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GNU (FDL) vs. GNU (GPL)

For this document, I will be comparing and contrasting the GNU Free Documentation License (GFDL) and the GNU General Public License (GPL). Both of these offer a form of free licensing but are aimed towards different types of work. The following paragraphs are intended to teach the reader enough about both of them so that they can make an informed decision on which one to use or if best, to use neither. All of the information stated comes from the newest versions of the licenses published on the official GNU website which is documented in the resources section.

I'll begin with a general summary of each license. The GFDL is a copyleft license that is intended for “free” use. It was made for the GNU Project and was created by the Free Software Foundation (FSF). This license was originally created for use on documentation that could accompany GNU software. That being said it can be used for any text-based work and is not limited to a software relation. The GPL is also a copyleft license that is intended for “free” use and was created by the FSF for the GNU Project. The largest difference between this and the previous one is that this license was designed for specific software.

More specifically in terms of similarities between the two, they are quite similar, and both describe “free” use as the right to copy, change, and share the works they license. They are also both copyleft which means they both require the distributor to give recipients the same freedoms of use that they have so anything created from the original must share the same copyright license and provide credit to the original author(s). That being said how the licenses control the freedoms do vary since the things being licensed vary.

The GFDL has specific guidelines on how to copy and redistribute documents in mass, and the GPL does not. The GFDL also focuses on physical copies as well as digital copies and requires these to have a “transparent” version that is machine-readable while the GPL focuses on digital distribution and requires source code to be shared. The GFDL is also more strict with modifications, as it allows for an invariants section that cannot be modified or removed and must be passed down, while the GPL allows all parts of the work to be modifiable. The GPL has an additional terms function, which is similar to the GFDL invariants section but these can be modified or removed during redistribution.

The main deciding factor between which of the two to use would be what type of product is being licensed. If it is documentation or any other type of non-software text then the GFDL is likely more fit. If the product is software-related and involves source code or programs then the GPL would likely fit the job more. If strong freedoms are not the intended goal in terms of copyright terms then neither of these would be ideal.

Resources

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