

Creative Commons and Open Licensing Quick Reference

Creative Commons licences make it easier for creators to share their work—and for other people to use it—without negotiating permission every time.

But “Creative Commons” does not mean “free of copyright,” “free for any use,” or “no credit required.” Copyright still applies, and the copyright owner decides which uses are permitted.

This guide will help you identify the licence attached to a work, understand what it permits, and provide proper attribution.

All Rights Reserved, Some Rights Reserved, or No Rights Reserved?

Status	What It Usually Means
All Rights Reserved	Copyright applies, and no additional permission has been granted. You must rely on a copyright exception, obtain permission, or choose different material.
Creative Commons Licence	Copyright still applies, but the owner has granted advance permission for certain uses. You must follow the conditions of the particular licence.
CC0	The rightsholder has attempted to waive copyright and related rights to the fullest extent permitted by law. Attribution is not legally required under CC0.
Public Domain	Copyright does not restrict the work. This may be because protection expired, the work was never eligible for copyright, or the rights were relinquished where the law permits.

Creative Commons calls its licences a “some rights reserved” approach. Some uses are permitted in advance; others may still require permission.

The Four Licence Elements

Creative Commons licences are built from four elements:

Symbol	Meaning	What It Tells You
BY	Attribution	You must give appropriate credit.
NC	Non-Commercial	The licensed material may be used only for purposes that are not primarily intended for or directed toward commercial advantage or monetary compensation.
ND	No Derivatives	You may share the material only in unadapted form.
SA	ShareAlike	If you share an adaptation, it must be offered under the same or a compatible licence.

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All six Creative Commons licences require attribution. The other elements determine whether commercial use and adaptations are permitted.

The Six Creative Commons Licences

Licence	Commercial Use	Adaptations	Additional Condition
CC BY	Yes	Yes	Credit the creator.
CC BY-SA	Yes	Yes	Credit the creator and license shared adaptations under the same or a compatible licence.
CC BY-ND	Yes	No*	Credit the creator and share the work only in unadapted form.
CC BY-NC	No	Yes	Credit the creator and use the material only for non-commercial purposes.
CC BY-NC-SA	No	Yes	Credit the creator, use it only for non-commercial purposes, and apply the same or a compatible licence to shared adaptations.
CC BY-NC-ND	No	No*	Credit the creator, use it only for non-commercial purposes, and share it only in unadapted form.

*An ND licence may not prevent every private modification, but it does not allow adapted material to be shared under the licence.

CC BY — Attribution

This is the most flexible Creative Commons licence.

You may copy, distribute, adapt, translate, remix, or build on the material, including for commercial purposes, provided that you give appropriate credit and follow the other licence requirements.

CC BY-SA — Attribution-ShareAlike

You may use and adapt the material, including commercially, but any adaptation you share must be licensed under the same or a compatible licence.

ShareAlike applies when you distribute an adaptation. It does not require you to place an entire book, website, or other collection under the licence merely because it includes an unadapted CC BY-SA work. Whether material is an adaptation or simply part of a collection can depend on how it has been used.

CC BY-ND — Attribution-NoDerivatives

You may copy and distribute the material, including commercially, but only in unadapted form. Translation, substantial editing, remixing, or otherwise transforming the work may create an adaptation that cannot be shared under this licence. Ordinary technical changes, such as converting a file to another format, do not necessarily create an adaptation.

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CC BY-NC — Attribution-NonCommercial

You may copy, share, and adapt the material for non-commercial purposes.

“Free to access” does not automatically mean non-commercial. A website may be free for visitors but earn advertising or affiliate revenue, promote paid services, build a commercial mailing list, or support product sales. A free resource used to market a book, course, business, or professional service may also raise questions.

If the use has a meaningful connection to promotion or financial gain, do not assume the NC licence covers it. Ask the rightsholder for clarification or separate permission.

CC BY-NC-SA — Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike

You may share and adapt the material for non-commercial purposes. You must give credit, and any adaptation you share must use the same or a compatible licence.

CC BY-NC-ND — Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives

This is the most restrictive of the six licences.

You may copy and share the material for non-commercial purposes, but you may not share an adaptation. Attribution is still required.

How to Provide Attribution

A useful attribution normally identifies:

- **Title** — the name of the work, when available
- **Author** — the creator or other person designated for attribution
- **Source** — where the work was found
- **Licence** — the complete name and version of the licence
- **Changes** — whether you edited, cropped, translated, recoloured, or otherwise changed the material

These elements are sometimes remembered as **TASL**: Title, Author, Source, Licence. Although the title is not an absolute requirement under the current 4.0 licences, including it remains a helpful practice when the information is available.

Basic Attribution Example

Morning at the Harbour by Alex Rivera, licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Source: www.example.com/morning-harbour

In a digital document, link the creator’s name, source, and licence where practical.

Attribution for an Adapted Work

Adapted from *Morning at the Harbour* by Alex Rivera, licensed under CC BY 4.0. Cropped and converted to black and white.

If the licence requires ShareAlike, also identify the licence applied to your adaptation.

Attribution in a Book

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Attribution does not always have to appear directly beside the material. Depending on the medium and context, it may be placed in a caption, endnote, acknowledgements section, image credits section, or other reasonably accessible location.

The attribution should be clear enough for the reader to identify the work, its creator, its source, and the applicable licence.

Do not present the attribution in a way that suggests the creator endorses you, your book, or your use of the material.

What Counts as an Adaptation?

An adaptation is a new work based on the licensed material. Depending on the kind of material and the applicable law, adaptations may include:

- translating written material;
- substantially editing or rewriting it;
- remixing music;
- altering an illustration or photograph;
- incorporating material into a new audiovisual work; or
- transforming the original into another creative form.

Not every change creates an adaptation. Correcting dimensions, changing a file format, or making another purely technical adjustment may leave the underlying work unaltered.

This distinction matters most when the licence contains **ND** or **SA**. If you are uncertain whether your use creates an adaptation, take the cautious route: use different material, share it unchanged, or ask the rightsholder.

CC0 and the Public Domain Mark

Creative Commons also provides two public-domain tools. They are not part of the six-licence system.

Tool	Purpose	Attribution Required?
CC0	Allows a rightsholder to waive copyright and related rights to the fullest extent legally possible.	No, although voluntary credit is often courteous.
Public Domain Mark	Identifies material believed to be free of known copyright restrictions worldwide.	No under copyright law, although source acknowledgement may still be appropriate.

CC0 is used by someone who owns or controls the rights and wants to release them as fully as possible.

The Public Domain Mark does not release rights. It is a label for a work already believed to be in the public domain worldwide.

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A website's own terms, contractual restrictions, privacy and publicity rights, trademarks, patents, cultural protocols, or other laws may still affect how material can be used. A public-domain label or CC0 designation does not erase every possible legal or ethical consideration.

Read the Entire Licence Notice

A Creative Commons symbol is only the beginning. Look for:

- the full name of the licence;
- the licence version, such as **4.0**;
- a link to the licence terms;
- the creator's attribution instructions;
- any notice identifying excluded material; and
- information about changes already made to the work.

A webpage may contain several separately owned elements. An article might be Creative Commons licensed while its photographs, quotations, logos, maps, or illustrations are not.

Look for wording such as:

Except where otherwise noted, the text of this article is licensed under CC BY 4.0.

That statement does not necessarily license every item displayed on the page.

Make Sure the Licence Comes from a Credible Source

Creative Commons does not verify that the person applying a licence owns the work.

A photograph licensed on the photographer's own website carries more confidence than the same image uploaded by an unidentified user to an image-sharing platform. Libraries, archives, universities, government agencies, established publishers, and recognized open-content repositories may also provide useful information about the source and rights status of their material.

When possible, trace the work back to the creator or original publication. Keep a record of:

- where you found it;
- who was identified as the creator;
- the licence and version displayed;
- any special attribution instructions; and
- the date you accessed the page.

A saved PDF, screenshot, or dated record can help establish the licence terms that were displayed when you used the material.

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Common Creative Commons Traps

Assumption

“Creative Commons means copyright-free.”

“I found it through a CC search, so the licence must be valid.”

“I gave credit, so I can use it.”

“My website is free, so it is non-commercial.”

“No Derivatives means I cannot resize the image.”

“ShareAlike means my entire book must use the same licence.”

“Everything on the licensed webpage has the same licence.”

“CC0 means there are no legal concerns.”

“The licence can disappear after I publish.”

The Safer Understanding

Copyright usually remains in place. The licence grants defined permissions.

Search results and platform labels can be incorrect. Verify the original source.

Attribution alone is not enough if the licence prohibits commercial use or adaptations.

Advertising, affiliate links, promotion, lead generation, and connections to paid products may complicate the analysis.

Purely technical changes may be permitted, but creative alterations can create an adaptation.

Not necessarily. The obligation generally applies to an adaptation of the licensed work, not automatically to every work in a collection.

Third-party images, quotations, logos, and other elements may be excluded.

Other rights and laws may still apply.

Creative Commons licences are generally irrevocable for users who comply with their terms. Keep evidence of the licence you relied upon.

When the Licence Does Not Fit

If the licence does not permit your intended use, you can contact the rightsholder and request separate permission.

For example, the creator may agree to:

- commercial use of material carrying an NC licence;
- an adaptation of material carrying an ND licence;
- distribution under different terms than an SA licence permits; or
- use without the standard attribution.

That permission should be documented in writing. It applies alongside—or instead of—the Creative Commons licence according to the terms the rightsholder grants.

Creative Commons licences do not eliminate fair use, fair dealing, or other copyright exceptions. If your use is independently permitted by law, you do not need to rely on the licence. However, whether an exception applies requires a separate legal analysis.

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Where to Find Creative Commons Material

Creative Commons material may be available through:

- Wikimedia Commons;
- Flickr's Creative Commons search filters;
- Openverse;
- government and institutional open-data portals;
- university repositories;
- museum, library, and archive collections;
- open-access journals; and
- open educational resource collections.

A search filter helps locate possible material. It does not replace checking the original source, the precise licence, and any exclusions.

Official Creative Commons Resources

- [About the Six Creative Commons Licences](#)
- [Creative Commons FAQ](#)
- [Creative Commons Licence Chooser](#)
- [CC0 and Public Domain Tools](#)
- [Recommended Attribution Practices](#)

Creative Commons' official descriptions confirm the permissions attached to the six licences and distinguish CC licences from CC0 and the Public Domain Mark. [Creative Commons licences](#), [public-domain tools](#)

This guide provides general information, not legal advice. Licence terms, copyright exceptions, and the treatment of adaptations may vary according to the facts and the law that applies.