

COPYRIGHT AND PERMISSIONS

Use this quick guide to understand key considerations around copyright and permissions when preparing your thesis, and to help you identify when to seek further advice from your university.

IN A NUTSHELL: Copyright in the UK is governed by the [Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988](#). It covers the use of literary, dramatic, musical or artistic works as well as films, broadcasts, and sound recordings. Copyright material can only be used with permission of the copyright owner or under provisions in the law which allow certain uses for specific purposes.

So, copyright affects what you can include in your thesis and how your own work can be shared over time. If you include material belonging to another copyright owner without the appropriate permissions or not as allowed under the legislation, your thesis may need to be restricted, delayed, or have content removed. Understanding this early helps you manage both what you can include and how your work can be made available and remain accessible over time.



THINGS TO KNOW

- **What do I own?**

In most cases, you own the copyright in your thesis. This means that you control how your thesis is shared, reused, and developed for future publication. In some cases—such as PhDs involving an industry partner or external funder—rights may be shared or subject to specific restrictions.

- **What do others own?**

Copyright also applies to material created by others including commercial publishers. Any third-party content you include (such as images, figures, text extracts, audio, or video) is usually protected by copyright. Even if you reference it correctly, you may still need permission to reproduce it in your thesis.



THINGS TO KNOW (continued)

- **What can I use?**

Some use of copyrighted material may be allowed without permission. UK copyright law includes specific exceptions (such as quotation, criticism, review, and non-commercial research), which may allow you to use *limited* amounts of copyrighted material without permission. For example, you can usually include short extracts of text to support your analysis or argument, as long as the use is relevant, no more than necessary, and properly acknowledged. However, these exceptions are narrow and depend on “fair dealing”—there are no fixed rules, and copying large or central parts of a work, or using material for illustration rather than analysis, is less likely to be permitted.

More information can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/exceptions-to-copyright>

- **What happens if I get it wrong?**

Permissions may affect long-term access. If you include material without the right permissions (and it is not covered by a copyright exception), your thesis may need to be restricted, delayed, or made available with content removed or replaced.

- **How will my thesis be shared?**

Your thesis may be made publicly available. Many universities make theses available online through institutional repositories, often as open access. This means your work can be discovered and read more widely, increasing its visibility, reach, and potential impact. Open access can help others find, use, and build on your research over time. However, you can request restrictions or an embargo where appropriate.

- **Do I need to restrict access?**

In many cases, an embargo is not necessary. Making your thesis available online will not necessarily affect your ability to publish a book or articles based on it later, as publishers expect substantial revision from a thesis. You may need to apply an embargo in cases where your thesis contains sensitive or confidential information (for example, about research participants or locations that could pose a risk if made public), material covered by non-disclosure agreements or commercial partnerships, or where there are short-term publication considerations. Be sure to check your university's guidance and policy on how and when embargoes should be applied.



THINGS TO DO

☒ **Identify and document third-party content in your thesis.**

As you draft your thesis, document where you wish to use material created by others (such as images, figures, text extracts, audio, or video). Noting this as you go will make it easier to manage permissions throughout the research and writing process. Keep a record of where it came from, who created it, how you intend to use it, and whether any permissions or licences apply. This doesn't need to be complex—keeping basic information as you go will make it much easier to keep track of third-party content and seek advice where needed. If you are unsure, use this record to ask questions and get guidance from your university.

☒ **Consider the implications of linking to external content.**

Linking to online content does not involve the copyright act of reproduction, but it can still entail copyright, ethical, or legal responsibilities. When linking to online content, you should consider the source and context. For example, linking to unlawfully shared materials (such as pirated content), sensitive or personal data, or content that could cause harm may raise concerns. Be cautious too about linking to platforms (such as YouTube) whose terms and conditions might put restrictions on access or sharing.

☒ **Make use of your university's copyright guidance and support *now*.**

Copyright and permissions can be complex, so it's worth familiarising yourself with your university's guidance early in your PhD—*before* you need to apply it in your thesis. Your university will be able to advise you on issues related to copyright, as well as explain requirements around permissions and other restrictions on what can be included or made available. Understanding these early can help you avoid problems later and make informed decisions as you go.

☒ **Request permission early if needed.**

Where appropriate, seek permission from the copyright holder as early as possible. Keep a record of any permissions granted.

