

Where to Get Permission

A Rights-Finding Guide for Writers

Knowing that you need permission is only the beginning. The person who created the material may not be the person who currently controls it. Copyright can be sold, assigned, inherited, licensed, or administered by another organization.

The challenge is not simply finding someone connected to the work. It is finding someone authorized to grant the rights you need.

Begin With the Material

Start with the copy of the material you intend to use. Look for a copyright notice, credit line, publisher, production company, agency, or licensing statement.

Material	Look Here First
Book	Copyright page and publisher's website
Article	Byline, masthead, publication website, or permissions link
Song lyrics	Album credits, official songwriter credits, or music-publisher information
Photograph	Credit line, photographer's website, agency, or image metadata
Illustration or artwork	Artist credit, publisher, gallery, museum record, or artist's website
Film or television material	Credits, studio, production company, or distributor
Website or blog	Byline, copyright notice, terms of use, or permissions page
Social-media post	Original account, creator's profile, or linked website
Letter, email, or diary	The writer of the material or their estate
Government material	The department's copyright, licensing, or reuse page

A credit identifies a creator or contributor, but it does not necessarily identify the current copyright owner. Treat it as the beginning of the search.

Books, Articles, and Other Written Works

For a quotation from a book, begin with the copyright page. It identifies the publisher and may indicate whether the copyright belongs to the author, publisher, estate, or another party. Next, search the publisher's website for **Rights, Permissions, Licensing, or Reprints**. Large publishers often use an online permissions system. Some direct users to the Copyright Clearance Center or its RightsLink service.

If the publisher no longer controls the rights, it may refer you to the author, literary agent, another publisher, or an estate. If the publisher has merged or disappeared, search the imprint name to identify its current parent company or successor.

Useful resources include:

Where to Get Permission

- [Copyright Clearance Center](#) for permissions and licensing involving many books, journals, articles, and other publications
- [WATCH](#) for copyright contacts associated with writers, artists, estates, archives, and representatives
- The WATCH **Firms Out of Business** database for information about vanished publishers and literary agencies
- [PLSclear](#) for locating and requesting permission from participating UK publishers
- The [U.S. Copyright Public Records System](#) for American registration and recorded ownership information

Copyright records can provide useful leads, but they may not reflect later transfers, inheritance, reversion of rights, or unrecorded agreements.

Song Lyrics

Permission to reproduce song lyrics is usually obtained from the **music publisher**, not the performer who made the song famous.

Begin with the song title and songwriter credits. Search a performing-rights repertoire to identify the songwriter, music publisher, or organization administering the composition.

Useful searches include:

- [SOCAN Repertoire Search](#) for Canadian and international repertoire represented by SOCAN
- [Songview](#) for ownership information drawn from major U.S. performing-rights organizations
- [ASCAP Repertory](#)
- [BMI Repertoire](#)
- [SESAC Repertory](#)

These organizations primarily administer performance rights. Their databases can help identify the music publisher, but the organization may not be authorized to grant permission to reproduce lyrics in a book.

Once you identify the publisher, search its website for print, lyric, reprint, or synchronization permissions. A song may have multiple writers and publishers, so permission from one party may not cover the entire composition.

The copyright in the song and the copyright in a particular recording are separate. Quoting lyrics, reproducing sheet music, using an audio recording, and including a song in a video may require different permissions from different rights holders.

Photographs, Illustrations, and Artwork

Begin with the credit attached to the image. Search for the photographer or artist's official website and look for licensing information or contact details.

Where to Get Permission

If the image came from a newspaper, magazine, publisher, museum, archive, or stock-image service, determine whether that organization owns the copyright or merely obtained permission for its own use. The fact that an image appears on a website does not mean the website can license it to someone else.

A reverse-image search may help locate the earliest available source or a higher-quality copy. It does not establish ownership or prove that an image is free to use.

For visual artwork, useful licensing organizations include:

- [COVA–DAAV](#) for Canadian visual artists and artists represented through affiliated international societies
- [Artists Rights Society](#) for visual artists and estates represented in the United States and through its international affiliates
- WATCH for artists, photographers, estates, and archival contacts

Owning a physical artwork does not necessarily include ownership of its copyright. A gallery, collector, archive, or museum may possess the original while reproduction rights remain with the artist or the artist's estate.

Photographs can involve additional rights. The photographer may own copyright in the image, while a recognizable person, artwork, property, or trademark depicted in it may create separate privacy, publicity, copyright, or trademark concerns.

Film and Television Material

For dialogue, screenplays, film stills, clips, or other material from a production, begin with the production credits. Identify the studio, production company, producer, or distributor and search its website for rights, licensing, clip licensing, or permissions.

The rights may be divided. A studio may control the film, while a photographer controls a publicity still, a music publisher controls a song, and a separate writer controls material adapted for the screenplay.

Describe exactly what you want to use. Permission to quote dialogue does not automatically include permission to reproduce a still, poster, character image, or recording.

Websites and Social Media

Start with the original post or webpage, not a repost, screenshot, aggregation site, or search result.

Look for:

- The creator's name or account
- A copyright notice
- Terms of use
- A Creative Commons or other open licence
- Contact information

Where to Get Permission

- A linked portfolio, publication, or business website

A platform's terms may give the platform permission to display user content. They do not ordinarily give other users permission to reproduce it in a book.

For a social-media post, contact the person who created the text, image, or video. If the post contains material belonging to someone else, the account holder may not be able to grant all the rights required.

Letters, Emails, and Personal Papers

Copyright in a letter or email generally belongs to the person who wrote it, not the person who received it or possesses the physical copy.

If the writer has died, permission may need to come from the writer's estate or another successor copyright owner. An archive, library, or family member holding the document may control access to the physical material without owning its copyright.

Ask the institution whether it controls reproduction rights or can identify the rights holder. Do not assume that access to an archival document includes permission to publish it.

Government Material

Government works are treated differently from country to country. Some may be available under an open-government licence, while others remain protected by Crown or government copyright.

Find the material on the issuing department's official website and look for **Copyright, Terms and Conditions, Open Government Licence, Reuse, or Permissions**.

Confirm that the permission applies to the specific material. Government publications sometimes contain photographs, maps, illustrations, quotations, or other elements owned by third parties.

When the Creator Has Died

Copyright usually continues long after the creator's death.

Search for:

- An official estate or foundation
- The creator's last publisher or literary agent
- A collecting society or licensing organization
- Library or archive records
- WATCH
- Obituaries or estate announcements identifying executors, representatives, or surviving family
- A publisher or agency currently issuing authorized editions

A relative is not automatically the copyright owner. Copyright may have been assigned, specifically bequeathed, or transferred through the estate.

Where to Get Permission

When a Company Has Disappeared

A defunct publisher, magazine, agency, studio, or production company may have sold its assets or been acquired by another business.

Search the former company's name alongside terms such as:

- Parent company
- Acquired by
- Imprint of
- Successor
- Rights and permissions

The current publisher of a work may also know whether it acquired the earlier company's rights or merely licensed the title.

What to Include in an Enquiry

A rights holder will generally need enough information to understand the exact use being proposed. This usually includes the material, its source, the amount being used, the new publication, formats, territory, language, expected publication date, estimated print run or audience, commercial purpose, and whether the material will be altered.

For example:

I am requesting permission to reproduce two lines from "[Song Title]," written by [songwriter], in a commercially published novel titled *[Title]*. The quotation will appear once in the body of the book. The novel will be distributed worldwide in English in print and ebook formats, with an estimated first print run of 500 copies.

The rights holder may request different or additional information through its own form. Follow its process rather than treating the example as a universal template.

If You Cannot Find the Rights Holder

An unanswered enquiry is not permission. Neither is an outdated address, dissolved company, missing copyright notice, or unsuccessful search.

If the rights holder cannot be identified or located, the practical options are to:

- Replace or remove the material
- Use public-domain or openly licensed material
- Obtain legal advice about the specific risk
- Proceed only after knowingly assessing that risk

Document the search even if it is unsuccessful. Keep the sources consulted, enquiries sent, responses received, dates, licence terms, receipts, and final permission agreement together with the publishing records for the book.

Where to Get Permission

Permission should be clear, written, and broad enough to cover the use you actually intend.

Finding the right person is only half the task. The other half is making sure their yes means what you think it means.