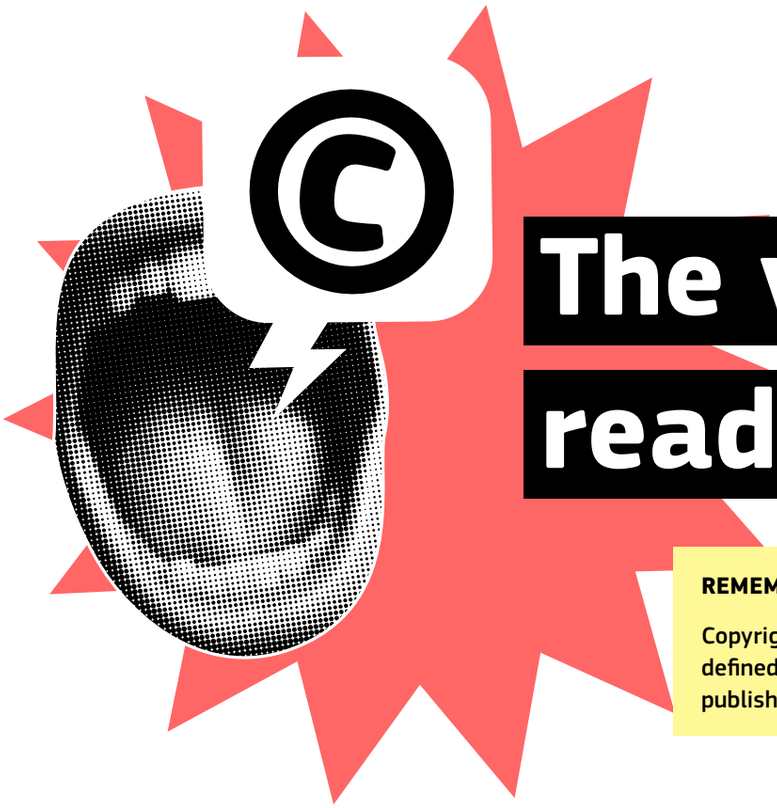
- Always include attribution: title, creator, source, date, rights statement or licence. You may add a short note such as: ‘For this class only – no reposting or downloading unless allowed’.
- Use secure, restricted sharing environments – for example, your school’s password-protected platform (intranet) or a restricted repository – and remove content after the course or licence ends.
- Use only lawful sources: point learners to official publisher websites, institutional databases or verified video channels.
- Use content from your school’s licensed databases.
- Always read licence terms carefully.
- Consider releasing materials you create under a Creative Commons licence, if permitted by your institution.
- Use content only for educational (non-commercial) purposes, such as for illustration in teaching.
- Use only what is necessary – excerpts, clips or fragments justified by the educational purpose.

⇠ BACK TO STEP 4

Quick checklist

1. Check whether the material is protected by copyright or if it is in the public domain.
2. Confirm whether the content is covered by a licence from your institution or an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons).
3. Verify whether your use falls under one of the copyright exceptions (e.g. teaching).
4. If no licence or exception applies, obtain a licence or permission from the author or rightholder – either directly or through a CMO.





The work is now ready to be used!

REMEMBER

Copyright law is partially harmonised at the EU level. The applicable legal framework is defined at the national level. Always consult national guidelines or a legal expert before publishing or reusing digitised content.

Learn more

More on EU copyright law

Country-specific copyright FAQs for teachers, by EUIPO

Licences list – Creative Commons

More information on the reuse of audiovisual content in education from Europeana

The EUIPO Academy Learning Portal

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