a zinester's quick guide to copyright

written by Not A Lawyer, Srsly
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Copyright in General

What is copyright?
Copyright is a form of protection grounded in the U.S. Constitution and granted by law for original works of authorship fixed in a tangible medium of expression. Copyright covers both published and unpublished works.

What does copyright protect?
Copyright, a form of intellectual property law, protects original works of authorship including literary, dramatic, musical, and artistic works, such as poetry, novels, movies, songs, computer software, and architecture. Copyright does not protect facts, ideas, systems, or methods of operation, although it may protect the way these things are expressed. See Circular 1, Copyright Basics, section "What Works Are Protected."

How is a copyright different from a patent or a trademark?
Copyright protects original works of authorship, while a patent protects inventions or discoveries. Ideas and discoveries are not protected by the copyright law, although the way in which they are expressed may be. A trademark protects words, phrases, symbols, or designs identifying the source of the goods or services of one party and distinguishing them from those of others.

When is my work protected?
Your work is under copyright protection the moment it is created and fixed in a tangible form that it is perceptible either directly or with the aid of a machine or device.

Do I have to register with your office to be protected?
No. In general, registration is voluntary. Copyright exists from the moment the work is created. You will have to register, however, if you wish to bring a lawsuit for infringement of a U.S. work. See Circular 1, Copyright Basics, section "Copyright Registration."

from the FAQ of the U.S. Copyright Office:
http://www.copyright.gov/help/faq/faq-general.html#what
U.S. government publication = in the public domain*

Where is the public domain?
The public domain is not a place. A work of authorship is in the "public domain" if it is no longer under copyright protection or if it failed to meet the requirements for copyright protection. Works in the public domain may be used freely without the permission of the former copyright owner.

from the FAQ of the U.S. Copyright Office:
http://www.copyright.gov/help/faq/faq-definitions.html#public_domain
Copyright aims to protect your work from being reproduced without your permission, like someone printing a bunch of copies of your zines, selling them for big bucks, and pocketing the money.

You may dig this, or maybe you want people to share your ideas as broadly as possible. Or maybe you want them shared, but only if your name stays attached.

Here are three of the options you can choose.

1. Do nothing.

Copyright is automatic for any "fixed" work – that means even before you actually publish ‘em. If you don’t make any statement about copyright on your zine, they will automatically fall under the laws in your jurisdiction.

You can add the © symbol, but it is not required.
2. Use copyleft instead

Copyleft is a response to copyright encouraging the free traffic in information. However, rather than just adding your work to the public domain (where it could be reused and then copyrighted by a new users), a copylefted work is intended to remain free forever.

Lots of zinesters use the symbol for just write "Copyleft" as their statement. However, this doesn't necessarily have legal weight – the Gnu Operating System folks have put together licenses representing this for software, and for other kinds of documents.

ADDENDUM: How to use this License for your documents

To use this License in a document you have written, include a copy of the License in the document and put the following copyright and license notices just after the title page:

Copyright (C) YEAR YOUR NAME.
Permission is granted to copy, distribute and/or modify this document
under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License, Version 1.3
or any later version published by the Free Software Foundation;
with no Invariant Sections, no Front-Cover Texts, and no Back-Cover Texts.
A copy of the license is included in the section entitled "GNU
Free Documentation License."

If you have Invariant Sections, Front-Cover Texts and Back-Cover Texts, replace the "with ... Texts." line with this

with the Invariant Sections being LIST THEIR TITLES, with the
Front-Cover Texts being LIST, and with the Back-Cover Texts being LIST.

If you have Invariant Sections without Cover Texts, or some other combination of the three, merge those two alternatives to suit the situation.

If your document contains nominal examples of program code, we recommend releasing those examples in parallel under your choice of free software license, such as the GNU General Public License, to permit their use in free software

from the GNU Free Documentation License,
http://www.gnu.org/licenses/fdl.html
3. Use a Creative Commons license.

Creative Commons gets at a similar idea—that the automatic nature of copyright prevents folks from sharing information in the effective and multiple ways we may wish to.

About

Our vision is nothing less than realizing the full potential of the Internet — universal access to research and education, full participation in culture — to drive a new era of development, growth, and productivity.

Why CC?

The idea of universal access to research, education, and culture is made possible by the Internet, but our legal and social systems don't always allow that idea to be realized. Copyright was created long before the emergence of the Internet, and can make it hard to legally perform actions we take for granted on the network: copy, paste, edit source, and post to the Web. The default setting of copyright law requires all of these actions to have explicit permission, granted in advance, whether you're an artist, teacher, scientist, librarian, policymaker, or just a regular user. To achieve the vision of universal access, someone needed to provide a free, public, and standardized infrastructure that creates a balance between the reality of the Internet and the reality of copyright laws. That someone is Creative Commons.

Our mission

Creative Commons develops, supports, and stewards legal and technical infrastructure that maximizes digital creativity, sharing, and innovation.

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CC BY-ND
This license allows for redistribution, commercial and non-commercial, as long as it is passed along unchanged and in whole, with credit to you.
There are other options, too – but these three of the most common.

Just remember, copyright will happen to you, unless you do something about it.