Artistic licence: artwork permission practices at The Lancet group

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Acknowledgements
We thank our colleagues at The Lancet group for their input in the development of this Viewpoint.

Declaration of Interests
Both authors are employees of The Lancet group of journals, owned by Elsevier. CHW is an Associate Lecturer at Bath Spa University, Bath, UK.

Funding
No funding was received for this viewpoint.

Citation
Abstract

Artwork within publications, broadly covering non-text items including graphs, diagrams, and photographs, is typically published under a copyright licence, and permission for the reproduction of such items needs to be sought. The various image rights can be difficult to navigate, especially in the era of open access, and thus at The Lancet, we have developed a streamlined workflow to guide our teams on artwork permission processes in our journals. We present a practical guide for other publishing professionals, which can be adapted to meet their resources and needs.

Keywords:
Artwork reproduction, copyright, figures, guidelines, images, permission clearance
Introduction

The invention and establishment of printing in the 15th and 16th centuries made it possible to have as many exact copies of a work as there were people who wanted it and could afford to buy it. Printing heralded an era of rapid, widespread, and, importantly, more accurate dissemination of ideas and information, which helped propel the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. Copyright law in most European countries originated in efforts by the church and states to regulate and control the output of printing presses. Bibles and government information were encouraged; works of dissent and criticism were discouraged by means of official licences, which printers were required to have to be in business and print books. ¹

In 16th-century England, the Stationers’ Company, by royal charter, held a monopoly over the publishing industry and ‘the right to copy’ or ‘copyright,’ and was officially responsible for setting and enforcing regulations. Largely to protect the copyrights of Stationers’ Company (rather than those of the authors), in 1642, Parliament ordered the Stationers’ Company to ensure that no publication could be printed without the name and consent of the author. Thus, when the Royal Society of London published its first scientific journal, Philosophical Transactions in 1665, the principle of authors’ rights had already been established. ²,³

The earliest copyright law to be regulated by government was the Statute of Anne, introduced in Great Britain (then comprising England and Scotland) in 1710, which legalised recognition of an author’s published work (that is, the text of a book) as intellectual property and ensured that the author automatically owned the copyright with fixed legal terms of protection. ⁴ The statute was an influential model of legislation for other European countries and the USA. The need for an international approach eventually led to the 1886 Berne Convention, which required its signatory countries (now 179 in number ⁵) to recognise the copyright of literary and artistic works of authors (creators) from other countries party to the convention.

The UK 1911 Copyright Act implemented the Berne Convention and established a single statute covering all forms of copyright; the current amended version of the act is the 1988 Copyright, Designs, and Patent Act, ⁶ which continues to be amended, often with the aim of harmonisation with the European Union’s 2019 Copyright Directive and the World Intellectual Property Organization. ⁵

Broadly speaking, copyright offers exclusivity in the use, adaptation, copying, or distribution of literary, artistic, or musical material to the creator, for a fixed period (in the UK, generally up to 70 years after the end of the calendar year of the author or creator’s death). ⁵ In addition to literary work, which, for our purposes means written material such as scientific research, the types of work protected by copyright include photography, painting, digital art, sculptures, technical drawings and diagrams, maps, and logos. Creators of such work are automatically protected from unauthorised use for free with no need for separate registration and may charge a fee to anyone requesting permission to reproduce their work until the copyright expires. ⁶

Publishing companies, therefore, need to make sure that they are compliant with applicable copyright law. In the digital era, although artwork and images can be copied and reused with ease, they nevertheless deserve proper acknowledgement for the creator. Reproduction of artwork in a
scientific journal, which includes graphs and other images in research and review articles, requires that the relevant permission be obtained from the source of the image (for example, the publisher, the illustrator, or the author or creator) unless the original was published under a Creative Commons (CC) licence.

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At The Lancet, we have developed streamlined workflow guidelines with the aim of ensuring that all reproduced illustrations appear with the correct permission clearance from the source and the correctly worded permission line or acknowledgement. We developed these best practice guidelines for, and in collaboration with, colleagues who are most likely to encounter reused figures in their day-to-day work, with simplicity, clarity, and ease of use in mind. These rules allow our in-house teams to navigate the various scenarios that can arise given the different rights that authors or creators retain over previously published work. Fortunately, it is often relatively simple to establish that no permission or fee is necessary to reproduce a particular piece of artwork.

Artwork permissions workflow

Like many journals (for example, European Science Editing itself), The Lancet asks authors to identify the copyright holder of reused artwork and obtain the necessary permission, and arrange payment if needed, ideally by the time that they submit their manuscript. Information on these requirements is included in The Lancet author guidelines, and in-house editors are ready to advise authors if required.

Potential permission requirements for artwork can be detected either before or after the manuscript has been accepted for publication. When a manuscript is submitted, all files are routinely checked by the journal Editor who oversaw peer review of the paper before acceptance, the Assistant Editor who copyedits the paper and works with the author after acceptance, and the Editorial Assistant responsible for supporting administrative processes. At least one of these editorial team members will check the figures and images within the paper (Figure 1).

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- Author confirms that they have the right to reuse the image without seeking permission
- Author sends correct permission document† or acknowledgment text
- Figure has been created by the author and not presented anywhere previously

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Sometimes more complex copyright scenarios can arise; for example, if the author’s institution requests to retain copyright (and a letter granting permission might be provided from the institution). To confirm whether this type of copyright permission is suitable, our editorial teams would refer to dedicated staff with expertise in copyright. Indeed, any uncertainties over copyright permissions are directed to our copyright team and we recommend consulting such experts for the less straightforward scenarios that might present themselves.

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Conclusion
Online journals and publications are now commonplace and copying and downloading images for reuse have become easy, which carries the risk of unknowingly breaching copyright. Therefore, journals need to be
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