




licensing 101

Free Fonts Are Not Always Free
By Yves Peters

 www.fontshop.com/education

Some are licensed for unlimited use, some only for private use but not for commercial jobs. You don't want to take advantage of the kindness and generosity of the people who designed them; it's really bad for your karma. And you don't want to risk that, do you?



Yves Peters, quoted in the introduction of the Free Fonts FAQ on typophile.com.



Some licenses are universal and apply to all fonts of the same kind, while others have been specifically drawn up by a type designer or foundry for their personal body of work, sometimes even for one particular font.



Be sure to check out the article about the FontFont EULA (End User License Agreement) on [The FontFeed](#).

Why are fonts licensed? What does this entail?

The most important thing one has to keep in mind is that typefaces are creative works. Fonts are merely the physical manifestations of the creations of a type designer. You can compare them to music, or movies, or similar artistic creations. When you purchase a DVD, you simply acquire the right to watch the creative work on that DVD. You don't own the movie. The intellectual property rights to that movie remain with the director, producer, etc. This is the reason why: before the movie starts, or sometimes after it ends – a message warns you that *“Unless otherwise expressly licensed by the copyright proprietor, any unauthorized copying, public performance, or any other distribution whatsoever, in whole or in part, is strictly prohibited”* and so on. The movie is not yours, so what you are allowed to do with it simply is not your decision to make. Similarly, when you acquire digital type, you

only own the “font” – the digital file which is the physical embodiment of a collection of letters, numbers, symbols, etc. – not the “typeface” – the design of this collection. Now very few people realize that, but **all fonts are licensed, regardless if they are free fonts or commercial ones**. When you receive a candy bar for free, the candy bar is yours. You eat it or you don't, you give it to someone else, you use it in a diorama; whatever you do with it is your business. But even if you get a font for free, the typeface still remains the intellectual property of the type designer who created it. All you have is a license to use it. So regardless whether you paid for this license or got it for free, you are to comply with the end user license agreement. For example you can't just tinker with the font and pass it on to someone else when the license doesn't include the right to modify nor to distribute it. It simply is not your decision to make.



ABOUT BUNDLED FONTS

Bundled fonts may only be used as long as the product (and version!) they're bundled with is installed.

The most obvious free fonts, those that are just there, on your computer, and included in your software packages, are in fact anything but free. True, you didn't have to buy them separately, yet their cost is calculated in the purchase price of said computer or program. What's more, their use is intimately tied to the specific version of the operating system or software they came with.

Let's take the popular Adobe Creative Suite as an example. Bundled fonts are covered by the license for the product they're bundled with. Some fonts that came with version CS3 – for example Bickham Script Pro and Garamond Premier Pro – are not included in version CS4. As long as CS3 is installed (and has been properly licensed), you still have a license to use the aforementioned fonts. However you technically lose that license when/if you un-install Adobe CS3, or migrate to a new machine that doesn't have Adobe CS3 licensed and installed.



WHAT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO?

The proper thing to do is to purchase licenses for fonts you got in a bundle and want to keep using after the original app is gone.

Software manufacturers – in this case Adobe – have chosen to not do anything technical to force un-installing bundled fonts. There are two reasons for this. On the one hand, bundled fonts are identical to fonts that are licensed directly, so the un-install process can't distinguish them by looking at the files. It would run the risk of un-installing fonts for which the user has a separate license.

On the other hand, even if the only license the user has is for the accompanying application, un-installing fonts would be a very bad user experience. Those fonts are likely to be referenced in lots of legacy documents on the user's system. The software manufacturers want people to do the right thing, without causing them major grief.



Almost all freeware fonts are only free for personal, non-commercial use.

ABOUT FREEWARE FONTS

Freeware (the contraction of “free” and “software”) fonts are available for use at no cost, or for an optional fee. Those fonts normally are fully functional for an unlimited time, but they seldom are unconditionally free. The designer usually restricts one or more rights to copy and distribute the fonts, and prohibits making derivative versions of the typeface. Most commonly the license also imposes restrictions on the type of use, including personal use, individual use, non-profit use, non-commercial use, academic use, commercial use, or any combination of these.

WHAT DOES “FREE” REALLY MEAN?



Read more about the artistic and technical quality of fonts on [The FontFeed](#).

Generally speaking almost all freeware fonts are “free for personal, non-commercial use.” This means that – as soon as you use the fonts to design something for someone else – you are required to purchase a license for commercial use. The price of such a license is comparable to that for a commercial font; however (some exceptions notwithstanding) – the artistic and/or technical quality rarely is.



CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE

Some freeware fonts are distributed under a Creative Commons license. This typically is the standard licensing model for [FontStruct](#) fonts. [Creative Commons](#) is a non-profit organization that increases sharing and improves collaboration. Their tools give everyone from individual creators to large companies and institutions a simple, standardized way to grant copyright permissions to their creative work. The [Creative Commons licenses](#) enable people to easily change their copyright terms from the default of “all rights reserved” to “some rights reserved.”

SIL OPEN FONT LICENSE

A small number of freeware fonts are distributed under a [SIL Open Font License](#) (OFL). This free and open source license is specifically designed for fonts and related software. It is based on the experience in font design and linguistic software engineering of [SIL International](#), a worldwide development and educational organization. The main purpose is to enable a true open typographic community to spring up and grow. The OFL provides a legal framework and infrastructure for worldwide development, sharing and improvement of fonts and related software in a collaborative manner. It enables font authors to release their work under a common license that allows bundling, modification, and redistribution. It encourages shared value, is not limited to any specific computing platform or environment, and can be used by other organizations or individuals.



Shareware fonts generally are incomplete, and are only free for a limited trial period of time.

ABOUT SHAREWARE FONTS

The fundamental distinction between freeware fonts and shareware fonts is that the latter are only free for a limited period of time.



freeware



shareware

Shareware fonts are usually offered to users without payment, sometimes with an incomplete character set or limited features, with the implied obligation to acquire a full license after a trial period. The rationale behind shareware fonts is to give potential buyers the opportunity to use the fonts and judge their usefulness before purchasing a license for the full version.

Shareware fonts are far less common than freeware fonts, because generating fonts with incomplete character sets is quite a hassle, plus it forces the type designer or foundry to maintain a double archive. Furthermore, having duplicate versions of fonts can potentially cause problems. Either the trial version and the full version are distinguished by their naming, but then the user has to substitute the fonts in all the documents they were used in once a full license has been purchased. Or the names are identical so the full version overwrites and automatically replaces the trial version, but then people may mistake the incomplete trial version for the full version, causing them to believe the fonts are sub-standard.



Bundled Freeware Shareware **Free Commercial** Pirated Commercial


Free weights of commercial fonts are free for commercial use, plus they are complete, and not limited to a trial period of time.

A number of type designers, foundries, and vendors provide some free font downloads as a marketing tool. Unlike shareware fonts these are not incomplete fonts, but rather single weights from larger type families. The fundamental difference is that those free weights are licensed just like commercial fonts: they are also free for commercial use, plus they are complete and not limited to a trial period of time. Instead of merely letting users try out the fonts, they can use them “for real.”

The basic idea is that for any serious work one needs more than a single weight, so if potential buyers like that single weight they are likely to purchase a license for the whole family. For example [FontFont](#) occasionally offers a single weight of one of its new releases for free; [Jos Buivenga](#) of the [exlibris](#) type foundry consistently offers one weight per family for free of his commercial typefaces; and [FontShop](#) has a [Free Fonts](#) page with a small and changing selection of quality free faces. An additional advantage is that those free fonts can also be used to introduce new font features or font formats, like [webfonts](#).

ABOUT FREE COMMERCIAL FONTS

WHY ARE THEY OFFERED FOR FREE?

 [See Styles, Weights, Widths — It's All in the \(Type\) Family](#)



ABOUT PIRATED COMMERCIAL FONTS

What about pirated commercial fonts?

Pirated fonts are not free at all; they are stolen and illegally redistributed.

What comes next may sound biased to some readers, yet I simply can't help it – it's the reality of the situation. The vast majority of the free fonts out there are – to put it mildly – of inferior quality. And although a very small percentage is fit for professional use, statistics tell us you'll more likely stumble upon – to put it mildly again – less successful creations. Because most free font websites are cluttered uncurated swamps, there is no quality control at all.

An additional problem is that you don't even know what you're downloading. Is it a genuine free font? Or could it be an unauthorized clone, a pirated and renamed commercial font, or a stolen proprietary face? If this seems trivial to you, maybe read through my account of [the tragic Hadopi story](#).



Read more about pirated commercial fonts on [The Font Feed](#).



**Free &
guilt free.**

FontShop has free fonts! Check out these two fontlists: [Free Fonts](#) and [Free FontFonts](#).

Commercial foundries release free fonts more often than you think. See the ‘Free Commercial’ section for details.

Founded by Erik Spiekermann and Neville Brody in 1989, FontShop is the original independent retailer of digital type. We offer more than 100,000 fonts from dozens of expert-selected foundries, including our house brand: FontFont.

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This document is set in FF Suhmo Pro and FF Unit Pro.



FontShop is more than a shop that sells fonts — we want to help you do great work too. Get more typography tips and tutorials at fontshop.com/education.

FURTHER READING

Erik Spiekermann’s Typo Tips
A Designer’s Guide to Webfonts
The Right Font for the Job
Type Anatomy

ONLINE RESOURCES

FontShop.com
FontFeed.com
Spiekermann.com