

A mini guide to copyright for UK fiction writers

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Introduction

As a writer, your words are your craft – and they're automatically protected by copyright. But just as your own work deserves that protection, so does everyone else's.

This guide helps you understand the basics of UK copyright, how to avoid accidental infringement and how to stay creative while keeping your work legally and ethically sound.



The essentials: what copyright actually covers

In UK law, copyright protects the *expression* of ideas, not the ideas themselves. That means you're free to write about anything you wish – but you *can't* copy someone else's particular way of expressing those ideas.

Protected: Original writing (stories, dialogue, articles) - Music and lyrics - Artwork, photography, film and software

Not protected: Ideas, themes, facts or concepts - Titles and short phrases - Common knowledge

Duration: Usually the author's life + 70 years (after death).



Common pitfalls

Even the most well-meaning authors can slip up. Here are a few areas to watch:

Song lyrics – Quoting even a single line can infringe copyright.

Poetry or published prose – Needs permission unless in the public domain.

Brand names or products – Often fine in passing, but avoid suggesting endorsement or defamation.

Real people and events – Legal and ethical issues (privacy, defamation, publicity rights).

Fan fiction – Exists in a legal grey area unless permitted by the rights holder.

Images – Don't use online pictures for covers or promotions without proper licensing.





Initial checks

Ask yourself:

1. Is it still under copyright? Check when it was written and whether the author has been deceased for 70+ years.
2. Is it in the public domain? Classic works (e.g. Austen, Dickens) are usually safe.
3. Do I have permission or a licence? Look for 'Creative Commons' or royalty-free licences, or contact the rights holder.

Does fair dealing apply? Limited exceptions exist for criticism, review, parody and quotation – but these rarely apply in fiction.



Safe alternatives

Risky use	Safe alternative
Quoting lyrics	Paraphrase, or evoke the mood of the lyrics through description.
Mentioning a brand name repeatedly	Use a generic brand or invent one.
Referring to real people	Create composites or fictional equivalents.
Retelling a story too closely	Use the theme as inspiration and invent your own structure and characters.





Finally: a quick copyright checklist

Before sending your manuscript to an agent, editor or publisher, ask:

- Have I copied any text, lyrics, or dialogue from another work?
- Have I checked image or artwork licences?
- Are all characters and brands fictional or safely generic?
- Have I changed identifying details for real people?
- Have I double-checked any quotations?

