When a repository with source code, a manuscript or other creative works becomes public, it should include a file LICENSE or LICENSE.txt in the base directory of the repository that clearly states under which license the content is being made available. This is because creative works are automatically eligible for intellectual property (and thus copyright) protection. Reusing creative works without a license is dangerous, because the copyright holders could sue you for copyright infringement.

A license solves this problem by granting rights to others (the licensees) that they would otherwise not have. What rights are being granted under which conditions differs, often only slightly, from one license to another. In practice, a few licenses are by far the most popular, and [choosealicense.com (Links to an external site.)](https://choosealicense.com/) will help you find a common license that suits your needs. Important considerations include:

* Whether you want to address patent rights.
* Whether you require people distributing derivative works to also distribute their source code.
* Whether the content you are licensing is source code.
* Whether you want to license the code at all.

Choosing a license that is in common use makes life easier for contributors and users, because they are more likely to already be familiar with the license and don’t have to wade through a bunch of jargon to decide if they’re ok with it. The [Open Source Initiative (Links to an external site.)](https://opensource.org/licenses) and [Free Software Foundation (Links to an external site.)](https://www.gnu.org/licenses/license-list.html) both maintain lists of licenses which are good choices.

[This article (Links to an external site.)](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1002598) provides an excellent overview of licensing and licensing options from the perspective of scientists who also write code.

At the end of the day what matters is that there is a clear statement as to what the license is. Also, the license is best chosen from the get-go, even if for a repository that is not public. Pushing off the decision only makes it more complicated later, because each time a new collaborator starts contributing, they, too, hold copyright and will thus need to be asked for approval once a license is chosen.