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Information

What are licenses?

“Progress in science and scholarship can only be achieved if scholars are able to build on earlier research results and apply them. However, scientific work is often complicated by a lack of clarity on whether, how, or under what terms the documents, illustrations, graphics, tables, data, and software of other authors may be reused for teaching and research work. Licenses that are granted by the author or the rights holder ... are one way out of this dilemma.” This is because “licenses stipulate what users are allowed to do with copyrighted works without having to ask the author for permission in each specific case.”

(Excerpt translated from: German Research Foundation (DFG), *Information für die Wissenschaft* No. 68 | November 20, 2014, [“Appell zur Nutzung offener Lizenzen in der Wissenschaft”](#))

What are Creative Commons licenses?

CC licenses allow holders of copyrighted material to grant usage rights to anyone interested in using the work. Usage rights range from simple sharing to translation, use as teaching material, and textual modifications. Six different CC license types have become established, specifying the terms of use in different ways. They are composed of four basic modules:

| Abbreviation | Module | Definition |
|--------------|----------------|--|
| BY | Attribution | The author/creator must be credited as the originator. |
| NC | Non-commercial | The work may not be used for commercial purposes. |
| ND | No derivatives | The work may not be modified. |
| SA | Share alike | The work, modified or not, must be distributed under the same license as the original. |

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A valid alternative to CC-BY 4.0 is [CC-BY-SA 4.0](#), equally one of the most important and widely used CC licenses in the academic context. CC-BY-SA binds users of a work to the original license. In other words, if someone remixes/adapts, translates, transforms or builds upon CC-BY-SA-licensed material and wants to share it, they must do so under the same license. Read more about why this may be relevant under the subsequent heading.

Creative Commons itself recommends against using Creative Commons licenses for software. We therefore support [LGPL 3.0](#), a comparably permissive Open Content license that can be used for licensing code.

Why do we not support the additional CC license element NC?

Adding the CC license element NC to a Creative Commons license prohibits commercial use. This initially sounds appealing to authors/creators, and is a popular choice. However, the NC module can be problematic in many respects, as it excludes types of use which actually may be in the interest of the author/creator. For instance, it prohibits sharing the material in newspapers, archives, and open knowledge banks such as Wikipedia. In addition, educational and training institutions that are not exclusively publicly funded are not necessarily permitted to use material with a NC license. A further disadvantage of the NC module is that in many cases, it is not exactly clear what counts as commercial use. Many blogs display advertising to generate revenue in order to cover their server costs. Also, some third-party funded research projects involve industry participation. Should these players then be classified as commercially-driven? NC licensing terms remain rather vague on this point, so that interested parties may, as a precaution, decide not to use the NC-licensed material ([Klimpel 2012](#)).

The SA (Share Alike) module is a useful alternative for authors/creators who want to prevent others from making money with their content, as it requires “sharing under the same (license) conditions.” The same licensing terms must be applied to modified material as to the original work. In other words, if companies create materials using SA-licensed content, they must make those materials freely available under Share Alike conditions. Very few companies want to take that step, and as a result, it is rare for unwanted commercial usages to occur. At the same time, a Share Alike license allows educational institutions and projects that are not, or not fully, publicly funded to use the materials.

Why do we not support the additional CC license element ND?

The CC license element ND (No Derivatives) prohibits the distribution of content that has been modified in any way, such as translations or excerpts. That makes the ND module particularly restrictive for the domain of education and research. For example, if an edited volume is given a CC-BY-ND license and made accessible on the internet, only the volume as a whole can be used, not selected texts. In some cases it makes sense to redistribute articles in a modified form, for example as a long excerpt – but this is not possible if you apply the restrictive ND ([Graf 2013](#)).

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