

Ideas, Methods, or Systems

What Is Not Protected by Copyright

Ideas, methods, or systems are not subject to copyright protection. Copyright protection, therefore, is 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, algorithms; or any other concept, process, or method of operation.

Section 102 of the copyright law, title 17, *United States 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. Under certain circumstances it may be possible to secure patent protection for an invention or an inventive design for an article of manufacture. For general information about the standards and conditions of the patent laws, write to:

*Commissioner of Patents and Trademarks
U.S. Patent and Trademark Office
P.O. Box 1450
Alexandria, VA 22313-1450*

Or call the Patent and Trademark help line at (800) 786-9199 (TTY: (571) 272-9950). Internet information is available at 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 the copyright law are met. Copyright in such a case protects the particular literary or pictorial expression chosen by the author. However, 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, will prevent others from publishing the text and illustrations describing the author’s ideas for machinery, processes, and merchandising methods. But it will not give the author any rights to prevent others from adopting the ideas for commercial purposes or from developing or using the machinery, processes, or methods described in the book.

No Comparative Searches

The Copyright Office ordinarily does not compare deposit copies or check registration records to determine whether works submitted for registration are similar to any material for which a registration of a copyright claim has already been made. 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

Information via the Internet

Frequently requested circulars, announcements, regulations, other related materials, and all copyright application forms are available via the Internet. You may access these from the Copyright Office website at www.copyright.gov.

Information by telephone

For general information about copyright, call the Copyright Public Information Office at (202) 707-3000. The TTY number is (202) 707-6737. Information specialists are on duty from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., eastern time, Monday through Friday, except federal holidays. Recorded information is available 24 hours a day. Or, if you know which application forms and circulars you want, request them 24 hours a day from the Forms and Publications Hotline at (202) 707-9100. Leave a recorded message.

Information by regular mail

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