

What you need to know about copyright before you set a text to music... *Guidelines Created by Travis Ramsey, composer mentor with Music-COMP*

Before you even think about setting a text to music, you need to make sure it's legal to do so.

Look at the copyright date.

- If it's **before 1923**, the work is in "**public domain**". You are free to use this text.
- If the **copyright date is later than 1923**, or the copyright date is not there, **you can not use it without permission. The work is protected by copyright laws.** If you really, really want to use the text, keep reading to find out how to ask permission.

Asking for Permission

Creating a setting of someone else's words without their written permission is against the law, and it's not nice. Imagine someone making an arrangement of your Opus composition and selling it without asking you! So, what's an inspired composer to do? Follow these steps:

1. If the copyright date is 1923 or after, you need to ask permission. Start by finding the "copyright holder."
 - a. If the poet is still living, google the name and hope to see an address or a phone number. If this doesn't work, google the poet's name and the word "agent," like "Billy Collins Agent." You should find the person the poet hired to handle all their communications for them.
 - b. If the poet is no longer living, google the poet's name and the word "estate," like "Langston Hughes Estate." You should be able to find the estate, or the person hired to handle requests.
2. Once you have found the right person to ask, be polite and grateful. Write a short letter or email asking for permission. Here is a form letter that you can copy.
 - a. "I am seeking permission to set the poem "Title" to music. I'm a 13 year old student at Anytown Middle School. The music composed would be for voice, piano, and violin. I intend to have it performed publicly. I do not expect to earn any royalties for the performance, nor do I expect to publish the composition. I would appreciate a response to let me know if you are willing to grant this permission, or to direct me to the person who is able to grant that permission."
 - b. If you reach the person by phone, ask where to send a letter or email. You will need permission in writing, not verbally. If you like, you can explain the project to them -- but always take the next step and get permission before you write!
 - c. Then, you wait... Sometimes you will have a response very quickly, sometimes in a few weeks or months, and sometimes not at all. (No response means no, by the way.)

Big Do's and Don't's

- DON'T write a piece of music hoping to get permission later. You may never get it, and your efforts will be wasted.
- DON'T write the piece if the poet does not respond, or if the poet says no. Remember, the poem belongs to them. You'd expect the right to decide if you want others to interpret your music and they deserve the same courtesy.
- If you get permission to set a text, DO share your final product with the agent or estate.
- DO send a thank you letter once you are given permission.

Ideas for Finding Poems

- Look to the past. Poets like Walt Whitman, Shakespeare, and anyone else who has been dead for a hundred or more years are always safe.
- Get in the habit of reading a book of poems every so often, and writing a letter or two asking for permission once in a while.
- Try out the works of Langston Hughes. He was a wonderful poet, and his estate is most gracious about giving permission.
- If your poem is very recent, the poet may request a fee to give permission. Depending on how much it is, you can choose to pay it or not. But permission is not yours until you have paid it, and you have a signed letter in front of you!