



DIGITAL RULES RESOURCE CENTER

Guide to Working in the Public Domain

Google and other search engines have done many wonderful things for the Internet, not the least of which was to make it accessible to the average person by delivering the most popular websites on demand. However, as you work on your Meridian Stories challenge, you must keep in mind that search engines like Google are not *providers* of images, videos, and music; they merely find the content for you: they are, after all, a *search* engine. To *use* that content is a different story. All content on the Internet, and indeed all content created by an individual and set down in a tangible medium, is protected under US common copyright law. If you use any picture, piece of music, or video clip in your own work without obtaining permission, you run the risk of being challenged legally by the content creator.

Luckily, there is content whose copyright protection has expired, been relinquished by the owner, or never existed in the first place. These media are in the public domain, and can be used freely. Below are our tips for how to use works in the public domain for your Meridian Stories challenge.

Images

Beware: you cannot simply visit Google Images and save your favorite images to your computer for use in your own project. If you cannot verify through your own research that a picture is in the public domain or free to use non-commercially, you must assume that it is protected under copyright and off limits without the express permission of creator. In short, you may seek out his or her permission. However, we suggest that you use Google Images' filter to search only for pictures available in the public domain. Follow this link for instructions on how to set this filter:

<https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/29508?hl=en>

You can also sign up at this website to download thousands of images free of charge:

<http://www.freeimages.com/>

Music and Sound

As with images, you cannot take music from YouTube, iTunes, or other mediums for use in your own project without the composer's permission. Even if you purchase the music or sound bite, you may not use it in your own work – you have purchased a license for personal use only. Music in the public domain can, just like an image, be used freely. The general rule of thumb here is that any music published in the US before 1923, is in the public domain. To see a list of that music, the Public Domain Information Project has a website for you: <http://www.pdinfo.com>. Another resource which covers very similar material, but is organized differently is <http://www.pdmusic.org>.

Here is an excellent website that acts as a database for sound effects in the public domain:

<http://www.pdsounds.org/>

Please see the page on royalty free music for some other site suggestions.

Video

As with images and music, video footage is also protected under copyright. So, even if you have bought a copy of the movie or video, you may not use it for your own purpose, beyond simply viewing it.

Using video clips generally falls into two categories: 1) the use of broadcast (cable, network or streamed) or theatrical (movies) content; and 2) the use what is called 'stock footage', which can include a shot of a frog jumping, a sun setting, a tornado touching down or more academic content. For the former, the use of that content is rarely, if ever, in the public domain. Most uses of existing broadcast/theatrical footage can be used if it meets the criteria for Fair Use.

For the second usage, there is a non-profit called the Internet Archive which is devoted to, among other things, creating a library of digital sources that are free to use. This library contains thousands of video source material from shots of New York City to cumulus clouds to battle scenes. This library can be found here:

https://archive.org/details/stock_footage

Finally, please remember that citation is a matter of academic integrity. A lack of copyright does not mean that you should not cite your use of another's work and give that person credit. Proper citation is a requirement of Meridian Stories. If you are confused on how proper citation is done, please see this page (hyperlink "this page" to the citation guide).

**If you would really like to use a piece of work protected by copyright and were unable to obtain the permission of its creator, please carefully read our section on the [Doctrine of Fair Use](#) before continuing.

