

Copyright: A Simple Guide

So You Want to Be a Journalist · By Simon Townsend · 3 min read

Copyright: a simple guide

Copyright should become clearer during the course.

Essentially copyright is the author's ownership in the words he/she has written.

Not the ideas and not the facts, because no one owns those, but the actual words, in the form you wrote them, remain your property, and belong to your estate for 50 years after your death.

You don't "apply" for copyright, or "register" anything.

You are not required to add the copyright symbol:

In fact putting in the copyright symbol is not something that professionals do, so putting it on your articles could mark you as a newcomer.

COPYRIGHT SIMPLY EXISTS.

Copyright exists, legally and morally, in something the moment you create it (article, novel, poem, painting, drawing, photo, whatever).

Even if no other living person ever sees your work, it contains copyright simply because it's been created by a human being.

Every editor KNOWS that if an article has a title and a byline then copyright belongs to the byline author. You would not write at the top of your article "The following is written in English"?your editor knows that, and it's telling him the obvious to mark "copyright" on your article.

The real use of the copyright symbol is if the copyright belongs to someone other than the original creator. For instance Beatle Paul McCartney wrote some songs whose copyright was long ago sold off and belongs to someone else. I have a on my FactSheets for a private business reason.

And you can't just holus-bolus take a chunk of something on the internet and pretend it's your own words. This is about COPYRIGHT. Copyright exists to protect you from other writers stealing your writings. And of course it's there to prevent you stealing material from others.

However the law allows writers to "borrow a bit". That is, you may quote something ("a bit") from another writer. If you quote another writer, you are entitled to use a reasonable amount of the other writer's material without having to ask permission and without having to pay. You may quote from anyone who owns copyright in his or her own words, such as an internet writer, a radio commentator, another journalist, a book author, a songwriter, a poet, and so on.

Similarly, anyone may use a reasonable amount from your writing without asking you, without paying you.

But what is "reasonable"?

To this question, I always reply: "Imagine that YOU are being quoted from an article you had written. If another writer used two sentences from your article you would enjoy being considered as someone who was WORTH quoting. But if the other writer wrote a 40-paragraph story and 20 of those paragraphs were straight out of your article, verbatim, you'd be furious! You'd feel that wasn't reasonable, that your material was being used to fill the other writer's space."

Remember this: the law allows any writer to quote from any other writer's work, without asking and without payment PROVIDED that the original writer is named and the work is "sourced".

That is, the book or publication, etc, is identified. And the amount used must be "reasonable". So, when YOU take something from another writer and use it in your article, be sure to not use an UNreasonable amount.

What is "reasonable" or "unreasonable" must be judged by you.

There are no numerical rules like "no more than 1.17%" or "up to 37 words only". It's a matter for your judgment.

But as I say, start by thinking of someone quoting from your hard-worked writing and what you'd consider "reasonable" to take (unasked, unpaid) from what you had created.

I use the internet to track down experts and then I PHONE THEM. I get a fresh quote said exclusively to me. Editors hate articles full of old, re-hashed quotes lazily nicked from the internet.

If you want to find out more about copyright, get in touch by phone or email with:

Australian Copyright Council

PO Box 1986

Strawberry Hills NSW 2012

ph.(02) 8815 9777

Or access its internet site for lots of free information under "Information Sheets" via

www.copyright.org.au

Here's some trivia for you (and it's uncopyrightable):

The ONLY 15 letter word that can be spelled without repeating a letter is: uncopyrightable.

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