© in a few simple steps  
(or how to know that you need to ask questions)

So you see a line on a website ... or a movie ... or a book ... that looks something like this: © 2015 Carole McNall.  
What does that mean? Can you use material from any of those in a project you're working on? Do people actually get sued for this stuff? And is it OK to use if that line doesn't appear?

Start here ====> What is copyright?  
Copyright is a type of legal protection offered to creators of works like books and other written work, movies, music, art and photography, video and dance.

Why do we even have copyright?  
American copyright law was established through a clause in the U.S. Constitution. It's supposed to be a win-win: Creators get control and, hopefully, some payment for their work and in return, they provide more of that work to the audience.

If you own a copyright, what can you do with it?  
The holder of copyright controls the ability to reproduce, distribute, perform, display and create derivative works. A creator might not own his or her own copyright; often, rights in a work are sold or licensed to another for reasons ranging from "get that movie made" to "my record company stole my copyright!"

And wait -- derivative work?  
Derivative work is work in a different format that's based on the original copyrighted work. For one well-known example: The "Hunger Games" movies are derivative works based on the original books. The movie studio had to reach a deal with author Suzanne Collins to allow the use of her books for the movies.

Doesn't someone have to register with the federal government to get a copyright?  
Very short answer: No. Before 1976, the law did require copyright registration and the use of that line mentioned above (© 2015 Carole McNall). Now? All a creator has to do is fix the work in a "tangible medium of expression" to have copyright protection. And that "tangible medium" could be anything from paper to film to video tape to any sort of digital medium.

Modern technology warning: Many people assume work online is not protected by copyright and may be used by anyone without permission. That's usually not the case. Unless a person deliberately chooses not to claim his or her copyright protection (called putting the work in the "public domain"), that work is protected. A user who didn't ask permission might never be noticed ... but it's increasingly easy to spot your own work on someone else's website.

Haven't I heard that people get sued for this?  
You have. Use of copyrighted work without permission is copyright infringement. (The law does offer one major exception to that, called fair use.) Record companies and movie studios have been particularly active in trying to find and sue people who infringe, especially if they share material with others. You don't have to make money to be infringing.
So is there any way I can use copyrighted material?

Maybe. Copyright law does allow legal use of copyrighted material without permission under a doctrine called fair use. One big problem here: You can't easily work through a checklist and say "yes, this is absolutely fair use." Guidelines exist, but you'd only get a definitive answer by working through a court case.

Guidelines for fair use? What are they?

* What is the purpose and character of the use you want to make of the material?
  Are you transforming the material by adding enough of your own work to make the original work into something new? Parodies, for example, have been found to be fair use of the original work.

* What is the nature of the work you're using?
  To satisfy this question, it's better if you're using published, factual work than unpublished or fictional material.

* How much are you using? How important a portion of the work is what you're using?
  Not surprisingly, the less you use of the work, the more likely a court is to see that as a fair use. But ... It is possible to use just a small but very important portion of a work and be found to be infringing. One well-known case: Former President Gerry Ford's autobiography is a sizable book, 454 pages. But the portion that attracted most people's attention was a fairly small section -- the pages in which he explained why he’d pardoned Richard Nixon. Ford had agreed to allow Time magazine to publish that section before the book hit the stores. When another magazine published before Time did, Ford's publishers won an infringement suit.

* What would the impact of this use be on the potential market for the original work?
  And here's part of why the Ford suit succeeded while, in a similar situation, Hillary Clinton opted not to sue. Courts will consider whether a proposed use will make it less likely that the original creator can find a paying audience for his or her work.

  The Hillary Clinton example: Clinton's "Living History," her first memoir, is an even bigger book than Ford's; it's 592 pages. But like Ford's, audiences were most interested in a small portion of the Clinton book -- the story of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Also like Ford, Clinton had arranged with Time to publish that portion before the book came out. Before Time could do so, the Associated Press provided to its members a story talking about that portion of the Clinton book.

  Why didn't Clinton's publishers sue? Probably because the AP story sparked even more interest in the book; preorders soared.

  It might be tempting to become a hero with students by sharing a major chunk of a textbook online. But consider that courts pay particular attention to this point in the test. If a publisher notices -- and they often do -- that loss of market would tilt a judge toward a ruling of infringement.

And if I can't argue fair use ...?

Look for material that's listed as public domain. (I once found an author had given permission for people to download his entire book for free.) Or check the Creative Commons website, creativecommons.org, for material whose creators have freed for use with far fewer restrictions.