

Ideas, Methods, or Systems

What Is Not Protected by Copyright

Copyright law does not protect ideas, methods, or systems. Copyright protection is therefore not available for ideas or procedures for doing, making, or building things; scientific or technical methods or discoveries; business operations or procedures; mathematical principles; formulas or algorithms; or any other concept, process, or method of operation.

Section 102 of the Copyright Act (title 17 of the *U.S. Code*) clearly expresses this principle: “In no case does copyright protection for an original work of authorship extend to any idea, procedure, process, system, method of operation, concept, principle, or discovery, regardless of the form in which it is described, explained, illustrated, or embodied in such work.”

Inventions are subject matter for patents, not copyrights. For information about patent laws, contact

*Commissioner for Patents
U.S. Patent and Trademark Office
P.O. Box 1450
Alexandria, VA 22313-1450
(800) 786-9199
www.uspto.gov*

What Is Protected by Copyright

Copyright protection extends to a description, explanation, or illustration of an idea or system, assuming that the requirements of copyright law are met. Copyright in such a case protects the particular literary or pictorial expression chosen by the author. But it gives the copyright owner no exclusive rights in the idea, method, or system involved.

Suppose, for example, that an author writes a book explaining a new system for food processing. The copyright in the book, which comes into effect at the moment the work is fixed in a tangible form, prevents others from copying or distributing the text and illustrations describing the author’s system. But it will not give the author any right to prevent others from adapting the system itself for commercial or other purposes or from using any procedures, processes, or methods described in the book.

No Comparative Searches

The Copyright Office does not compare deposit copies or check registration records to determine whether works submitted for registration are similar to any material for which a copyright has already been registered. The records of the Copyright Office may contain any number of registrations for works describing or illustrating the same idea, method, or system.

For Further Information

By Internet

Circulars, announcements, regulations, certain application forms, and other related materials are available from the Copyright Office website at www.copyright.gov. Claims to copyright can also be registered online at this address.

By Telephone

For general information about copyright, call the Copyright Public Information Office at (202) 707-3000. Staff members are on duty from 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM, eastern time, Monday through Friday, except federal holidays. Recorded information is available 24 hours a day. To request paper application forms or circulars, call the Forms and Publications Hotline at (202) 707-9100 and leave a recorded message.

By Regular Mail

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