HOW SOFTWARE WORKS · BEGINNER · 10 MIN READ

Open source and licences: can I use this?

What open source means, how licences like MIT and GPL differ, what to check before you copy code, images or fonts, and how to license your own project.

Pass the check (4 of 5) online to earn the “Licence Aware” badge:
https://digitalbuilders757.com/university/study/open-source-and-licences

Public isn't the same as free to use

Code on GitHub, images in search results and fonts on websites are all owned by someone. What you're allowed to do with them is set by their licence. Open source means the owner has published the code under a licence that lets others use, change and share it, usually with a few conditions. No licence at all usually means you can look but not reuse.

The licences you'll meet most

- MIT and Apache 2.0 (permissive): use it in almost anything, including paid products; keep the copyright and licence notice.
- GPL (copyleft): if you distribute software that includes GPL code, you generally must share your source under the GPL too. Check carefully before using it in a closed product.
- Creative Commons: common for images, writing and music. CC BY means credit the creator; NC means no commercial use; ND means no changes.
- Fonts and icons have their own licences; many free fonts (such as those on Google Fonts) use the SIL Open Font License.

Before you copy

Look for a LICENSE file in the repository, or the licence on the image or font page. Keep the required notices. When an AI tool or builder adds packages, they come with licences too; most popular ones are permissive, but check anything unusual. AI-generated code can sometimes resemble existing code, so don't paste in large chunks you can't explain, and follow your company's or school's rules. For anything high-stakes, ask someone who knows the law.

License your own work

If you share code publicly and want others to use it, add a LICENSE file (GitHub can add one when you create a repository). MIT is the simplest permissive choice; pick a copyleft licence like GPL if you want improvements to stay open. Keep secrets out of public repositories, whatever the licence.

Key terms

Open source
Software whose code is public for anyone to read, use and improve under its licence.

Licence (software license)
The rules for what others may do with code, images or fonts: use, change, share or sell.

Repository (repo)
A project folder plus its full change history.

README
The front page of a repository: what it is and how to run it.

Copyright
Legal rights over creative work. Rules for AI-made work differ by country and are still changing.

npm / package
npm is the registry of reusable JavaScript code; each reusable piece is a package.

Try it: Licence detective

1. Open a popular GitHub repository and find its LICENSE file. Which licence is it?
2. Open your own project's package.json and pick two packages. Look up their licences.
3. Find a free image you'd like to use and check its licence terms.
4. Add a LICENSE file to one of your own public repositories.

KNOWLEDGE CHECK

Open source and licences: can I use this?

5 questions. Circle one answer for each; 4 or more correct passes. Answers are at the back.

1. You find code on GitHub with no licence file. What can you assume?

A. It's free for any use, because it's published publicly on GitHub
B. It's automatically MIT
C. You usually can't reuse it; ask the owner or find licensed code
D. Only paid products can use it

2. What does the MIT licence usually require?

A. Paying the author
B. Open-sourcing your whole app under the same MIT licence
C. Never selling software that includes the MIT code
D. Keeping the copyright and licence notice

3. Which licence most often means your distributed app must also share its source?

A. GPL
B. MIT
C. Apache 2.0
D. CC BY

4. An image is licensed CC BY-NC. Can you use it on a paid product's sales page?

A. Yes, as long as you credit the creator under the image
B. No: NC means non-commercial use only
C. Yes, if you crop it
D. Only on weekends

5. You want others to freely reuse your public code. Simplest step?

A. Do nothing, it's public
B. Put your secrets in the README
C. Add a LICENSE file, for example MIT
D. Make the repo private

Official sites

Choose a License (by GitHub): https://choosealicense.com
Open Source Initiative: Licenses: https://opensource.org/licenses
Creative Commons: About the licenses: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/

Last reviewed 2026-11-25. AI tools change fast; check each tool's own site for current features, plans and prices.

ANSWER KEY

Open source and licences: can I use this?

1. C: You usually can't reuse it; ask the owner or find licensed code
Without a licence, the owner hasn't granted permission to reuse it.

2. D: Keeping the copyright and licence notice
MIT is permissive: use it freely, just keep the notice.

3. A: GPL
GPL is copyleft: distributed works that include it generally must be GPL too.

4. B: No: NC means non-commercial use only
NC rules out commercial use. Find an image licensed for it or make your own.

5. C: Add a LICENSE file, for example MIT
A licence file tells everyone exactly what they're allowed to do.