



# AUTHORSHIP and OWNERSHIP

## Unit Overview

**The Authorship and Ownership Unit focuses on how the act of creation has been altered by digital media and the related effects on claims to ownership and authorship. Overall, the goals of the unit are to help students reflect on the ethics of appropriation; to understand the difference between plagiarism and responsible “appropriation”; and to give them the tools to identify—and to defend—meaningful critical and creative expression that is inspired by the work of others.**

### Key Questions

- How has the act of creation been altered by new media? What does it mean to you to be an author or a creator today?
- What is the difference between being “inspired by” someone else’s work and plagiarism?
- How can you remix, or otherwise “appropriate” the work of others in a responsible, ethical way?
- How do legal aspects of ownership, such as copyright, public domain, and fair use, limit or enable some forms of appropriation?

New media provide new ways to create content and share it with others, and to access and use others’ creations. Traditional notions of authorship (the process of creating original work) and ownership (holding the legal rights to creative work) are being rethought in response to collective authorship on sites like Wikipedia, by the capacity to distribute amateur and professional videos to mass audiences through sites like YouTube, and by the technologies that allow remixing of content.

There are both promises and risks related to the ways in which authorship and ownership are being reconceptualized in new media environments. New media afford unprecedented access to information,



which may inspire new forms of learning; they also afford budding authors and other creators new avenues to participate in creative life.

At the same time, the ease of access to information, music, video, and other content can result in intentional or naïve misuses—e.g., practices such as illegal downloading, plagiarism, and failures to cite sources properly or to consider the intentions of original creators and owners of online content.

**NOTE:** This unit will **not** instruct students on the finer points of intellectual-property law or copyright infringement. Rather, the lessons will give a basic overview of copyright and ask students to think critically about legal and social norms surrounding copyright and the appropriation of copyrighted materials (see *Axis of Media Ethics* and *Ad Men*). In sum, our approach to ownership focuses on building a basic understanding of the legal principles while engaging students in ethical consideration of the meaning of ownership for creators. For more in-depth information and curricula on copyright law, please see:

- The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University and eIFL.net’s Copyright for Librarians Curriculum: [http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/copyrightforlibrarians/Main\\_Page](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/copyrightforlibrarians/Main_Page)
- The Media Education Lab at Temple University’s Copyright and Fair Use Curriculum: <http://mediaeducationlab.com/teaching-about-copyright-and-fair-use>

## Ethical Thinking Skills

**Ethical thinking skills highlighted in this unit:**

- **Perspective-Taking**—understanding, recognizing the legitimacy of, and empathizing with the often disparate views of authors, creators, owners, and users of content.
- **Roles and Responsibilities**—recognizing and reflecting on their personal roles and responsibilities when creating or using online content in various ways.
- **Awareness of Benefits and Harms to Different Communities**—reflecting on the potential benefits and harms to communities of different ownership and authorship choices online.

## New Media Literacies

**New media literacies highlighted in this unit:**

- **Appropriation**—the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content. Existing laws and policies in school may not match with social norms of remixing content; what counts as “appropriation” in one setting might be seen as “plagiarism” in others.



- **Negotiation**—the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms. In this environment of remixed content and differing norms for appropriate use of others’ work, this skill is critical for youth.

## Unit Lessons

The authorship and ownership unit was designed by Andrea Flores (GoodPlay), John M. Francis (GoodPlay), Steve Schultze (Project NML), and Deja Elana Swartz (Project NML). This curriculum contains the following lessons:

- **The Axis of Media Ethics**—This lesson includes different scenarios of appropriation in new-media environments. Students discuss the appropriateness of each scenario from the perspectives of both legal norms and social norms, and plot them on an axis of media ethics.
- **Diamonds and DJs**—This lesson is designed to introduce students to the idea of appropriation and to begin to think critically about the ethics of appropriating a creator’s work for a new purpose. Students will watch two sets of videos: 1) a Project New Media Literacies Media Exemplar video about the differences between remixes and mash-ups; and 2) the video of a song that has been remixed and the original song that inspired it. The class will then engage in a group discussion about the purpose and meaning of remixing and appropriation.
- **The Inspired Highlighter**—The Inspired Highlighter lesson focuses on the ethics of authorship. The question is examined in light of authorship tools (e.g., point of view and character), copyright protections, and a broader sense of authorial responsibility across different media forms. Participants consider remixes and mashups created by DJs, and original novels that inspired new works (other novels, fan fiction, plays, films).
- **Ad Men**—In this lesson, students role-play as advertising project managers working for the “Vegetable Growers of America” (VGA) on a campaign promoting vegetarianism. The VGA wants a high-impact, creative, controversial print and billboard campaign for use in several major publications and on billboards nationwide. In the activity, participants will choose photos and music for the campaign, considering ownership and licensing and the song/photos’ original purpose and authors. Students will also create tag lines for the photos that promote the VGA’s message creatively. This lesson allows students to explore how using media purposes other than the original artist intended can have unexpected consequences.
- **Supplemental Lessons: Who Wants to Be in the Public Domain? and Is It Fair Use?**—As stated above, this unit is not intended to serve as an in-depth curriculum on intellectual property law or copyright infringement. However, a basic understanding of the



concepts of copyright, public domain, and fair use will help to ground the discussion in the lessons of this unit and help students to think critically about their legal, social, and ethical consequences. The supplemental lessons provided with this unit introduce these concepts.