

Works Enter the Public Domain in the United States for First Time in Twenty Years

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On October 27, 1998, President Clinton signed the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act, which extended the term of copyright an additional twenty years, making the term for most works to be the life of the author plus seventy years. It similarly extended terms of anonymous and pseudonymous works, works made for hire, and works in their renewal terms from seventy-five to ninety-five years. Under the Act, works made in 1923 or afterward that were still protected by copyright in 1998 would not enter the public domain until 2019 or later.

The public domain is not a place. That might seem obvious to some, but the Public Information Office has received calls asking “Is the public domain in Washington, DC?” Public domain works are anywhere—they are works not protected by copyright and therefore can be used without first obtaining permission from the author.

Many works in the public domain once were protected by copyright, but the term has expired. Others failed to meet the requirements for copyright protection. And still other rights were released by the copyright owners. An author should never assume something is in the public domain—it should always be researched and confirmed before use. For example, a movie could be in the public domain, but an underlying story within the movie may not be.

In January 2019, the first of the works affected by the 1998 act enter the public domain, making them free to reproduce, have derivative works made based upon them (translations, cover songs, adaptations), distribute, or publicly perform or display. As long as the current law stands, works will enter the public domain every year in January as their copyrights expire.

The following is a small sample of the works entering the public domain in 2019. An extensive list can be found [here](#). ©



Movies

- *The Ten Commandments*, directed by Cecil B. DeMille
- *The Pilgrim*, directed by Charlie Chaplin
- *Our Hospitality*, directed by Buster Keaton and John G. Blystone

Books

- *Tarzan and the Golden Lion* by Edgar Rice Burroughs
- *A son at the Front* by Edith Wharton
- *The Inimitable Jeeves* and *Leave it to Psmith* by P.G. Wodehouse

Music

- “Yes! We Have No Bananas” words and music by Frank Silver and Irving Cohn
- “Who’s Sorry Now” words by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby, music by Ted Snyder
- *London Calling!* (musical) by Noel Coward