

An Introduction to Copyright in Australia

In this fact sheet, we give an introduction to copyright in Australia.

Our book [Copyright Essentials](#) provides in-depth guidance on the provisions of the Copyright Act set out in this fact sheet. It is available for purchase from our website: copyright.org.au. Information about our education programs is available [here](#).

This fact sheet gives general introductory information about copyright. If you need to know how the law applies in a particular situation, we recommend you seek legal advice.

Key points

- Copyright provides creators with an incentive to create new works and a legal framework for the control of their creations.
- Copyright protection is free and applies automatically when material is created.
- **There is NO registration system for copyright in Australia.**
- Copyright does not protect ideas, information, styles or techniques.
- Copyright does not protect names, titles or slogans.
- There are no general exemptions from copyright law for not-for-profit organisations.
- There are some situations where copyright law allows people to use copyright material without permission for their own personal use, but these are narrow and specific.
- Australian copyright law applies to actions that take place in Australia, even if the material used was created or first published in another country.

1. Copyright law

Copyright law creates incentives for people to invest their time, talent and other resources in creating new material – particularly cultural and educational material, which benefits society.

In Australia, copyright law is set out in the *Copyright Act 1968* (Cth) (Copyright Act). This is federal legislation and applies throughout Australia. The Commonwealth Attorney-General administers Australian copyright law.

Although the Copyright Act dates from 1968, it sets out how copyright applies to material created both before and after that date.

The Copyright Act has been regularly amended since 1968, to bring it up to date with evolving technologies and concerns. In addition to dealing with copyright rights, the Copyright Act also deals with performers' rights and the 'moral rights' of individual creators.

In many cases, Australian courts have had to decide how the Copyright Act is to be interpreted and applied. Therefore, if you want to know how copyright law will apply to a particular situation you are facing, you will generally need to be aware not only of what is in the Copyright Act but also of how courts have approached the issues and interpreted the provisions of the Copyright Act.

2. What does copyright protect?

Copyright protects:

- **textual material** ('literary works') such as journal articles, novels, screenplays, poems, song lyrics and reports
- **computer programs** (a sub-category of 'literary works')
- **compilations** (another sub-category of 'literary works') such as anthologies – the selection and arrangement of material may be protected separately from the individual items contained in the compilation
- **artistic works** such as paintings, drawings, cartoons, sculpture, craft work, architectural plans, buildings, photographs, maps and plans
- **dramatic works** such as choreography, screenplays, plays and mime pieces
- **musical works:** that is, the music itself, separately from any lyrics or recording
- **cinematograph films:** the visual images and sounds in a film, video or DVD are protected separately from any copyright in works recorded on the film or video, such as scripts and music
- **sound recordings:** the particular recording itself is protected by copyright, in addition to, for example, the music or story that is recorded
- **broadcasts:** TV and radio broadcasters have a copyright in their broadcasts, which is separate from the copyright in the films, music and other material which they broadcast, and
- **published editions:** publishers have copyright in their typographical arrangements, which is separate from the copyright in works reproduced in the edition (such as poems, illustrations, or music).

Something that is a literary, dramatic, musical or artistic work for copyright purposes will be protected if it is original. In copyright terms, it's not hard for something to be original: it means that the work isn't a mere copy, a requisite level of skill and effort has been exercised in its creation, and it has been created by a human author.

It is important to note that a physical item can contain a number of different and separate copyrights. For example, a CD of 12 song tracks will have 12 sound recordings, 12 musical works, and 12 sets of song lyrics, each of which will be protected by its own copyright, meaning the CD holds 36 individual copyrights, plus the album artwork as a likely 37th. Similarly, a DVD or video will usually contain not just moving images and sounds on the soundtrack, but also a screenplay and music, each of which may be separately protected.

3. What is not protected by copyright?

3.1 Ideas, concepts, styles, techniques and information

Copyright does not protect ideas, concepts, styles, techniques or information.

For example, if you write an outline of your idea for a TV show, the written text will be protected by copyright as a literary work and, generally, someone wanting to reproduce the text would need your permission. However, someone else could write their own script, using your ideas, without necessarily infringing your copyright. Copyright would only be an issue if someone copied or paraphrased an important or distinctive part of your written work (see '11. Infringement of copyright', below).

In some cases, however, people using your ideas, information or styles could be in breach of other laws (see '16. Other areas of law', below).

3.2 Names, titles and slogans

Some things are too small or unoriginal to be protected by copyright. For example, single words (even invented words), names, titles, slogans and headlines are unlikely to be protected by copyright.

In some cases, however, someone using a name, title or slogan which is already being used by someone else may run into problems with other areas of law, such as trade marks. For further information, see our fact sheet [Names, Titles and Slogans](#).

3.3 People

People and people's images (images of their face or body) are not protected by copyright. Sometimes, however, other areas of law, such as defamation and the Competition and Consumer Act, can affect the circumstances in which a person's image can be used.

4. Copyright protection is automatic

Copyright protection is free and automatic from the time a work is first written down or recorded in some way. You do not apply for copyright in Australia, and there is no system of registration here. Nor are there any forms to fill in or fees to be paid.

You do not need to publish your work, put a copyright notice on it, or do anything else before your work is covered by copyright. For example, as soon as a poem is written, or a song is recorded, it is protected.

5. Who owns copyright?

The Copyright Act sets out rules about copyright ownership. However, people involved in creating or investing in copyright material can reach agreements about who will own copyright.

Whether or not the rules in the Copyright Act will be followed, if there will be more than one person involved in the creation of material or where material is commissioned, it's a good idea to have a written agreement about who will own copyright.

The general rule under the Copyright Act is that the first owner of copyright is the creator of the work, or the person responsible for making the sound recording, film, broadcast or published edition.

There are, however, important exceptions to this general rule set out in the Copyright Act:

- **Employees.** Where a work is made by an employee (rather than a freelancer) as part of that employee's job, the employer usually owns copyright. For people employed as staff who are creating material for newspapers, magazines and other periodicals, the employer will own most of the copyright, but the employee will usually own copyright for some purposes (photocopying and publication in books). Further information for journalists may be found in our fact sheet [Journalists & Copyright](#).
- **Freelance photographers, engravers and people doing portraits.** At default, freelance creators usually own copyright in what they create. Someone who pays for work to be created will generally not own copyright but will be able to use it for the purposes for which it was commissioned. However, where a person commissions a freelance photographer to create material for a private or domestic purpose (e.g. wedding photographs, family portraits) that person will own the copyright in the commissioned material, not the photographer.
- **Films and sound recordings.** The first owner of copyright in a film is usually the producer or the person who paid for it to be made. The first owner of copyright in a sound recording is usually the person who paid for the recording to be made. However, in some cases, performers recorded on sound recordings own a share of the copyright in those sound recordings.
- **A state, territory or Federal government** will usually own copyright in material created, or first published by it or under its direction or control. See our fact sheet [Government: Commonwealth, State and Territory](#).

Any of the rules in the Copyright Act about who will own copyright can be altered by agreement.

For more detailed information about the rules in the Copyright Act, including information about how the ownership rules have changed over time, see our fact sheet [Ownership of Copyright](#).

6. The 'copyright notice' and '©' symbol

The copyright notice consists of the symbol ©, followed by the name of the copyright owner and the year of first publication: for example, '© Australian Copyright Council 2023'. For sound recordings, the letter 'P' (for phonogram) in a circle or in brackets is used instead of the 'C' in a circle.

A copyright notice is not mandatory to get copyright in Australia, or most other countries. However, putting a copyright notice on something is very helpful to remind people that the work is protected by copyright. It also lets people know who is claiming copyright and is the presumed copyright owner. Copyright owners can put the notice on their work themselves; there is no formal procedure.

Generally, while there is no legal problem under Australian law in using a pseudonym or 'nom de plume', in a copyright notice you should use your real name. Given that there is no legal requirement for your name to appear on a work for it to be protected, the use of a pen name or pseudonym will not generally affect the copyright protection for your work. However, a work first published under a pseudonym may only be protected for 70 years from the year

of publication, rather than 70 years from the year of your death, if your identity later cannot be ascertained by people wanting to use your work.

If a company owns copyright, the copyright notice should include the name of the company. However, if someone trades under a business name, the correct name to put in the copyright notice is not the business name but the names of the relevant individual or individuals. The reason for this is that copyright is a form of property, and a business name is not a legal entity, and therefore cannot own property; only individuals and incorporated bodies such as companies can own property (including copyright). You could, however, use a formulation such as '© Bob Jobs t/as Jobs4U 2023', where the 't/as' indicates that at that time Mr Jones was 'trading as' that particular business name.

If you are regularly updating a work (such as material on a website or a computer program), you can include all the years from first publication to the present: for example, '© Georgia Blair 2019-2023'.

Sometimes you will see the words 'All rights reserved' as well as, or instead of, the copyright notice. This is not necessary under Australian law, nor in most other countries. However, if the first publication of your work will be in a country outside Australia, you should seek advice from a lawyer with the relevant expertise.

7. How do I prove I'm the copyright owner if there's no registration system?

If there's a dispute about who created something protected by copyright, it may need to be resolved by a court. There is a presumption that a person named in a copyright notice is the copyright owner. However, a court would look at all the relevant evidence such as oral evidence from the creator and from people who saw the material being created or who saw early copies. Other evidence may include drafts of the work. Such cases are, however, extremely rare.

For further information on this issue, see our fact sheet [Protecting Your Copyright](#).

8. The copyright owner's exclusive rights

Owners of copyright have several exclusive rights over their material. Anyone who wants to use someone else's material in any of these ways generally needs permission. Different rights apply to different types of material.

8.1 Literary, dramatic, artistic and musical works

Owners of copyright in 'works' have the exclusive right to:

- reproduce the work (including by photocopying, copying by hand, filming, recording and scanning)
- make the work public for the first time, and
- communicate the work to the public (for example, by email, broadcasting, cable or the internet).

Owners of copyright in literary, dramatic and musical works have two additional exclusive rights:

- to perform the work in public (this includes performing a work live, or playing a recording or showing a film containing the work, in a non-domestic situation), and

- to make an adaptation (for example, a translation or dramatised version of a literary work, a translation or 'non-dramatic' version of a dramatic work, or an arrangement or transcription of a musical work).

8.2 Films, sound recordings, broadcasts and published editions

Owners of copyright in films, sound recordings, broadcasts and published editions have the exclusive right to copy their material. In addition, there are rights relating to:

- showing films and playing recordings in public
- transmitting films and sound recordings to the public using any form of technology (by email, broadcasting, cable or the internet, for example), and
- rebroadcasting television and sound broadcasts.

8.3 Rental rights

Owners of copyright in *computer programs*, *sound recordings* and *works on sound recordings* (such as music) have the exclusive right to rent out articles such as compact discs and CD-ROMs. See our fact sheets [Renting Items Protected By Copyright](#) and [Lending Items Protected By Copyright](#) for further information.

8.4 Control over importation

In some cases, copyright owners can also control who imports copies of their material into Australia. This can be the case even if the material was legitimately made overseas.

See our fact sheet [Importing Copyright Items](#) for more information.

9. Assigning and licensing rights

Copyright owners can assign (generally, sell) or license their rights. Assigning rights means someone else becomes the copyright owner; licensing means another person can use the copyright material.

Assignments and licences can apply to all the rights in the material, or to just one or some of the rights. For example, a writer can assign or license just the right to reproduce his or her story in a book but keep all other rights. In addition, a copyright owner may restrict an assignment or licence in various ways, for example to:

- particular countries
- a particular period of time
- a set number of copies
- a particular format (for example, hard-copy only, or in brochures but not in posters).

A copyright owner may also set certain conditions, such as payment, as part of their agreement to assign or license rights.

While assignments and exclusive licences **must** be in writing and signed by or on behalf of the copyright owner to be fully effective, it is good business practice to put all agreements relating to copyright into writing. This need not be a formal document; in many cases an email will be sufficient.

For further information, see our fact sheet [Assigning and Licensing Rights](#).

10. How long does copyright last?

Until 1 January 2005, copyright in a literary, musical, dramatic or artistic work (excluding photographs) generally lasted for the life of the relevant creator plus 50 years after the calendar year in which they died. There were various exceptions to this rule, including:

- where a work was not published, performed or broadcast during a creator's lifetime, and
- where something was published anonymously or under a pseudonym, and the identity of the creator couldn't reasonably be ascertained.

In each of these cases, copyright lasted for 50 years from the end of the year the work was, with permission, first published, performed or broadcast. Under the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, Australia agreed to extend the general duration of copyright. As a result, the rules now are that copyright in a work (including photographs) generally lasts for the life of the creator plus 70 years and where duration depends on year of publication, it lasts until 70 years after it is first published.

The Free Trade Agreement did not, however, include any obligation to revive copyright if copyright had already expired. This means that if, under the old rules, copyright had already expired by 1 January 2005, it stays expired and the material can be used freely under Australian law.

Note, however, that the duration of copyright varies from country to country. Where, for example, material is to be reproduced or sold overseas, or where performances are to take place in another country, advice may be needed to determine whether relevant copyright material is still protected in that country, and therefore whether any permissions may be needed in relation to the use of the material in that country.

For further information, see our fact sheet [Duration of Copyright](#).

11. Infringement of copyright

11.1 Using copyright material in one of the ways exclusively reserved to the copyright owner without permission

Unless a special exception applies, people who use copyright material in any of the ways exclusively controlled by the copyright owner without permission infringes copyright.

Using **part** of a work without permission may also infringe copyright if that part is an important part – the part doesn't need to be a large part. In this context, the issue is not whether you have changed or added something to the copyright material, but whether the part you have used is an **important, essential** or **distinctive** part of the original material.

For more detailed information, see our fact sheet [Quotes and Extracts](#).

11.2 Other ways in which copyright may be infringed

People may also infringe copyright if they:

- authorise infringement (that is, endorse or sanction someone else's infringement – for example, by asking or encouraging them to infringe copyright, or by providing them with the means to do so)
- import certain types of items containing copyright material, or

- sell infringing articles or certain types of items containing copyright material which were imported without permission.

You can find further information on what to do if you think your copyright has been infringed or if you have been accused of having infringed copyright in our fact sheets [Infringement: What Can I Do?](#) and [Infringement: Actions, Remedies, Offences and Penalties](#).

11.3 Hacking, cracking, ‘mod chipping’ and decoding

Copyright owners and broadcasters sometimes use technology to try to protect digital material from unauthorised access or use (for example, by encrypting material or encoding broadcasts). In some cases, copyright owners also use technology to identify and monitor digital copies of their material (electronic rights management information).

Under the Copyright Act, copyright owners can take action against people who circumvent technological measures which control access to copyright material. Copyright owners can also generally take action against people who make, sell, import or rent out devices which are used to circumvent technological measures and against people who provide circumvention services.

Copyright owners can also take action against people who remove or alter electronic rights management information.

In many cases, it can also be a criminal offence to deal commercially with circumvention or decoding devices, to offer decoding or circumvention services, to alter or remove electronic rights management information, or to deal with copyright material knowing that rights management information has been removed from it.

12. Activities that do not infringe copyright

There are a number of situations where, for public policy reasons, people may use copyright material without permission. The provisions in the Copyright Act which cover these situations (referred to as defences or exceptions) are mostly very specific.

For example, there are provisions that allow reviewers and students to use copyright material without permission provided their use is fair (for further information, see our fact sheets [Research or Study](#) and [Fair Dealing: What Can I Use Without Permission?](#) There are also special provisions for libraries, educational institutions and government bodies. In some cases, certain procedures must be followed and fees paid (for more information, see our fact sheets and practical guides).

There are, however, **no** provisions in the Copyright Act that give non-profit organisations a **general** exemption from having to comply with copyright obligations merely because they are non-profit. The exceptions allowing certain personal uses of copyright material – including taping from TV and individuals copying recordings they own – are very narrow and subject to specific limitations.

13. Moral rights

Individual creators have rights called moral rights, whether or not they own copyright. These are the rights to:

- be attributed as the creator of their work
- take action if their work is falsely attributed as being someone else's work or is altered by someone else but attributed as if it were unaltered, and
- take action if their work is distorted or treated in a way that is prejudicial to their honour or reputation.

For more information, see our fact sheet [Moral Rights](#).

14. Performers' rights

The Copyright Act also gives some rights to performers. These rights are in addition to the rights of the copyright owners and creators of the material performed.

Under the Copyright Act, people generally need to get consent from a performer to record or broadcast a live performance. The performer's consent may also be needed to use an unauthorised recording of a performance, or to use an authorised sound recording of a performance on a film soundtrack. Performers on audio recordings have additional rights, including moral rights. For more information, see our fact sheet [Performers' Rights](#).

15. General advice to creators and copyright owners

Creators and owners of copyright should regard their copyright as valuable property and deal with it in a business-like way. It is a good idea to keep dated copies of material such as manuscripts, negatives, footage and recordings, as well as copies of all letters or other communications with people who have access to the work.

Generally, it is a good idea for any agreements about copyright to be in writing. It is also a good idea to get legal advice before signing any document dealing with copyright, or before finalising any other arrangement relating to copyright.

16. Other areas of law

Intellectual property is a general term covering a number of areas of law. Copyright is one of these areas. Some other areas of law are sometimes confused with copyright. We briefly outline these below.

16.1 Trade marks

If you are using a name or logo (and in some cases, a colour, sound or smell) in your business, you may be able to register it as a trade mark. Unlike copyright, trade mark protection requires registration and payment of a fee. Registration gives you protection against other people using a substantially identical or deceptively similar mark in the course of trade. Trade marks are registered with IP Australia (ipaustralia.gov.au).

There is also legislation such as the *Olympic Insignia Protection Act 1987* (Cth) that control the use of particular signs, such as the use of the Olympic rings.

16.2 Passing-off and the Australian Consumer Law

The law known as ‘passing off’ protects business reputation or goodwill. It can be used to stop people cashing in on someone else’s name (including a brand name) or image, or on other distinctive features of someone else’s business. There are similar provisions about misleading the public in the *Competition and Consumer Act 2010* (Cth).

16.3 Designs

Designs law may be used to protect articles that do not come within the scope of copyright law or where copyright protection is limited. Designs protection covers the appearance or shape of articles that have some functional purpose, not how they work. To get design protection the design must be registered with IP Australia (ipaustralia.gov.au).

The interaction between design law and copyright is in some cases very complex. If you have created something which might be protected under either or both areas of law, it is very important that you get appropriate and early legal advice. General information on the interaction is provided in our fact sheet [Designs & Copyright](#).

16.4 Plant Breeders Rights

Plant varieties are also capable of protection. For more information, go to IP Australia’s website (ipaustralia.gov.au).

16.5 Confidential information

Copyright does not protect ideas or information. However, someone using information or ideas they have got from someone else in confidence may have breached a duty of confidentiality. For further information, see our fact sheet [Ideas: Legal Protection](#).

16.6 Patents

Patents protect inventions, including processes, methods and techniques. However, the protection will only be granted for a device, substance, method or process if it is new, inventive and useful.

Patent protection requires registration with IP Australia (ipaustralia.gov.au).

16.7 Defamation

The law of defamation protects people’s reputations and concerns the way you speak about or refer to people and how you use their images.

Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

Where do I register my copyright for protection in Australia?

Under Australian law, there is no registration of copyright. Copyright rights come into existence as soon as someone creates something which is a type of material that copyright protects. For example, copyright is automatically created by writing down a story; typing up a poem; shooting film footage; recording music; and taking a photo. Copyright protection is free: there are no procedures to follow or fees to pay.

How many changes to something do I need to make to avoid infringing copyright?

Generally, making changes to something won't avoid copyright infringement.

If, for example, you want to use something someone else has created – on your website, or in a brochure, or even for purely personal purposes – you might need permission even if you are using only a small part of that material, or if you make changes to it.

When working out whether or not you will need to get permission, it is more important to look at what is still the same, rather than what has been changed. You will usually have a copyright issue to deal with if you are using any important, distinctive or essential part of the original material – this may or may not be a large proportion of that material.

Is material from overseas protected by copyright?

As a result of Australia's obligations under a number of international treaties, almost all copyright material created overseas is also protected in Australia under the Copyright Act.

Is material from Australia protected overseas?

As a result of a number of international treaties, copyright in material created by Australian residents, citizens and nationals is recognised in most countries overseas. For more information, see our fact sheet [Copyright Protection in Other Countries](#).

Can children own copyright?

Copyright material can be created (and owned) by anyone, no matter what their age: children or centenarians.

Research sources

The Copyright Act is available on the website of the [Federal Register of Legislation](#).

Further information and advice

We have a range of other fact sheets on specific topics and publish books that focus on particular interest groups. Check our website for information about our publications [here](#) and details of our seminar/webinar program [here](#).

An Australian Copyright Council lawyer may be able to give you free preliminary legal advice about an issue not addressed in a fact sheet. This service is primarily for professional creators and arts organisations but is also available to staff of educational institutions and libraries and members of our [affiliate organisations](#). For further information about the service, see [Legal Advice](#) on our website.

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About us

The Australian Copyright Council is an independent, not-for-profit, non-government organisation. Founded in 1968, we represent the peak bodies for professional artists and content creators working in Australia's creative industries. Our objectives include:

- to assist creators and other copyright owners to exercise their rights effectively
- to raise awareness in the community about the importance of copyright
- to identify and research areas of copyright law which are inadequate or unfair
- to seek changes to law and practice to enhance the effectiveness and fairness of copyright
- to foster co-operation amongst bodies representing creators and owners of copyright.

The Australian Copyright Council acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands on which our office is located, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and all Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia. We pay our respects to all Elders past and present, and recognise their continuing great, creative and cultural expressions.



The Australian Copyright Council is assisted by the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its principal arts funding and advisory body.

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