What is copyright?

Copyright protects the authors of literary and artistic works. It is the way in which an idea is expressed that is protected, not the idea or concept itself. Copyright protection therefore applies to the form of the work and not its content. For example, Einstein’s essay “The Foundation of the General Theory of Relativity” in the “Annals of Physics” is protected by copyright. The theory of relativity itself, however, may be freely used, just not with the same words as in Einstein’s original text.

What are works?

According to copyright law, works are intellectual creations in the field of art and literature. These include, in particular:

- Any type of literary work (texts) – from novels, scientific papers and newspaper articles to marketing brochures and texts for the web
- Visual and audiovisual works such as photographs and films
- Musical works and other acoustic works
- Works of art (paintings, sculptures, graphics)
- Works of applied art (objects with practical value), whereby registration as a design does not exclude the work from being protected by copyright
- Works with scientific or technical content such as drawings, plans, maps or three-dimensional representations
- Works of architecture

Software protection

In particular, the source code of computer programs is protected by copyright. However, algorithms which form the basis of software, for example, are excluded from protection.
Copyright does not protect ideas, achievements, concepts or instructions – even if they are individual. Laws, ordinances and other official texts as well as decisions, protocols and reports by authorities are also not protected, insofar as they do not concern the legal position of citizens. Methods of payment, patent specifications and published patent applications are likewise not protected.

Term of protection

In Switzerland, copyright protection expires 70 years after the death of the author (50 years for computer programs). For photographs without individual character, protection expires 50 years after their creation.

Copyright is automatic

Copyright protection begins automatically from when a work is created. There are no formalities or registration required. There is no copyright register in Switzerland.

Related rights

Along with creators of works, copyright law also protects other categories of cultural providers that enable the enjoyment of works such as actors, musicians, music and film producers, radio and television programmes. However, these rights are not as extensive as those of creators.

Protection in other countries

In principle, every legal system is a national system. The Swiss Copyright Act protects authors and other categories of cultural intermediaries in Switzerland only. International protection is regulated by international agreements.
Collective management organisations

Collective management organisations collectively administrate the rights of copyright owners, in particular where it is not possible for individual rights owners to manage their copyright or if it would be impractical to do so (for example, for photocopying, using works for educational purposes etc.).