

## What is it?

Software like the web browser Firefox, the virtual learning environment Moodle and the web server Apache can be downloaded, copied and used without signing any agreements or paying for any licences. This can happen because the creators of this software allow it through the licence that they choose. The creator of a program owns the copyright in it, which means that they can control who copies, adapts or distributes their work. If someone other than the creator of the work wants to do any of those things, they need a licence from the author which provides that permission. With free and open source software licensing, the creator gives a licence to anyone allowing them to copy, adapt or distribute the work provided that they agree to a few conditions.

There are many different free and open source licences, but they all share some common features. They all make it possible for users to examine the way the software works by allowing them access to the program's source code. They all allow any user to share the software as widely as they want. They all allow users to alter the software as much as they like, and to give their changed version to others.

## Is it the same as Freeware?

Free and open source software is not the same thing as freeware. Freeware may be available at no cost but it does not use a free or open source licence, and rarely provides access to its source code or a right to modify.

## What are the conditions?

We mentioned some conditions. All free and open source licences ask that the original author be given credit on all copies of the software. Some licences have conditions about what happens when you mix code that they cover with other code – perhaps that you have written yourself. For example a licence might state that when any code that it covers is used in a software project, the whole project must be released under that same licence if it is released at all. This kind of condition is often referred to as a 'copyleft' condition in a punning reference to 'copyright'. Broadly speaking, free and open source licences fall into one of two categories – 'permissive' or 'copyleft' - based upon whether they contain these kind of conditions. Some licences try to have a foot in both camps, insisting that only some projects that use their code must also use their licence. These licences are sometimes known as 'weak copyleft' or 'partial copyleft' licences.

## Why do people use it?

There are a few reasons why creators of software might want to release their software under a free or open source licence. The freedom that these licences provide to change the software they cover allows any contributors anywhere in the world to work on software projects together at the same time. The contributors do not have to get permission to make the changes they want, and they can pass the changes back and forwards between themselves to assess and improve them still further. If a contributor wants to collaborate widely with others, free and open source software licensing can make this happen more easily. Increasingly this kind of 'open development', facilitated by free and open source software licensing, is being seen as a valuable tool for all levels of software development from the hobbyist to the corporation.

## Who is OSS Watch?

OSS Watch provides unbiased advice and guidance on the use, development, and licensing of free and open source software. OSS Watch is funded by the JISC and its services are available free-of-charge to UK higher and further education. If you want to find out more about open source software, we're the people to ask.

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