

FAQ: Open Educational Resources

What are Open Educational Resources (OER)?

Open educational resources (OER) are educational materials that are distributed at no cost with legal permission for the public to freely use, share, and build upon the content.

The Hewlett Foundation defines OER as “teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others. OER include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge”

How do OER help educators and students?

Open educational resources give educators the ability to adapt instructional resources to the individual needs of their students, to ensure that resources are up-to-date, and to ensure that cost is not a barrier to accessing high-quality standards-aligned resources. OER are already being used across America in K-12, higher education, workforce training, informal learning, and more.

What is the difference between ‘free’ and ‘open’ resources?

Open educational resources are and always will be free, but not all free resources are OER. Free resources may be temporarily free or may be restricted from use at some time in the future (including by the addition of fees to access those resources). Moreover, free-but-not-open resources may not be modified, adapted or redistributed without obtaining special permission from the copyright holder.

Are all OER digital?

Like most educational resources these days, most OER start as digital files. But like traditional resources, OER can be made available to students in both digital and printed formats. Of course, digital OER are easier to share, modify, and redistribute, but being digital is not what makes something an OER or not. This flexibility is important, because it no longer makes print and digital a choice of one or the other. OER textbooks, for example, can typically be printed for \$5-50 (compared to \$100-300 for traditional books) while still being available free digitally.

How do you tell if an educational resource is an OER?

The key distinguishing characteristic of OER is its intellectual property license and the freedoms the license grants to others to share and adapt it. If a lesson plan or activity is not clearly tagged or marked as being in the public domain or having an open license, it is not OER. It's that simple. The most common way to release materials as OER is through Creative Commons copyright licenses, which are standardized, free-to-use open licenses that have already been used on more than 1 billion copyrighted works.

Can OER be high quality if it is free?

Studies at both the K-12 and higher education levels show that students who use OER do as well, and often better, than their peers using traditional resources. Also, many OER are developed through rigorous peer review and production processes that mirror traditional materials. However, it is important to note that being open or closed does not inherently affect the quality of a resource. Being open does enable educators to use the resource more effectively, which can lead to better outcomes. For example, OER can be updated, tailored and improved locally to fit the needs of students, and it also eliminates cost as a barrier for students to access their materials.

Do OER require special technology to use?

One of the great things about OER is that users have the right to turn it into any format they wish (which is almost always forbidden with traditional resources). Therefore, OER aren't tied to a particular type of device or software, which gives students and schools more freedom in what technology they purchase. In cases where technology isn't available, there is always the option to print.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution \(CCBY\) 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). It was adapted by Nicole Allen of SPARC (nicole@sparcopen.org) from “#GoOpen: OER for K-12 Educators” (www.tinyurl.com/GoOpen) by Doug Levin, also available under a CC BY license.