



Thesis Guide

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OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS PROCESS

1. Before 1st semester of thesis hours:
 - a. Assemble thesis committee.
 - b. Begin researching.
 - c. Register for thesis hours (through the Office of Graduate Programs).

2. During 1st semester of thesis hours:
 - a. Obtain IRB approval (if required).
 - b. Work with chair to write prospectus.
 - c. Submit prospectus and signature page to Thesis Coordinator. (Be sure to include your IRB approval letter along with this submission, if needed.) Once your prospectus is approved, write thesis!
 - d. Apply for graduation.

3. During 2nd semester of thesis hours:
 - a. Keep writing thesis!
 - b. Defend thesis at least six weeks before graduation.
 - c. Submit defense report to Office of Graduate Programs.
 - d. Make changes requested by committee at defense.
 - e. Submit thesis to Thesis Coordinator for reader review at least five weeks before graduation.
 - f. Make reader review changes.
 - g. Submit thesis to Thesis Coordinator for final mechanical review at least four weeks before graduation.
 - h. Make final mechanical review changes.
 - i. Upload final thesis to Digital Commons, and fill out associated forms one week prior to graduation.

THE THESIS PROCESS IN DETAIL

NOTE: When these guidelines diverge from the specific guidelines given by the Doctor of Ministry program, D.Min. students should follow their program guidelines.

Thesis Committee

Before a student may be registered for thesis credit, a [Thesis Committee Announcement](#) form must be submitted to the Office of Graduate Programs (OGP), preferably via email.

Committee members must be approved by the program director. Committee chairs must be ACU faculty, credentialed in the content area, have a doctorate, and have relevant experience. Chairs must also have prior experience on at least one thesis committee. Individual programs may require chairs to have additional service on committees before serving as chair. Non-ACU faculty may be allowed to serve on committees, but they must be approved by the department and may only serve as the third committee member, unless specifically approved by the Assistant Provost for Residential Graduate Programs via a Request for Academic Exception.

Thesis Registration

All students are registered for thesis hours through the Thesis Coordinator in the OGP once the Thesis Committee Announcement form has been submitted. Students will be enrolled in 6 total hours of thesis credit divided between 2 long semesters.

IRB Approval (if applicable)

If research involves human or animal subjects, approval from the Institutional Review Board must be obtained before research is started. More information can be found at <http://www.acu.edu/community/offices/academic/orsp/human-research/overview.html>. A copy of the approval letter must be included with the prospectus, and a snapshot or image of the approval letter should be included as Appendix A of the final thesis.

Prospectus

The prospectus is due by the end of classes during the first semester of thesis hours. Follow departmental guidelines, as individual departments may set earlier deadlines. It is strongly recommended that the prospectus be completed as early as possible in the thesis process.

Follow the Thesis Prospectus Instructions on page 8 of this guide or departmental guidelines. After the thesis committee chair signs the [signature page](#), submit your prospectus, IRB approval letter (if required), and the signed Prospectus Signature Page via Canvas for review and approval. ***Please note that if human subjects are involved in the research, a copy of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval must accompany the prospectus.*

The Thesis Coordinator will review the prospectus for clarity and style formatting. The Thesis Coordinator will return the signed Prospectus Signature Page when the prospectus has been approved, either via Canvas or email.

Thesis Defense

The thesis defense must take place at least 6 weeks before graduation. This date is listed on the

[Deadlines and Timelines](#) page of the OGP site. If the defense does not occur by the published deadline, the student will be excluded from commencement. ***Please note that, as of 2016, ACU no longer holds commencement ceremonies in August. According to the Office of the Provost, students who lack 6 or fewer hours to complete their degree after the spring semester (and are already enrolled in those hours during a summer term) will be allowed to participate in May commencement; however, this exception expressly excludes thesis hours.*

In the case of **extenuating circumstances only**, exceptions to this deadline may be granted by the Assistant Provost for Residential Graduate Programs at his/her discretion. To apply for an exception, students should fill out a Request for Academic Exception form (which can be picked up in the Registrar's office), which should be submitted to and signed by the student's chair as well as the program director before being sent to the Thesis Coordinator for processing and submission to the Assistant Provost. ***Please note that these situations must be truly exceptional, meaning extraordinary, unprecedented, and rare.*

A clean copy of the thesis should be delivered to each committee member at least five days before the defense (or per department guidelines).

At the defense, the committee chair should sign the [Thesis Defense Report](#) form. (This form should be submitted to the OGP as quickly as possible after the defense but **no later than 5 weeks before graduation**. Failure to defend and submit this form by the reported deadlines will result in the student's exclusion from commencement.) Additionally, at the defense, all committee members should sign the thesis signature page. Signatures may be physical or electronic. Please follow the [signature page template](#), filling in the degree name and committee members' names as appropriate. Once signed, this signature page should be submitted to the Thesis Coordinator via email or Canvas. The Thesis Coordinator will obtain the Assistant Provost's signature and insert the signature page into the finished thesis once approved by all parties and ready for submission to the Digital Commons.

OGP Reader Review

An electronic (Word or PDF) copy for reader review must be submitted to the Thesis Coordinator via Canvas no later than 5 weeks before graduation. At this point, the chair should confirm that all changes requested at the defense have been made. It is the committee chair's responsibility to ensure that the student has made the necessary changes requested by the committee during the defense.

The OGP reader reviews the thesis for grammar, punctuation, spelling, and clarity. Attention is also given to consistency in following the ACU Thesis Guide and the style manual designated by the department.

Generally, the reader's review period is 5 business days. Typically, the earlier a thesis is submitted to the OGP, the faster the turnaround. Reader edits will be returned to the student via Canvas or via email. If needed, the student and committee chair should meet together to review the suggested edits. It is at the discretion of the committee chair as to which edits should be incorporated into the final draft.

Final Mechanical Review

At least 4 weeks before graduation, the student must submit a Word or PDF copy of the thesis via Canvas for final mechanical review and approval.

In the final mechanical review, the thesis will be reviewed for correct formatting. Particular attention will be given to margins, accuracy of the Table of Contents, and page numbering. Students should use [the Formatting Checklist as](#) a guide.

Final Submission

After the Thesis Coordinator has approved the thesis and inserted the signature page, the final electronic copy of the thesis must be uploaded to the ACU Digital Commons library website. This must be done at least 1 week before graduation. More details about this process can be found at digitalcommons.acu.edu/etd. This version will be printed and bound, so it should be free from errors. (At the time of submission, you may elect to have a Creative Commons copyright license on your work. More information about Creative Commons copyright licenses are on page 16 of this document.)

Keywords

As part of the final electronic submission, students will be asked to submit 3-5 keywords that will allow their paper to be found more easily by search engines. Students should consult with their committee chair to determine the most appropriate keywords. These words do not need to be listed explicitly in the body of the thesis; instead, they should be submitted through the Digital Commons.

Thesis Binding Information Form

At the time of final submission, submit the online [Thesis Binding Information](#) form, which gives information necessary for binding and shipping hard copies of theses. If students desire any additional copies of their thesis at a cost of \$65 each, they can indicate the desired number on this form and designate a payment method.

Author Permission Form

The ACU Library requires this form in order to catalog a print and electronic version of the thesis. Please submit the online [Author Permission Statement](#) at the time of final submission.

Theological Research Exchange Network (TREN)

All Graduate School of Theology (GST) theses must be registered with the Theological Research Exchange Network. Students must submit to TREN a signed [distribution agreement](#) to TREN.

If D.Min. students desire an additional layer of legal protection, they have the option to have their thesis copyright registered through TREN for a fee of \$85. This fee should be mailed to TREN. Kenneth Crews (2012) notes, “Statutory damages and attorney fees are generally available to the copyright owner only if the owner registered the work with the U.S. Copyright Office before the infringement occurred” (Copyright Law for Librarians and Educators).

Binding

After approval by the OGP, thesis files are sent to the bindery. When the bound theses are done, one copy is presented to the thesis committee chair, and one copy is mailed to the student. Please

note that it may take up to 3 months for the bound theses to be completed and returned to the OGP for distribution. Students should keep this in mind when submitting a mailing/shipping address. Note that there is a \$10 shipping fee for international addresses.

Additional Information

Thesis Fee

The OGP thesis fee, which includes reader services and binding costs, is due at the time of registration in the second three hours of thesis and is non-refundable. The thesis fee is \$295. This fee will be charged to the student's account unless other payment arrangements (cash or check) are made with the OGP.

Withdrawal

Students should contact their thesis committee chair if they decide to withdraw from thesis hours. Withdrawal from thesis must be done by the committee chair submitting a change of grade form to change the grade from IP to W.

Thesis Continuation (if applicable)

Students who do not complete their thesis by the end of the second semester in which they are enrolled in thesis hours will be automatically registered for thesis continuation each fall and spring semester until completion. Thesis continuation is zero credit hours and has a fee equal to ½ hour of tuition (which varies by department). By being enrolled in thesis continuation, the student is eligible to consult with his/her thesis committee, thus making progress toward completing the thesis. **A student is expected to be enrolled each term until the thesis is completed.** Students will not be enrolled in summer continuation without the approval of the student's chair.

THE THESIS PROSPECTUS

As soon as the student and the chair of the thesis committee have agreed on a tentative thesis topic, the student will prepare a prospectus following the Prospectus Outline below (or following departmental instructions).

After each committee member has been provided a copy of the prospectus, the student should call a meeting of the committee to finalize and approve the thesis study. It is the responsibility of the student to see that the meeting is scheduled. Serious research and writing are premature until the topic and research methods have been approved by all members of the thesis committee.

The prospectus serves as an agreement between the student and the committee as to the goals, methods, and potential outcomes of the study. If the thesis problem or methodology changes, the student should obtain approval from the committee. If the change is substantial, a revised prospectus, prospectus signature page, and or IRB letter may be required.

Approval, Filing, and Deadline

The committee chair should sign the Prospectus Signature Page. If research involves human or animal subjects, it must be approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). If IRB approval is required, a copy of the IRB approval letter **must** accompany the prospectus. The signed prospectus (with the IRB approval letter, if necessary) is due to the OGP by the last day of classes of the semester in which the student is enrolled in the first three hours of thesis credit.

An electronic (Word or PDF) copy of the prospectus and the Prospectus Signature Page with the chair's signature must be submitted via Canvas for review and approval. After approval, a copy will be either returned via Canvas or emailed to the student.

Prospectus Outline

The prospectus should ordinarily include the following items:

1. Introduction – overview, statement of problem, research questions or hypotheses, research rationale
2. Review of the literature (properly cited in text and in the References section)
3. Description of research methods
4. Preliminary References page, including primary and secondary sources upon which the study will be based. It is acceptable to list sources that you intend to utilize in your research. Although this is not expected to be a complete and final list of references, it should be sufficient to demonstrate both availability and student awareness of adequate sources to support the study.

The prospectus should be polished and carefully edited. It is NOT a rough draft.

STYLE AND FORMATTING GUIDE

Style Manual

The acceptable style manuals that should be used for the various academic disciplines are listed below. The thesis must comply with the **most current edition** at the time of completion of the thesis.

Communication	<i>Publication of the American Psychological Association (APA) or Chicago Manual of Style</i>
English	<i>MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers</i>
Graduate School of Theology	<i>SBL Handbook of Style</i>
Marriage and Family Therapy	<i>Publication of the American Psychological Association (APA)</i>
Psychology	<i>Publication of the American Psychological Association (APA)</i>
School of Social Work	<i>Publication of the American Psychological Association (APA)</i>

Citation

Each style manual has slightly different requirements for proper citation of sources within the text and in the References or Works Cited section. Consult the style manual for your department for specific instructions on the format of parenthetical documentation, footnotes, and references.

General Formatting Information

Margins

The margins for each page, front matter, text, and reference material must adhere to those listed below, measuring from edge of paper to first letter of type:

- Left (binding edge) 1 ½ inch
- Right 1 inch
- Top 1 inch (except first page of each section or chapter)
- Bottom 1 inch (with no more than 1 ¼ inches)

The page number may intrude into the bottom margin. Text may extend a single line below the bottom margin in order to complete a footnote or last line of a paragraph, a chapter, a subdivision, a table, or a figure.

Justification

The use of double (left & right) justification is unacceptable since it often causes gaps within printed lines.

Font

A 12-point standard serif font should be used (e.g., Times New Roman).

Spacing

The text of the thesis must be double-spaced. Single spacing can be used in tables and in some footnotes (see your discipline's style manual). No extra space should be added between paragraphs or sections.

Page Numbering

Page numbers should be the same font and size as the rest of the text (typically 12-point Times New Roman). All page numbers will be centered at the bottom of each page of the body and appendices.

Note that the front matter is numbered differently. The first few pages will not be numbered. Beginning with the Table of Contents, each page is counted. Number all of the pages which directly follow the Table of Contents using lowercase Roman numerals. For example, if there is a two-page Table of Contents, the page which immediately follows the Table of Contents is numbered iii. Each page in the Table of Contents is counted, but numbers do not appear on the page. The body of the text and all appendices will then be numbered consecutively with Arabic numerals. (For D.Min. students, note that the brief vita is not numbered.)

Paragraph Indentation

All paragraphs should begin with a ½ inch indentation.

Order of Sections

The thesis consists of three parts: front matter, text, and end matter. The sections are arranged in the order listed below. (Some sections are optional and may not be included in all theses.)

Front Matter

- Abstract
- Thesis title page
- Dedication (optional)
- Acknowledgments (optional)
- Table of Contents
- List of Tables (if applicable)
- List of Figures (if applicable)

Text

- Body of the thesis divided into chapters

End Matter

- References (or Works Cited)
- Appendix/Appendices (if applicable)
- Brief Vita (for Doctor of Ministry only)

Front Matter

Abstract

The abstract consists of an essay-style statement of the thesis problem, a brief exposition of the method used, a condensed summary of findings or results, and conclusions. The maximum length of the abstract is 350 words, which is approximately 1-1/2 double-spaced pages. The text begins with the heading ABSTRACT in capital letters at the top of the first page of the abstract. The heading is centered 2 inches from the top of the page and the text begins one double-space below the heading.

Thesis Title Page

The title appears 2 inches from the top of the page. Format the title in sentence case with main words capitalized. The date at the bottom of the page should be 1½ inches from the bottom of the page. Follow the title page template.

Dedication (optional)

The dedication is brief and centered on the page. No heading is necessary. It begins two inches from the top of the page and customarily begins with the word “To.” No page number should appear on this page.

Acknowledgments (optional)

This section begins with the heading ACKNOWLEDGMENTS centered in all capital letters two inches from the top of the page. The text is double-spaced and begins one double-space below the heading. No page number should appear on this page.

Table of Contents

There are two approaches to creating the Table of Contents. One is to utilize the automatic Table of Contents in Microsoft Word. This requires some work to set up on the front end, but once you have it set up, you can automatically update the Table of Contents when you make any changes. The second option is to create the Table of Contents manually at the end. This takes less time initially, but it does require you to re-check page numbers at every stage after you have made changes. See Table of Contents Help for detailed instructions for both approaches.

The Table of Contents may vary in the amount of information included. However, the following items must be shown:

1. List of Tables (if included)
2. List of Figures (if included)
3. Chapter titles
4. First- and second-level headings (further levels of heading are optional)
5. References or Works Cited
6. Appendices

Table of Contents checklist:

- Page numbers are not shown in the header or footer of any page of the Table of Contents.
- The heading TABLE OF CONTENTS in all capital letters is centered without punctuation two inches from the top of the first page only; neither a continuation notice nor any part of the heading appears on subsequent pages.
- Entries in the Table of Contents should exactly match the corresponding headings in the text word for word.
- Each chapter should be numbered with Roman numerals. The chapter title should be indented ½ inch from the Roman numeral.
- Level-1 headings should align with the chapter title (not the Roman numeral).
- Each level of heading after level 1 in the Table of Contents should be indented one-half inch further than the previous entry.
- Entries in the Table of Contents should be double-spaced.

- If an entry has multiple lines, the second line will be indented one-half inch. The page number is placed opposite the last line of each entry in the Table of Contents.
- Page numbers and dot leaders are right aligned. If you are creating the Table of Contents manually, you must use the dot leader feature in Word (see Table of Contents Help). Manually adding the dots will lead to uneven alignment.
- All page numbers in the Table of Contents must match with the page numbers in the text.

List of Tables/List of Figures

- The heading(s) LIST OF TABLES and/or LIST OF FIGURES in all capital letters is centered without punctuation two inches from the top of the first page only.
- The page numbers should be shown in lower case Roman numerals centered at the bottom of the page. (Remember: start counting with the Table of Contents. The List of Tables or List of Figures should not be page i.)
- Tables and figures should be listed by number. Do not include the word Table or Figure.
- All table/figure numbers and captions are listed exactly as they appear in the text with respect to wording, capitalization, and punctuation.
- Captions are listed in their entirety, except when the caption consists of several phrases separated by periods. In that case, the first phrase (the material up to the period) may be entered in the List of Tables or List of Figures as the caption.
- If an entry has multiple lines, the page number is placed opposite the last line of each entry.
- The page number must match the page on which the caption appears.
- Page numbers and dot leaders are right aligned. As with the Table of Contents, the dot leader feature must be used. Do not add dots manually.

Page Numbers

Do not put page numbers on any page before and including the Table of Contents. The List of Tables and List of Figures (if necessary) should have page numbers. Count the first page of the Table of Contents as page (i), but do not actually number it. So, if your Table of Contents is two pages, the List of Tables will be numbered as page iii.

Text

Chapter Numbering and Chapter Title

Each chapter is numbered consecutively with uppercase Roman numerals. The word “CHAPTER” and its number are centered two inches from the top of the page. The chapter title is centered in capital letters one double-spaced line below the chapter number. Neither the “CHAPTER” heading nor the chapter title should be bold.

Introduction (if applicable)

A division entitled “Introduction” is often the first numbered chapter. However, it may precede the first numbered chapter. If it precedes the first numbered chapter, its pages should be numbered with lowercase Roman numerals instead of Arabic numerals. If it is to be used as the first chapter, it must carry the Roman numeral “I” (etc.) and the title.

Subdivisions (Levels of Heading)

Subdivision headings serve to establish importance of each topic. All topics of equal importance have the same level of heading throughout a manuscript. Students should consult the style manuals for their disciplines to determine appropriate use and formatting of levels of heading.

Chapter numbers and chapter titles are primary divisions of the entire thesis body and are not part of the subdivision scheme. They are not considered levels of heading.

Levels of heading are used in much the same way as an outline. Just as there would not be an A without a B in an outline, there always must be at least two subsection headings within any given section.

Each chapter does not have to contain the same number of subdivisions. However, the levels of heading used must be consistent throughout the text. Two levels of heading suffice for most theses written at ACU. However, some students may use three or four levels of heading.

Table and Figure Numbering and Placement

See the following sections for more specific information about tables and figures, respectively.

- Each table or figure must be numbered independently and consecutively in Arabic numerals.
- Each table or figure must have a unique title. It should be a brief and explanatory title. See the style guide for appropriate formatting for your field.
- Tables and figures should be referred to by number, not by “the following table” or “the figure below.”
- Tables and figures must not interrupt a paragraph. If possible, they should appear on the same page as their call-out. If that is impossible, they should be placed on the next page.
- It is preferable for tables/figures to be at the top or bottom of a page, unless this causes a paragraph to break.
- It is sometimes necessary to place large tables or figures horizontally on the page. The margin at the left binding edge must be 1 ½ inches, and all other margins at least one inch. The caption should also be placed horizontally. The placement of the page number must be consistent with the rest of the thesis.

Tables

- The same font used for the thesis must also be used for tables. Sometimes it is necessary to alter the size of the font to fit the table within the required margins.
- Table text should be single-spaced.
- Tables should have at least 3 horizontal rules:
 - An opening line, which is placed below the table title and above the column headings.
 - A second line below the column headings.
 - A closing line, showing that the data in the table is complete.
- Additional horizontal lines should be used if they enhance clarity. Vertical lines should not be used.
- Notes, if any, are placed below the closing line of the table, and begin flush left (no

indentation). Notes should be single-spaced, like footnotes.

- Tables may be continued on as many pages as necessary, provided the column headings are repeated on each page. The table title is not repeated. However, continuation pages must show the following designation: “Table ____ (continued).”

Figures

- Any print that is part of the figure can be in any typeface, provided it is neat and legible. However, the figure title (or caption) and number must be in the same typeface as the rest of the thesis.
- Legends are considered as part of the figure and should be placed within the figure. They explain symbols or something used in the figure.
- Figure numbers and captions are placed below the figure. A caption is a concise explanation of the figure. It serves as both an explanation of the figure and as a figure title.
- Photographs must be of professional quality and in black and white format. Color photographs usually do not copy well.

Block Quotations

Remember that block quotations do not need quotation marks.

- For MLA, indent quotations of 4 or more lines 1” from the left margin. Double-space the block quotation.
- For APA, indent quotations of 40+ words 1” from the left margin. Double-space the block quotation.
- For SBL, indent quotations of 5+ lines 1” from the left margin. Single-space the block quotation.
- For Chicago style, indent quotations of 5+ lines—or more than 100 words—1” from the left margin. Single-space the block quotation.

End Matter

References

A thesis must include a list or lists of materials used in the preparation of the manuscript. Consult the appropriate style manual for detailed instructions. Style manuals designated by ACU departments are listed on page 9 of this guide.

Appendices

An appendix allows detailed information to be included that would be distracting to the reader if introduced in the text of the thesis.

- Treat each appendix as a separate chapter in regards to page numbering and margins.
- If there is only one appendix, the generic heading APPENDIX can be used.
- When there is more than one appendix, each should be labeled with a separate capital letter (APPENDIX A, etc.).
- Each appendix should have a descriptive title underneath the heading. The title should be capitalized headline-style (not all caps).
- In the text, appendices should be referred to by their labels in title case (e.g., “see

Appendix A”).

- If there is an IRB Approval Letter, it must be included as Appendix A.

Brief Vita (Doctor of Ministry theses only)

The Brief Vita is a narrative summary of the writer’s academic and professional information with limited personal information. If it is included, it should be no more than one page in length. It is placed as the final page in the thesis document. The Brief Vita is not numbered nor mentioned in the Table of Contents. Appropriate information is:

- Date and place of birth. Citizenship should be added when not apparent by place of birth.
- Educational institutions attended and degrees awarded.
- Place of current employment.
- Professional positions held (optional).
- Scholastic publications (optional).

FAQS ON COPYRIGHT AND PUBLISHING YOUR THESIS

Thesis students are sometimes encouraged to take their thesis work and disseminate it in peer-reviewed and edited venues, including journals and books. This increases visibility and viewership by interested professionals and gives you acceptance by peers.

When you publish your dissertation/project in [ACU's Digital Commons](#) you will choose a [Creative Commons copyright license](#). This will protect your thesis but also allow you, as the copyright holder, to develop derivative works from it. Below are two common questions and answers students have about copyright and future use of your dissertation/project.

Am I allowed to make multiple books/articles out of my dissertation?

As copyright holder of your scholarship, you're entitled to make derivative works and adapt or rearrange your work as you see fit, although a journal may want you to edit your work a bit to make it something different for the journal iteration. Every version or adaptation of your work is a separate work for which you hold copyright.

Keep in mind, though, that if you publish journal articles that are merely excerpted from your digital project without modification, you should be careful about assigning copyright to the journals. If you later wish to reuse the same language in, say, a manuscript for a book, you don't want to have transferred your rights to that iteration.

Will publishing my dissertation in Digital Commons affect the acceptance of publications derived from it?

In most cases, you have the right to publish work from your thesis in other copyrighted venues even after publishing in ACU's Digital Commons. While not common, certain publishers in particular disciplines may consider theses to be prior publications and/or limit their consideration of a subsequent journal article or book manuscript based on the dissertation. Note that this is rare and untrue for the majority of publishers.

- To the contrary, academic publishers typically view prior [open access publication as a means to improve acceptance for a book deal](#) due to increased awareness of your work.
- While numbers vary significantly by discipline, a 2013 [study on electronic theses and dissertations](#) indicates that more than 90% of university presses will consider an open access dissertation for book publication. See also a similar [2011 survey](#).
- Keep in mind, too, that your dissertation will be revised and rewritten significantly if/when you shape it into a manuscript for a first book or journal article. Most publishers accordingly view this as entirely new work.
- If you are instead concerned about acceptance for future journal articles rather than books, take a look at the guidelines for the particular journals in which you're interested. For instance, [Springer](#) and [Elsevier](#)--which do *not* count theses as prior publications.

Ultimately, you should check with your advisors and the guidelines of the publishers you are considering. It is important to familiarize yourself with the policies in your field.

What is a Creative Commons Copyright License?

The Creative Commons copyright licenses and tools forge a balance inside the traditional "all

rights reserved” setting that copyright law creates. Our tools give everyone from individual creators to large companies and institutions a simple, standardized way to grant copyright permissions to their creative work. The combination of our tools and our users is a vast and growing digital commons, a pool of content that can be copied, distributed, edited, remixed, and built upon, all within the boundaries of copyright law.

All Creative Commons licenses have many important features in common. Every license helps creators — we call them licensors if they use our tools — retain copyright while allowing others to copy, distribute, and make some uses of their work — at least non-commercially. Every Creative Commons license also ensures licensors get the credit for their work they deserve. Every Creative Commons license works around the world and lasts as long as applicable copyright lasts (because they are built on copyright). These common features serve as the baseline, on top of which licensors can choose to grant additional permissions when deciding how they want their work to be used.

A Creative Commons licensor answers a few simple questions on the path to choosing a license — first, do I want to allow commercial use or not, and then second, do I want to allow derivative works or not? If a licensor decides to allow derivative works, she may also choose to require that anyone who uses the work — we call them licensees — to make that new work available under the same license terms. We call this idea “ShareAlike” and it is one of the mechanisms that (if chosen) helps the digital commons grow over time. ShareAlike is inspired by the GNU General Public License, used by many free and open source software projects.

Our licenses do not affect freedoms that the law grants to users of creative works otherwise protected by copyright, such as exceptions and limitations to copyright law like fair dealing. Creative Commons licenses require licensees to get permission to do any of the things with a work that the law reserves exclusively to a licensor and that the license does not expressly allow. Licensees must credit the licensor, keep copyright notices intact on all copies of the work, and link to the license from copies of the work. Licensees cannot use technological measures to restrict access to the work by others.

What Are the Three “Layers” Of Licenses?

Our public copyright licenses incorporate a unique and innovative “three-layer” design. Each license begins as a traditional legal tool, in the kind of language and text formats that most lawyers know and love. We call this the Legal Code layer of each license.

But since most creators, educators, and scientists are not in fact lawyers, we also make the licenses available in a format that normal people can read — the Commons Deed (also known as the “human readable” version of the license). The Commons Deed is a handy reference for licensors and licensees, summarizing and expressing some of the most important terms and conditions. Think of the Commons Deed as a user-friendly interface to the Legal Code beneath, although the Deed itself is not a license, and its contents are not part of the Legal Code itself.

The final layer of the license design recognizes that software, from search engines to office productivity to music editing, plays an enormous role in the creation, copying, discovery, and

distribution of works. In order to make it easy for the Web to know when a work is available under a Creative Commons license, we provide a “machine readable” version of the license — a summary of the key freedoms and obligations written into a format that software systems, search engines, and other kinds of technology can understand. We developed a standardized way to describe licenses that software can understand called CC Rights Expression Language (CC REL) to accomplish this.

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