

Translations of this page**The Free Software Definition**

We maintain this free software definition to show clearly what must be true about a particular software program for it to be considered free software. From time to time we revise this definition to clarify it. If you would like to review the changes we've made, please see the [History](#) section below for more information.

Free software is a matter of liberty, not price. To understand the concept, you should think of free as in free speech, not as in free beer.

Free software is a matter of the users' freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software. More precisely, it refers to four kinds of freedom, for the users of the software:

- The freedom to run the program, for any purpose (freedom 0).
- The freedom to study how the program works, and adapt it to your needs (freedom 1). Access to the source code is a precondition for this.
- The freedom to redistribute copies so you can help your neighbor (freedom 2).
- The freedom to improve the program, and release your improvements (and modified versions in general) to the public, so that the whole community benefits (freedom 3). Access to the source code is a precondition for this.

A program is free software if users have all of these freedoms. Thus, you should be free to redistribute copies, either with or without modifications, either gratis or charging a fee for distribution, to anyone anywhere. Being free to do these things means (among other things) that you do not have to ask or pay for permission.

You should also have the freedom to make modifications and use them privately in your own work or play, without even mentioning that they exist. If you do publish your changes, you should not be required to notify anyone in particular, or in any particular way.

The freedom to run the program means the freedom for any kind of person or organization to use it on any kind of computer system, for any kind of overall job and purpose, without being required to communicate about it with the developer or any other specific entity. In this freedom, it is the *user's* purpose that matters, not the *developer's* purpose; you as a user are free to run a program for your purposes, and if you distribute it to someone else, she is then free to run it for her purposes, but you are not entitled to impose your purposes on her.

The freedom to redistribute copies must include binary or executable forms of the program, as well as source code, for both modified and unmodified versions. (Distributing programs in runnable form is necessary for conveniently installable free operating systems.) It is ok if there is no way to produce a binary or executable form for a certain program (since some languages don't support that feature), but you must have the freedom to redistribute such forms should you find or develop a way to make them.

In order for the freedoms to make changes, and to publish improved versions, to be meaningful, you must have access to the source code of the program. Therefore, accessibility of source code is a necessary condition for free software.

One important way to modify a program is by merging in available free subroutines and modules. If the program's license says that you cannot merge in a suitably-licensed existing module, such as if it requires you to be the copyright holder of any code you add, then the license is too restrictive to qualify as free.

In order for these freedoms to be real, they must be irrevocable as long as you do nothing wrong; if the developer of the software has the power to revoke the license, or retroactively change its terms, without your doing anything wrong to give cause, the software is not free.

However, certain kinds of rules about the manner of distributing free software are acceptable, when they don't conflict with the central freedoms. For example, copyleft (very simply stated) is the rule that when redistributing the program, you cannot add restrictions to deny other people the central freedoms. This rule does not conflict with the central freedoms; rather it protects them.

Free software does not mean non-commercial. A free program must be available for commercial use, commercial development, and commercial distribution. Commercial development of free software is no longer unusual; such free commercial software is very important. You may have paid money to get copies of free software, or you may have obtained copies at no charge. But regardless of how you got your copies, you always have the freedom to copy and change the software, even to sell copies.

Whether a change constitutes an improvement is a subjective matter. If your modifications are limited, in substance, to changes that someone else considers an improvement, that is not freedom.

However, rules about how to package a modified version are acceptable, if they don't substantively limit your freedom to release modified versions, or your freedom to make and use modified versions privately. Rules that if you make your version available in this way, you must make it available in that way also can be acceptable too, on the same condition. (Note that such a rule still leaves you the choice of whether to publish your version at all.) Rules that require release of source code to the users for versions that you put into public use are also acceptable. It is also acceptable for the license to require that, if you have distributed a modified version and a previous developer asks for a copy of it, you must send one, or that you identify yourself on your modifications.

In the GNU project, we use **copyleft** to protect these freedoms legally for everyone. But **non-copylefted free software** also exists. We believe there are important reasons why **it is better to use copyleft**, but if your program is non-copylefted free software, it is still basically ethical.

See **Categories of Free Software** for a description of how free software, copylefted software and other categories of software relate to each other.

Sometimes government export control regulations and trade sanctions can constrain your freedom to distribute copies of programs internationally. Software developers do not have the power to eliminate or override these restrictions, but what they can and must do is refuse to impose them as conditions of use of the program. In this way, the restrictions will not affect activities and people outside the jurisdictions of these governments. Thus, free software licenses must not require obedience to any export regulations as a condition of any of the essential freedoms.

Most free software licenses are based on copyright, and there are limits on what kinds of requirements can be imposed through copyright. If a copyright-based license respects freedom in the ways described above, it is unlikely to have some other sort of problem that we never anticipated (though this does happen occasionally). However, some free software licenses are based on contracts, and contracts can impose a much larger range of possible restrictions. That means there are many possible ways such a license could be unacceptably restrictive and non-free.

We can't possibly list all the ways that might happen. If a contract-based license restricts the user in an unusual way that copyright-based licenses cannot, and which isn't mentioned here as legitimate, we will have to think about it, and we will probably conclude it is non-free.

When talking about free software, it is best to avoid using terms like **give away** or **for free**, because those terms imply that the issue is about price, not freedom. Some common terms such as **piracy** embody opinions we hope you won't endorse. See **Confusing Words and Phrases that are Worth Avoiding** for a discussion of these terms. We also have a list of translations of free software into various languages.

Finally, note that criteria such as those stated in this free software definition require careful thought for their interpretation. To decide whether a specific software license qualifies as a free software license, we judge it based on these criteria to determine whether it fits their spirit as well as the precise words. If a license includes unconscionable restrictions, we reject it, even if we did not anticipate the issue in these criteria. Sometimes a license requirement raises an issue that calls for extensive thought, including discussions with a lawyer, before we can decide if the requirement is acceptable. When we reach a conclusion about a new issue, we often update these criteria to make it easier to see why certain licenses do or don't qualify.

If you are interested in whether a specific license qualifies as a free software license, see our **list of licenses**. If the license you are concerned with is not listed there, you can ask us about it by sending us email at [<licensing@gnu.org>](mailto:licensing@gnu.org).

If you are contemplating writing a new license, please contact the FSF by writing to that address. The proliferation of

different free software licenses means increased work for users in understanding the licenses; we may be able to help you find an existing Free Software license that meets your needs.

If that isn't possible, if you really need a new license, with our help you can ensure that the license really is a Free Software license and avoid various practical problems.

Beyond Software

Software manuals must be free, for the same reasons that software must be free, and because the manuals are in effect part of the software.

The same arguments also make sense for other kinds of works of practical use — that is to say, works that embody useful knowledge, such as educational works and reference works. Wikipedia is the best known example.

Any kind of work *can* be free, and the definition of free software has been extended to a definition of free cultural works applicable to any kind of works.

Open Source?

Another group has started using the term open source to mean something close (but not identical) to free software. We prefer the term free software because, once you have heard that it refers to freedom rather than price, it calls to mind freedom. The word open never refers to freedom.

History

From time to time we revise this Free Software Definition to clarify it. Here we provide a list of those modifications, along with links to illustrate exactly what changed, so that others can review them if they like.

- **Version 1.77:** Clarify that all retroactive changes to the license are unacceptable, even if it's not described as a complete replacement.
- **Version 1.74:** Four clarifications of points not explicit enough, or stated in some places but not reflected everywhere:
 - "Improvements" does not mean the license can substantively limit what kinds of modified versions you can release. Freedom 3 includes distributing modified versions, not just changes.
 - The right to merge in existing modules refers to those that are suitably licensed.
 - Explicitly state the conclusion of the point about export controls.
 - Imposing a license change constitutes revoking the old license.
- **Version 1.57:** Add "Beyond Software" section.
- **Version 1.46:** Clarify whose purpose is significant in the freedom to run the program for any purpose.
- **Version 1.41:** Clarify wording about contract-based licenses.
- **Version 1.40:** Explain that a free license must allow to you use other available free software to create your modifications.
- **Version 1.39:** Note that it is acceptable for a license to require you to provide source for versions of the software you put into public use.
- **Version 1.31:** Note that it is acceptable for a license to require you to identify yourself as the author of modifications. Other minor clarifications throughout the text.
- **Version 1.23:** Address potential problems related to contract-based licenses.
- **Version 1.16:** Explain why distribution of binaries is important.
- **Version 1.11:** Note that a free license may require you to send a copy of versions you distribute to the author.

There are gaps in the version numbers because there are many other changes that do not affect the substance of the definition at all. Instead, they fix links, add translations, and so on. If you would like to review the complete list of changes, you can do so on our [cvsw](#) web interface.

[back to top](#)

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Translations of this page

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