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Copyright for Archivists
Canadian Council of Archives Copyright Committee

What does “public domain” mean?

A work in the public domain can be used without permission from the copyright owner and without paying copyright royalties. The phrase “public domain” is a copyright term referring to works that belong to the public. Works can be in the public domain for a variety of reasons. One is because the term of copyright protection has expired. Copyright protection has a set time limit. When the time ends, the work falls into the public domain. Works then belong to the public and anyone may use them without permission or the payment of royalties.

Works can also be in the public domain because the copyright owner has given the copyright in the work to the public. Any work that is protected by copyright, can in a figurative sense, be placed in the public domain. The owner must specifically give the work, or certain uses of it, to the public. This is done by stating on the work or website that the public may use the work without permission or payment.