

# Copyright: Changing Lyrics

## **“Can I change the words of a song?”**

While “Music teachers can edit or simplify purchased, printed copies, provided that the fundamental character of the work is not distorted or the lyrics, if any, are not altered or lyrics added if none exist.” this does not necessarily follow when modifying the lyrics of a song.

## ***What does that mean?***

“Any revision of a lyric that changes the integrity of the work requires authorization from the copyright owner.”  
e.g. parody (although this may fall under “Fair Use exemption”, choir changing the text of a song for the Mass

“Altering just a few words in a text is another matter. Suppose you want to change just the last text line in a song to personalize it for your group . . . assuming you’ve bought a sufficient number of copies for your group, you can probably do it . . . If you haven’t [bought sufficient copies], then it’s difficult for you to claim a Fair Use exemption. Also, you need to consider whether it is going to be reproduced.

**To be extra safe, ask for permission, and chances are you’ll get it.”**

## **How do you ask for permission?**

“First, identify and locate the copyright owner. The copyright notice at the bottom of the first page of music . . . will give you the name of the owner. Sometimes the credits on a CD label or liner will, too.”

Contact the copyright owner and request permission to make a derivative work. Include the following information:

- The nature of derivation of the original work?
- How many copies you’ll make?
- Who will make the change—you or someone for hire?
- Who will perform the arrangement?
- Will you sell the arrangement? If so, why and for how much?
- Is the arrangement for one specific occasion (graduation, church, etc.), or will it become part of your group’s repertoire?

“The more information you can provide, the better your chances of getting a speedy reply,” If permission is granted, get it in writing.

**If permission is denied, don’t make the change; and don’t ever make a public performance**