

The Online Books Page

Frequently Asked Questions

How Can I Tell Whether a Book Can Go Online?

In order for a book to go online, either

- the copyright holder (usually the author) has to [give permission](#), or
- the book needs to be in the [public domain](#) (i.e. copyright on the material has expired), or
- there must be a [special legal exemption](#) allowing whoever puts the book online to do so without permission of the copyright holder. (This last case is quite rare; in the US, it may apply to libraries and archives with respect to some out-of-print copyrighted books from the 1920s.)

Most free online books are from public-domain texts, but there are also many books online with the permission of the copyright holder.

How do I get permission from the copyright holder?

There are three basic steps:

- Find out the name and contact information for whoever holds the copyright and can give permissions.
 - The copyright page on a book will usually tell you who the copyright holder is. If a publisher holds the the copyright, you can find out their mailing address by looking in Books in Print. If a person holds the copyright, and their address cannot be found through other means, most authors and estates can be reached care of their publishers. Many well-known authors also have a copyright contact address listed in the online [Writers, Artists, and Their Copyright Holders](#) (WATCH) database. You can also consult some guides to locating copyright holders in various countries:
 - **Australia:** [Owners of copyright: How to Find](#) (from the Australian Copyright Council)
 - **Canada:** [Canadian Copyrights Database](#) (official site: has post-1991 registration information)
 - **United Kingdom:** [Locating UK copyright holders](#) (from WATCH)
 - **United States:** [Locating US copyright holders](#) (from WATCH)
- Contact them to ask permission.
 - If you're writing to ask permission, tell them who you are and what you plan to do with the book. If you make it clear that you're planning a free, non-profit venture, and are

willing to cooperate with the author, it's quite possible the author will welcome the chance to see their work made available to new generations of readers. Authors may be concerned about losing control or royalties for their work, or about the integrity of their work. You may want to address these concerns in your letter. (For instance, you can note that they will retain copyright over the work, and that your copy will prominently assert their copyright and author's rights. You can offer to have them check over the electronic copy if they want to make sure it's being published as they intended. You can also note that online versions of books, especially if they provide a way to buy print copies, or other books by the author, in some cases have increased sales and demand for an author's works.)

- See what the copyright holder says in reply.
 - The author may reply quickly, or may take a while to respond (especially if the letter has to be routed via publishers). Some authors may not reply at all. Others will say no. While it may be unfortunate that the book cannot be read online, the author or other copyright holder does get to have the last word on whether and how they want the book published online, while the copyright is still in force. You can always try pursuing permission for someone else's book, or work on one that is in the public domain.

How do I find out whether the book is in the public domain?

The rules vary from country to country. In just about every country, authors can put a work in the public domain by formally declaring that they are doing so. But most books enter the public domain either because they are not copyrightable (e.g. certain government documents), or because their copyrights expire.

Below, I give my best understanding of when copyright expires in various countries, but keep in mind that I am **not** a lawyer, and should not be relied on for legal advice.

In the **United States**, the following rules apply:

- Anything copyrighted prior to 1923 is in the public domain. (Practically speaking, this includes anything published prior to 1923, since publication without copyright put the work straight into the public domain. But note [this possible exception](#) in some western states for some 1909-1922 foreign works that were not published in the US before 1923.) Due to a 20-year copyright extension enacted in the US in 1998, copyrights from 1923 or later that are still in force will stay in effect through 2018 or longer.
- Certain works copyrighted in 1923 or later may already have entered the public domain. In particular, works published in the US before 1989 without proper copyright notice, and works published in the US before 1964 whose copyrights were not renewed, may have entered the public domain. However, works from 1923 or later that were originally published in countries outside the US may still be copyrighted regardless of whether they were printed with proper notice or renewed. To research whether a book's copyright has been renewed, or needed to be renewed, see [this article](#).

- Works never published prior to 2003 (and never registered for copyright prior to 1978) are now in the public domain in the US if they are by authors who died more than 70 years before the most recent New Year's day. (For 2005, this means authors who died before 1935.) Although this new rule does not put any previously published material into the public domain, it may allow some long-lost manuscripts and collections of letters to be published online as "new" online books.

Peter Hirtle at Cornell has a useful annotated [chart](#) covering the US copyright status of various types of works in more detail.

Here's a summary of copyright durations in other countries, last I checked them:

- **Short or nonexistent:** A few countries have no copyright relations with the United States or with international copyright conventions. Other countries provide no copyright protection at all, or protection only for a short time period or for locally produced or registered works. One country in this category was **Afghanistan**, last I checked. The Online Books Page will not list online books that are only in the public domain in such countries, unless they were originally published in those countries, or the copyright holder has given permission. (Note that in the US, works are not eligible for copyright protection unless they are published or created in a country that has copyright relations with the US.)
- **Life + 25:** The [Universal Copyright Convention](#) specifies that copyrights should run for the life of the author plus (at least) 25 years (which is sufficient to protect a work during the lifetime of the author and the minority of the author's children). Most UCC members, however, now have longer terms, because they have signed on to the Berne Convention (see below), or have joined organizations like the [World Trade Organization](#) that require eventually implementing Berne's longer copyright terms. Here are some countries that may still have the shorter UCC terms:
 - **Djibouti** copyright law specified copyrights of life+25 years for most works, as of 1996 (the latest year for which I can find a law). However, they joined the Berne Convention in 2002, so they may have updated their laws since then, or do so soon.
 - **Iraq** copyright law was extended from life+25 (or 50 years total, whichever is greater) to life+50 in 2004 by the US administrator Paul Bremer after the occupation of Iraq. It is unclear, however, whether these changes will remain in effect after Iraq fully regains self-rule.
 - **Libya's** copyright law of 1968 specifies copyrights of life+25 years, also with a minimum term of 50 years from publication. Libya joined the Berne Convention in 1976, and I do not know whether the terms were extended after that.
 - **Seychelles** copyright law specifies copyrights of life+25 years for most works, as of 1991 (the latest year for which I can find a law).
 - **Sudan's** copyright law also has life+25 year terms in general. It is unclear whether this country has copyright relations with the US, or with international copyright conventions.
- **Life + 30:** In **Iran** and **Yemen**, copyrights tend to last for the lifetime of the author plus 30 years. Iran does not have copyright relations with the US or with international conventions, at last

check, and Yemen's relations are unclear.

- **Life + 50:** The [Berne Convention](#) specifies that copyrights should run the life of the author plus (at least) 50 years, rounded up to the end of the calendar year. "Life + 50 years", is therefore the standard copyright length in many countries, including (to the best of my knowledge) **Albania, Algeria, Angola, Argentina, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belarus, Belize, Bolivia, Benin, Brunei, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Canada, Chile, China, Cuba, Egypt, El Salvador, Fiji, Ghana, Iceland, Indonesia, Iraq** (under US occupation rules), **Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, (South) Korea, Kuwait, the Kyrgyz Republic, Lebanon, Malawi, Malaysia, Moldova, Mongolia, Morocco, Namibia, Nepal, New Zealand, Niger, Oman, Pakistan, Panama, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Qatar, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Saudi Arabia, Serbia and Montenegro, Singapore, Solomon Islands, South Africa, Syria, Taiwan, Tanzania, Thailand, Togo, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Zambia**. There are a few possible variants to the usual life+50 rule:

- **Cyprus** joined the European Union, which requires life+70 copyrights, on May 1, 2004. I haven't confirmed yet whether they've updated their copyright terms, which were still life +50 years in 1993, but they apparently amended their copyright law in 2002, and the amendments may have included a term extension.
- **Italy**, another European Union member, may still have a "life+50" copyright term for most books. Legislation passed in May 1997 extended the term to life+70 years for movies, photographs, and works first published posthumously, but kept other copyright terms at life+50 years. I have received no word of a more general extension.

Some life+50 countries are also considering extending their terms to life+70 years as part of agreements with the US or the European Union. Some may already have done so, though I do not yet have definite confirmation of any of the countries below. Among these countries are:

- **Chile** (stipulated in Chile-US trade agreement; I'm not sure it's entered into force yet. The agreement does not itself extend copyright, but says that the legislatures will do so. It does not require returning public domain material to copyright)
- **Singapore** (reportedly stipulated in Singapore-US trade agreement; I'm not sure it's entered into force yet, and I haven't yet seen the text myself)
- **Authors living in 1954 or later:** This reportedly is the transitional term for copyrights in **Russia**, which extended its copyrights from life+50 years to life+70 years, effective July 28, 2004. I am told that copyrights that had already expired at that point were unaffected, but I don't yet have English-language confirmation on this point. (Kevin Hawkins of Michigan pointed me to a Russian site at [copyright.ru](#), whose text I can't read. There's also an English notice of the change at [petosevic.com](#), but it doesn't talk about transitional provisions.) Russia has also in the past granted extra time for authors who were active in World War II, or who were repressed and then rehabilitated. I don't know if those extensions are included in the new law.
- **Authors living in 1955 or later:** This is the transitional term for copyrights in **Australia**, which extended its copyrights from life+50 years to life+70 years, effective January 1, 2005. Copyrights that had already expired at that point were unaffected.
- **Life + 60:** In **India** and **Venezuela**, copyrights tend to last for the lifetime of the author plus 60 years.

- **Life + 70:** In the **European Union** (with the possible exceptions mentioned above), **Andorra, Australia** (for new works), **Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Croatia, Ecuador, Israel, Liechtenstein, Madagascar, Nigeria, Norway, Paraguay, Peru, Romania, Russia** (for new works), **Switzerland**, and **Turkey**, copyrights tend to last for the lifetime of the author plus 70 years. (The European Union includes **Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.**) Life plus 70 years is also the standard duration of copyright in the **United States** for works first published after 1977. But note:
 - Many countries with a term of life+70 years or longer adopted it relatively recently. Some may have a transitional period that means that some works by authors who died less than 70 years ago may still be in the public domain. If you want to use some of those works in one of those countries, you'll need to research national laws to see whether a country made the extension retroactive, of whether it just simply froze the public domain for a while. For example, most European Union countries made the extensions retroactive, rolling the public domain 20 years by bringing works back into copyright. But **Australia**, which went from life+50 to life+70 in 2005, did not do this; instead it has effectively postponed entry into the public domain for authors who died in 1955 or later. (The public domain will start moving forward again in Australia at the end of 2025.) This may also be the case for **Russia** (see "authors living in 1954" above). **Israel** had also done this previously, though long enough ago that its transitional phase has effectively ended at this writing.
- **Life+75:** Even as more countries move to life+70 terms, some countries are now extending the copyright even further. These longer terms may in the future serve as an excuse for extensions in other countries in the name of "harmonization". In **Guatemala**, and **Samoa**, for instance, copyrights tend to last for the lifetime of the author plus 75 years, with certain exceptions. I do not know if these laws cover older works or are just applied to copyrights current at the time the longer terms were adopted.
- **Life+80:** In **Colombia**, copyrights tend to last for the lifetime of the author plus 80 years, with certain exceptions. Again, I don't know to what extent, if at all, this law retrospectively applies to older books, or whether they just apply to books under copyright when the longer terms were adopted.
- **Even longer:** A few countries are now at or near the century point. In **Cote d'Ivoire**, copyrights tend to last for the lifetime of the author plus 99 years. And in July 2003, **Mexico** extended its copyrights to the lifetime of the author plus 100 years! Again, I don't know to what extent, if at all, these laws retrospectively apply to older books, or whether they just apply to books under copyright when the longer terms were adopted.

In some countries outside the US, there is also a "law of the shorter term", which may expire copyrights for books written and published in other countries at the same time as they expire in their "home" country, if this is a shorter time period.

In the cases of multiple authors, authors that are organizations rather than people, works not published until after the author's death, and works published outside the country, national laws vary.

You can often find information on publication dates and author's death dates from the book itself, or from library catalogs. Other resources for this information include the [New General Catalog of Old Books and Authors](#) (in the UK), and the [WATCH database](#).

For more information on copyrights in various countries, see the following sites:

- [Afghanistan](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Albania](#) (information courtesy aidaa.org)
- [Algeria](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Andean Community](#) (Decision 351, 1993; official site)
- [Andorra](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Angola](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Argentina](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Armenia](#) (from the Armenia Intellectual Property Agency)
- [Australia](#) (info provided by the Australian Copyright Council; see also [The Australian Copyright Act](#))
- [Austria](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Bahrain](#) (information courtesy agip.com)
- [Azerbaijan](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Bangladesh](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Barbados](#) (1998 copyright law, courtesy of OAS)
- [Belarus](#) (from the Belarus Legislation Databank)
- [Belgium](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Belize](#) (2000 copyright law, courtesy belizelaw.org)
- [Benin](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Bolivia](#) (information courtesy US Department of Commerce)
- [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Brazil](#) (in Portuguese; courtesy of the Biblioteca Nacional in Brazil. See also [English copy of the law](#) at UNESCO)
- [Brunei](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Bulgaria](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Burkina Faso](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Burundi](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Cambodia](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Cameroon](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Canada](#) (official Canadian IP Office)
- [Chile](#) (1990 copyright law in Spanish, courtesy of OAS)
- [China](#) (1991 law; information courtesy UNESCO)

- [Colombia](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Costa Rica](#) (copyright law in Spanish, courtesy of OAS)
- [Cote d'Ivoire](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Croatia](#) (courtesy jagor.srce.hr)
- [Cuba](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Cyprus](#) (information courtesy WIPO)
- [Czech Republic](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Denmark](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Djibouti](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Ecuador](#) (copyright law in Spanish, courtesy of OAS)
- [Egypt](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [El Salvador](#) (copyright law in Spanish, courtesy of OAS)
- [Estonia](#) (courtesy esis.ee)
- [European Union](#) (copyright harmonization legislation; official site)
- [Fiji](#) (information courtesy University of the South Pacific)
- [Finland](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [France](#) (in French only)
- [Germany](#) (from WIPO via iuscomp.org; see also [original German](#) at transpatent.com)
- [Ghana](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Greece](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Guatemala](#) (copyright law in Spanish, courtesy of OAS)
- [Hungary](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Iceland](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [India](#) (info provided by Lall Lahiri and Salhotra)
- [Indonesia](#) (info provided by Lentera Haki)
- Iraq: [old law](#) (courtesy agip.com) and [occupation update](#) (courtesy the Coalition Provision Authority)
- [Iran](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- Ireland: [Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000](#) (official Irish government site)
- [Israel](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Italy](#) (information courtesy UNESCO -- last change 1997)
- [Japan](#) (info provided by the Copyright Research and Information Center)
- [Jordan](#) (information courtesy agip.org)
- [Kazakhstan](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Kenya](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [\(South\) Korea](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Kuwait](#) (information courtesy mideastlaw.com)
- [Kyrgyz Republic](#) (from the Kyrgyz State Agency of Science and Intellectual Property)
- [Latvia](#) (information courtesy latiss.lv)

- [Lebanon](#) (information courtesy agip.com)
- [Libya](#) (information courtesy agip.com)
- [Liechtenstein](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Lithuania](#) (summary at osi.hu)
- [Luxembourg](#) (copyright law; in French)
- [Madagascar](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Malawi](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Malaysia](#) (information courtesy lawyerment.com.my)
- [Malta](#) (information courtesy Aldo Zammit Borda)
- [Mexico](#) (copyright law in Spanish, courtesy of OAS; extension to life+100 documented [in this note from Ladas and Parry](#))
- [Moldova](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Mongolia](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Morocco](#) (information courtesy agip.com)
- [Namibia](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Nepal](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- Netherlands: Text of the [Dutch Copyright Law \(Auteurswet 1912\)](#) (at ivir.nl)
- New Zealand: [Copyright Act 1994](#) (with links to later amendment acts; see also a government [information sheet](#))
- [Namibia](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Nigeria](#) (from nigeria-law.org)
- [Norway](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Oman](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Pakistan](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Panama](#) (copyright law in Spanish, courtesy of OAS)
- [Papua New Guinea](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Paraguay](#) (copyright law in Spanish, courtesy of OAS)
- [Peru](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Philippines](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- Poland: [1994 law](#) courtesy UNESCO; for summary of the extensions to life+70 passed in 2000, see [this page](#)
- Portugal: [1991 copyright law](#) (courtesy UNESCO); [1997 extensions](#) (in Portuguese; courtesy deec.uc.pt)
- [Qatar](#) (information courtesy agip.com)
- [Romania](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Russia](#) (1995 law courtesy UNESCO; see 2004 updates summarized [at petosevic.com](#))
- [Samoa](#) (information courtesy University of the South Pacific)
- [Saudi Arabia](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [St. Vincent and the Grenadines](#) (1989 copyright law, courtesy of OAS)

- [Serbia and Montenegro](#) (information courtesy Branislav Manic Law Office; Yugoslavian law has apparently been carried over)
- [Seychelles](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Singapore](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Slovakia](#) (information courtesy WIPO)
- [Slovenia](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Solomon Islands](#) (information courtesy University of the South Pacific)
- [South Africa](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Spain](#) (information courtesy WIPO)
- [Sudan](#) (information courtesy agip.com)
- [Sweden](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Switzerland](#) (courtesy Swiss Federal Institute of Intellectual Property)
- [Syria](#) (courtesy agip.com)
- [Taiwan](#) (official government website)
- [Tanzania](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Thailand](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Togo](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Trinidad and Tobago](#) (1997 copyright law courtesy of OAS)
- [Tunisia](#) (information courtesy agip.com)
- [Turkey](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Ukraine](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [United Arab Emirates](#) (information courtesy agip.com)
- [United Kingdom](#) (official Patent Office Site)
- [United States](#) (official Copyright Office site)
- [Uruguay](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Uzbekistan](#) (information courtesy gtz.de's LexInfoSys)
- [Venezuela](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)
- [Vietnam](#) (information courtesy lele.com.vn)
- [Yemen](#) (courtesy agip.com)
- [Zambia](#) (information courtesy UNESCO)

(If anyone can provide additional documentation on their own country's laws, I'd be interested in seeing it. Thanks to Peter Evans, Stephen Fishman, Kevin Hawkins, Wojciech Kotwica, Christian Steiner, and others for helping me find this information!)

What if the book is copyrighted in some countries, but public domain in others?

Consider first whether it's copyrighted in your own country (or the country where your Web site is located, if that's different). I will generally list books on the Online Books Page if they're public domain in the countries they're being served from. However, if they are not yet public domain in the US (where this page is located) I will include a warning mentioning this.

As far as I'm aware, there are not yet hard-and-fast rules on the distribution of legal responsibility for downloading etexts from a country where they're public domain to a country where they're not. But I would at the least include a warning if you know that some of the texts you serve are copyrighted in some countries. And I would avoid downloading texts from other countries that are copyrighted in your own country.

What's this special legal exemption for libraries and archives?

When the United States Congress extended copyrights 20 years in 1998, they included a provision that "libraries and archives" could, during the last 20 years of a copyright's term, and for purposes of preservation, scholarship, or research, "reproduce, distribute, display, or perform in facsimile or digital form a copy or phonorecord of the work or portions of the work", if it has determined that:

1. the work is not subject to normal commercial exploitation
2. a copy or phonorecord of the work cannot be obtained at a reasonable price
3. the copyright holder or its agent has not filed a notice with the Copyright Office claiming either of the two conditions above.

As of 2005, this may allow certain copyrighted and out-of-print works from 1923-1929 to go online from the web sites of libraries and nonprofit archives. For more information, including how to search notices of claims, see [this page](#) from the US Copyright Office. Of course, some copyrights from those years have already expired due to nonrenewal.

What about reprints of public domain works? Can I work from those, or do they get a new copyright?

A simple reprint of a book, without any creative additions or changes, does not get a new copyright of its own-- at least not in the United States. (Some other countries may have a limited "facsimile" right-- check local laws for details.) However, some reprints have been re-edited, or include new material, which may be eligible for a new copyright. If you'd like to transcribe or scan a reprint edition, first check the copyright page to see if any new copyrights are claimed. In some cases, reprints only copyright the foreword, or the notes, or new illustrations-- in which case you can just omit those in your transcription. Even if a new edition is copyrightable, issuing a new edition does not in any way lengthen or restore the copyright of older editions.

Note that some people prefer to transcribe from older editions, even if reprint editions are also in the

public domain. This may be because the older editions have a more accurate text, or because they want to include the unique details of the older editions (such as the pagination, or the title pages) in their transcription.

Where can I get more information on the public domain and copyright?

A very useful guide on the legalities of putting books online in the US is Mary Minow's [Library Digitization Projects and Copyright](#). It's written by a lawyer and librarian, and goes into more detail on many of the issues discussed here.

If you would like more information on the public domain, a new (offline) book by Stephen Fishman, called *The Public Domain: How to Find Copyright-Free Writings, Music, Art and More* (Nolo Press, 2000) is a useful guide to finding and using public domain works, and goes into much more detail than is possible on a single Web page like this one. Here is the [publisher's information page on the current edition](#).

For questions on other aspects of copyright law that aren't answered on the Web, newsgroup [misc.int-property](#) may be a good place to ask. The [CNI-Copyright](#) forum is a mailing list with a number of copyright experts on it. I have also found the following (offline) books helpful for more complicated legal questions on copyright. Both books are updated every few years:

- *The Copyright Handbook: How to Protect and Use Written Works* by Stephen Fishman, published by Nolo Press, (See [the publisher's information page on the 2003 edition](#).)
- *The Copyright Book: A Practical Guide* by William S. Strong, published by MIT Press. (See [the publisher's information page on the 1999 edition](#).)

If you need expert legal advice, consult a lawyer who handles intellectual property matters. (Again, I am not a lawyer, and this page should not be considered legal advice.)

Why do copyrights expire, anyway?

Because both copyright and the public domain serve authors and the public. Copyrights give an author a temporary monopoly over distribution of her works, so as to encourage her to write and earn a living by it. The public domain, in turn, is a rich source of material that people can freely read, retell, perform, and distribute, and that authors can use to produce new creative works.

For instance, the tale of Snow White, by being in the public domain, was told and retold in many books, became widely loved throughout European and North American culture. It also has been [made available](#)

[on the Net](#) free of charge. But it also has formed the basis of new, copyrighted works, like Walt Disney's movie "Snow White". Eventually, Disney's movie will in turn enter the public domain, and the images, dialogues and songs of the movie will be freely usable in yet more creative works-- or be freely used by schools and camps to help encourage kids to sing, draw, and eventually create new works in their own right.

The US Constitution recognizes the balance between these interests by giving Congress the power "To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries".

Originally, in the US these 'limited times' were 14 years for copyrights, optionally renewable for another 14. But the terms have been steadily lengthened over time, until now most copyrights extend far beyond the lifetime of the artist they're meant to encourage to create. This upsets the balance of copyright and the public domain in the promotion of the arts. It also means that works often end up being lost to future generations, since most books drop out of print and then become forgotten or inaccessible long before their copyright runs out. If they were in the public domain, anyone would be free to ``revive" them easily, especially in today's world of online texts.

Even so, entertainment industry lobbyists are now pushing new bills that would extend copyrights even further. On October 27, 1998, the President signed into law an extension of copyrights on older works to a maximum of **95** years, nearly a full century. Copyright terms for many newer books can run even longer. During the hearing on this bill, Sonny Bono's widow expressed the wish, which she said was also that of MPAA head Jack Valenti, of making copyright terms last effectively forever!

I encourage US citizens to contact their legislators and the President to oppose further erosions of the public domain. For more information, see these URLs:

- [Opposing Copyright Extension Homepage](#)
- [Copyright's Commons](#)

[Home](#) -- [About Us](#) -- [FAQ](#) -- [Get Involved!](#) -- [In Progress / Requested](#) -- [More Book Links](#)

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