



A JOURNALIST'S GUIDE TO CREATIVE COMMONS

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"Creative Commons - cc stickers" by
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Creative Commons is an international nonprofit organization that empowers people to grow and sustain the thriving commons of shared knowledge and culture we need to address the world's most pressing challenges and create a brighter future for all. Together with our global community and multiple partners, we build capacity and infrastructure, we develop practical solutions, and we advocate for *better sharing*: sharing that is contextual, inclusive, just, equitable, reciprocal, and sustainable.

Open Newswire is a consolidated feed of freely-republishable news articles written by professional journalists from around the world. Articles are written in over 90 languages and are available to be used under [Creative Commons](#) licenses or [similar guidelines](#).

INTRODUCTION

Sharing and reusing content in newsrooms is nothing new. But embracing Creative Commons unlocks infinitely more potential, completely free of charge. Increasingly, newsrooms around the world embrace Creative Commons to enhance their coverage, boost their readership, and move towards more sustainable business models. This is a primer on Creative Commons for journalism, and how to make the most of CC licenses.

The most common use case is for photos. Newsrooms that can't find the right photo through a service like Getty Images often turn to websites like Flickr or Wikimedia Commons to find high-quality, newsworthy photos that are CC-licensed and free to use.

But open licensing also applies to entire articles. Around 300 news outlets across Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Pacific already release their stories under Creative Commons licenses. This means that other organizations can republish these articles free of charge, and without having to ask beforehand.

Republishing stories can increase the original news outlet's traffic, social media engagement, and ad revenue, and generally contributes to a better product. Good journalism will always be appreciated by readers.

Some newsrooms like [The Conversation](#) and [ProPublica](#) CC license *all* of their works as part of their business models, encouraging other journalists to “steal our stories.” Other newsrooms like [Meduza](#) select particular news to CC license, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to spread it as widely as possible.

The Conversation's Joel Abrams [notes](#) that “because of the CC licenses on our articles, 60% of authors get contacted by other media agencies [for additional stories].” He says almost half of The Conversation's readership comes through republication, “so by using Creative Commons licensing we are doubling our reach.” In a 2019 interview with CC, Meduza noted how CC licensing their news articles about a detained investigative journalist ultimately got him freed.

When smaller newsrooms republish major stories, they can reallocate their staff and limited resources to chasing under-reported stories in their immediate communities. Other outlets can republish stories from the other side of the world to broaden their coverage in ways not previously possible. For example, a newspaper in Kenya could republish an article from Myanmar about a major protest, or a website in Canada could republish a story from Brazil about conservation efforts.

Publications that openly license content run the gamut of news media. [Deshabhimani](#), one of the largest print newspapers in the Indian state of Kerala, publishes under the **CC BY** license while Spanish newspaper [El Salto](#) uses **CC BY-SA**. Some local news websites like [The City](#) in New York release their work under the **CC BY-NC-ND**, while regional investigative outfits like [Mekong Eye](#) in Southeast Asia use **CC BY**. Spanish feminist magazine [Pikrara](#) publishes under **CC BY-NC-ND**, as does the Colombian counter-culture magazine [Cartel Urbano](#). The list goes on.

What Creative Commons licenses mean for journalists

All original, creative work is automatically granted copyright.¹ Where traditional copyright reserves all rights for the creator, or copyright holder, of the work, Creative Commons licenses are considered “some rights reserved.”

They offer more flexible permissions, which ensure the creator still gets credit for their work, but can choose how others can use, share and/or adapt their work. CC licenses are considered the global standard of open licenses because (a) they operate world wide, having been designed and vetted by legal experts and aligned to international copyright laws; (b) they are interoperable; and (c) they are dedicated to the public domain, and therefore free to use forever. The license permissions last for the duration of the work's copyright. They are enforceable, just as any traditionally copyrighted content is enforceable.²

[1] Over 180 countries are signatories to the [Berne Convention](#), an international treaty to protect creative works and the rights of authors. Under the Berne Convention, copyright is automatically granted to a work of original, creative expression.


[2] Though, like traditionally copyrighted works, enforceability may be easier in some contexts where you register your work at a copyright office.

Those new to Creative Commons can familiarize themselves with the six different licenses on [CC's About CC Licenses web page](#). They're straightforward and generally compatible with everyday journalistic practices. The different licenses have different conditions, or elements.

Licenses like CC BY or CC BY-SA have minimal restrictions and afford "downstream users" more options for reuse. Licenses such as CC BY-NC or CC BY-ND have more restrictions. The license you choose directly impacts your immediate audience *and* future audiences' access to your work. To support the greatest access and reuse of resources, we recommend using licenses with minimal restrictions wherever possible.


Journalists and editors sometimes get confused by the two NC, or "Non-Commercial" licenses. These licenses allow content to be reused, as long as it's not reused for commercial gain. For-profit news publication can still republish stories with CC's Non-Commercial licenses, as long as they do so without the intent for commercial gain.

For example, [ProPublica](#) uses the CC BY-NC-ND license but clarifies that this does not preclude normal journalistic use:



...It's okay to put our stories on pages with ads, but not ads specifically sold against our stories. You can't state or imply that donations to your organization support ProPublica's work...

[The Citizen Bulletin](#), a public interest journalism website in Zimbabwe, takes a similar approach:



"We're keen to reach as many people as we can with our stories. We encourage other organizations of all types to republish our stories for free under a Creative Commons 'Attribution' license, subject to the following additional terms...

...You must not resell the story or sell ads against the story. It's fine to publish the story on a page that's surrounded by previously sold ads, however."

In other words, a publication that generates revenue from advertising or has subscribers can often still republish these articles that are shared under non-commercial CC licenses. The licenses are more about preventing random people from selling a specific article and flipping it for a profit. But always double check each publication's own guidelines to be sure.

There are abundant opportunities to CC license works, and reuse other's CC licensed content for better news. To support news outlets, we've provided a preliminary guide below.



How to Openly License Your Work – It's Easy!

To CC license content, there are two steps: First, the copyright holder of a work needs to choose one of six licenses or two public domain tools to apply to their work. CC has a [license chooser](#) that helps creators determine which license will best meet their needs. CC recommends using the more permissive licenses whenever possible, to increase access to the resources.

Second, once creators select a license, they can copy and paste the license text and links into their work, or copy the code into their web editor. We recommend using the most permissive license that meets your needs.



How to Attribute – It's Also Easy!

Navigating copyright laws can confound journalists and editors, but Creative Commons licenses are deliberately designed to be hassle-free.

More often than not, an editor can add the correct Creative Commons attribution much the same way they'd normally write photo credits or bylines from syndicated articles. It's a flexible system that's able to gel with different publishing conventions and house styles.

Attributing CC Photos in Journalism

You can attribute CC photos the same way you would normally credit a photo from an agency or even a staff photographer. In both cases, you usually need to mention the name of the photographer and either the organization they belong to or where you found the photo.

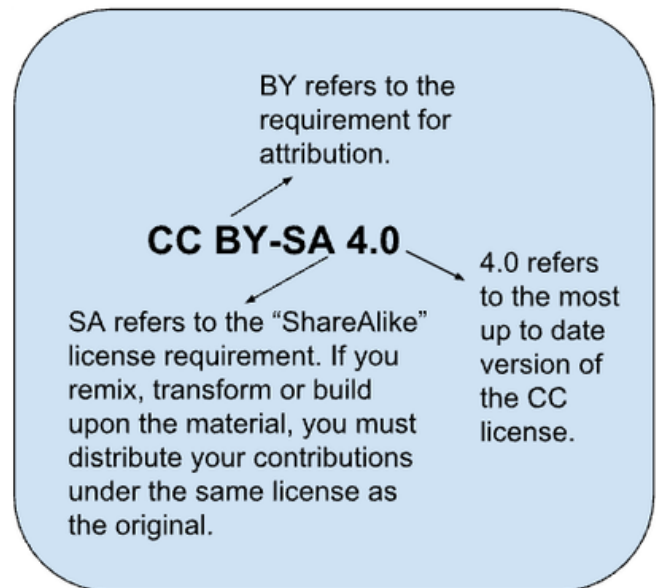
But with Creative Commons, it's best to also include the specific CC license. You can phrase it like so: CC BY-SA 4.0. Think of this as an alternative to including a copyright symbol.

So, instead of "Jane Doe / Reuters" you could instead say "Jane Doe / "Self portrait" on Flickr / CC BY-SA 4.0" and provide the relevant links. Creative Commons has more detail on [recommended practices for attribution](#), and recommends linking to the "[human readable](#)" form of the CC license you choose.

Unfortunately, some journalists and editors do occasionally slip up. Don't just say "Credit: Wiki" or "Source: Creative Commons". This doesn't name the photographer or the license. After all, Wikimedia Commons is a repository and Creative Commons is an organization.

The attribution can be placed where publications usually include photo credits, such as in the captions beneath images. Although it's best practice to include a hyperlink to the source of the photo, this isn't possible in many CMSs and is not mandatory. After all, a print newspaper wouldn't be able to include a hyperlink, either.

For publications that do not include captions beneath lead images or other photos, editors can still include the proper Creative Commons attribution at the bottom of the article.



Example of CC licensed photo for journalism:
"Gate in front of the Queen's Sandringham Residence in Norfolk, England" by Ross Dunn, licensed CC BY-SA 2.0


Attributing CC Articles

In many cases, a news outlet can republish a CC-licensed article much the same way it would syndicate an article from a newswire service.

Make sure to list the original journalist(s) in the byline. Some publications also ask that the original masthead itself be mentioned in the byline.

Then, at top or the bottom of the article, list the original headline with a hyperlink back to the source, along with the journalist(s) and the specific CC license (also linked). Some publications have a preference for either the top or the bottom of the article, while others don't.


Some publications like The Conversation even provide a handy template to include at the bottom of the article:



“This article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article [insert hyperlink here].”

The most open Creative Commons licenses like CC BY or CC BY-SA allow the user to remix the work however they see fit. They can cut down an article or mix it with other works or make any changes they'd like. Some alterations, such as removing the final paragraphs from an inverted pyramid article in order to fit on a newspaper page, are pretty standard in journalism. Others, such as removing important context, could be considered journalistic malpractice. The same responsibilities apply to CC-licensed works just as they would to reusing any other article.


For example, [360info](#) states:



“Publishing via Creative Commons 4.0 International means you can use all or part of an article. Take sentences to repurpose as quotes within your own reporting, or use our framing articles to deliver informed background.”


Other Creative Commons licenses that include the ND or “No-Derivatives” element stipulate that others cannot remix a particular work. However, format changes are allowed under copyright law! Many publications that release their articles under these licenses still allow others to make minor changes regarding style and other conventions, such as a British publication changing “soccer” to “football” when republishing an American article. Or a website in Fiji could change “NSW ICAC” to “the New South Wales Independent Commission Against Corruption” when reusing an Australian article. “Yesterday” could be changed to “on Monday” in a republished article, and so on. House style rules relating to punctuation also fall into this category.

Aspen Journalism publishes its articles under the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license. It states:



“...you can’t edit our material, except to reflect relative changes in time, location, and editorial style; if you’re republishing online, you have to link to us and include all of the links in the story...”

However, some publications that use CC BY-NC-ND such as Brazilian science magazine Pesquisa FAPESP, chose not to make exceptions to the No-Derivatives element. Pesquisa FAPESP uses a CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 license, noting:



“Licensed content, including headlines and subheadlines, must be reproduced in its entirety and must not be edited without the express permission of Pesquisa FAPESP. If in doubt, contact us by email before republishing.”

As a matter of courtesy, try to check if that publication has other requirements or requests, such as notifying them after the fact or tagging the original publication on social media.

Keep in mind: Attribution is not complicated, but it is vital to sharing knowledge. It's also a matter of transparency. Journalists and editors will be familiar with this principle when using photos from agencies or syndicating articles from newswires. Attributing the original author of a work is also required by many countries' copyright laws.

South African news website [GroundUp](#), which mainly publishes under Creative Commons licenses, succinctly explains the philosophy behind Open Journalism:

“We want our articles to be republished. You are welcome and encouraged to copy nearly any article or photo we publish, so long as you credit GroundUp, you credit the author(s) or photographer(s), and you don't make any substantive edits to the article or photo. It's also nice if you include a link back to the article or photo on our site.

Failing to credit GroundUp, the authors or photographers is plagiarism. We get very cross when that happens, and there's no good reason to do it.”

Ready to use Creative Commons-licensed content?

Journalists already flock directly to websites like [Openverse](#), [Flickr](#) or [Wikimedia Commons](#) to find CC-licensed photos. Between both sites, they have hundreds of millions of freely-usable photos.



flickr

Wikimedia Commons is the image repository associated with Wikipedia and its sister projects. It has thousands of high-quality, newsworthy photos of political events, natural disasters, sports, people and places, with users uploading new photos every minute. The best way to navigate Wikimedia Commons is not by searching, but by browsing categories.

Sometimes it can be easiest to find the relevant page on Wikipedia, click a relevant photo, and then search through the categories listed at the bottom of the page. But beware, not every file on Wikimedia Commons has a Creative Commons license, so always double check the file's description.

[CC Search](#) shows users where to find CC-licensed photos, video and audio across different sources, such as [Openverse](#); Openverse is a search engine that trawls websites and the digital archives of museums, art galleries and scientific institutions around the world that have released photos and audio files under CC licenses. Google's [Advanced Image Search](#) also allows users to search for CC-licensed photos with the "usage rights" filter; however many of the images that make it through the filter are not CC licensed.

Finding publications that release entire articles under Creative Commons licenses can be a little trickier. In general, these publications will mention Creative Commons at the bottom of the page where copyright info is usually found. Some also have dedicated pages encouraging other outlets to reuse their works.

The global aggregator of CC-licensed articles is [Open Newswire](#). It displays the latest news article from hundreds of news courses in about 90 languages. Many of these articles are published under Creative Commons licenses, while others are allowed to be republished under similar schemes.





"Al Jazeera News Floor Vertical" by rejon, marked with CC0 1.0

Users can select their language from the left-hand side. The newest articles are shown at the top of the page, just like a newswire. Next to each headline is a tag showing what license the article is released under. Users can hover this for more information, and click on it to read each publication's own terms and conditions (if there are any). Articles on specific topics or locations can be found using the search bar at the top of the page.

The idea is that by combining articles from different sources around the world, the end result can resemble a comprehensive newswire. The strongest feeds are in English, Portuguese and Spanish. Other languages that have relatively comprehensive feeds include Arabic, Catalan, French, German, Hindi, Russian and Swahili.

For more information about OpenNewswire, contact info@opennewswire.org.

For more information about CC licensing your works or reusing others' CC licensed content, visit the [CC FAQ page](#) and the [CC Certificate training resources](#), or contact learning@creativecommons.org for a consultation.

CC also offers free "[office hours](#)" with our copyright lawyers and periodic trainings.

We hope this helps you get started!



A Journalist's Guide to Creative Commons

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