
8 Questions and Answers about Predatory Journals: Protecting Your Research, Reputation, and Funding from Theft and Fraud

Predatory

/'prɛd ə, tɔː i/

adjective

1. preying upon others for food
“predatory snake species”
2. exploiting others out of greed or for personal gain
“the company’s predatory practices”

Academic publishing has changed tremendously with the spread of open access journals and the shift to online publishing. There are now more journals and papers being published than ever before. As a result, authors are faced with ever fiercer competition to publish in a vast array of journals that employ diverse publishing practices. Against this background of change in the publishing landscape, a serious problem has emerged: **predatory journals**.

In this article, I’ll introduce predatory journals and answer some questions of the sort that we at ThinkSCIENCE have been asked by authors and by attendees at our workshops and seminars. I’ll also give links to resources that I hope will be helpful to you in learning more about this topic.

Q1. What is a predatory journal?

This is a difficult question and there are many possible ways to define predatory journals. Perhaps it can be most simply stated as follows:

“A predatory journal is a journal that deceptively takes from an author.”

This concept of deceptively taking from an author can take a number of forms, which we discuss below. Opinions can differ on whether certain publishers and journals are predatory or not, but what is not in question is that the bulk of predatory journals engage in clear fraud. Part of the difficulty with identifying and avoiding predatory journals is that although some practices are clearly abusive (e.g., wholesale duplication of previously published papers, fake peer reviews), many practices are not intrinsically predatory. When choosing where to submit your paper, it is crucial to be able to distinguish between good and bad journals.

Q2. What's the difference between "good" and "bad" journals?

Simply put, good journals provide all of the following things, and bad journals don't.

- 1 Exposure for your work**

This is the reason that we publish, after all. Paper journals should be published at the promised times, and electronic journals should be kept up to date and available. The [Digital Library Federation](#), among other organizations, works on the issue of perpetual availability for electronically published works.
- 2 Adequate review**

Without adequate peer review—or, in some cases, editorial or institutional review—publishing in a journal is no different than publishing a paper on your own website, on a pre-print server, or in a general magazine. Not all works are intended for peer-reviewed publication, and there is certainly a place for things such as expository articles, textbooks, monographs, and other explanatory materials, but these publications serve a different purpose. A journal without some form of adequate and qualified review is not a scholarly journal.
- 3 Qualified, independent editorial oversight**

Legitimate scholarly journals are typically established by respected academics to serve an unfilled need. To be considered legitimate, a journal must clearly and accurately state the membership of its editorial board. The board should comprise academics with the expertise to understand and evaluate the papers that the journal publishes. [STM](#), a trade association for journal publishers, sets out this principle as the only responsibilities (split into two parts: correctness and independence) for publishers in their [International Ethical Principles for Scholarly Publication](#).
- 4 Acceptance by other scholars**

Jocelyn Clark of the *BMJ* [suggests](#) checking PubMed Central and Web of Science to see whether a journal is included. Lack of inclusion does not necessarily mean by itself that a journal is predatory, but some institutions and grants do not regard publications in such journals as scholarly.

For more detailed information about the duties of journals and publishers, we recommend visiting [COPE](#), the Committee on Publication Ethics.

Q3. What do predatory journals do?

Predatory publishers engage in deception to exploit authors. One of the most common forms of abuse is charging excessive or hidden Article Processing Charges (APCs). This type of abuse is, at heart, an attempt to get paid out of your research funding without providing suitable value in return. However, it's important to distinguish between the APCs charged by legitimate publishers and journals and those charged by predatory journals (see our list of warning signs for predatory journals below).

So what makes one group legitimate and the other predatory? Put simply: quality and transparency. Legitimate journals will uphold the four principles listed above for Q2, and they will be extremely clear about any APCs or other fees

associated with publication. Predatory journals pervert these principles, often providing falsified information about the readership, importance, and oversight of the journal. In particular, predatory journals are likely to lie about their [impact factor](#), editorial board, and content (sometimes going so far as to plagiarize other journals to give the appearance of having legitimate papers).

Q4. Are excessive or hidden APCs the only type of abuse?

No, there are other types. For example, predatory journals may steal intellectual property through deception, engage in fraudulent or fake peer review, or list respected researchers as editors without their knowledge or consent. Because APCs are the most direct route to profiting from others' effort, they are a frequent target of abuse, but generally speaking, abuse can occur whenever the journal or publisher fails to fulfill its obligations to authors.

Q5. How common a problem is predatory journals?

This question is a subject of debate among academics. Jeffrey Beall, an associate professor at the University of Colorado Denver, tracks one particular segment of abusers: open-access publishers. His blog, Scholarly Open Access lists and discusses journals and publishers in what is often called simply "Beall's List" of predatory journals and publishers. As of this writing, there are 671 journals and 811 publishers on this list.

Q6. What are some indicators that a journal or publisher is predatory?

Predatory journals and publishers exist to defraud the scientific community, and they spend a lot of time and effort thinking of new and innovative ways to do so. Still, checking a few characteristics can often identify them quickly.

- 1 They are on Beall's list or not listed in citation services**
Inclusion on Beall's list is not a definitive answer by itself, as exemplified by two different accounts of one publisher: one suggesting predatory practices and the other [describing best practices by the publisher](#).
- 2 Mistakes in English (or the target language) on the journal's website, distinct from mistakes in the journal articles**
Mistakes can slip past even the best of us, but if a journal's editors cannot write well in the language that the journal is published in, it seems unlikely that they're qualified to edit that journal. Note that the level of language in the journal articles is a distinct issue: some journals are very concerned about proper language; others are concerned with the ideas only.
- 3 Promoting the ISSN (International Standard Serial Number) as a sign of quality**
Any publisher in an ISSN member country can get an ISSN by applying and fulfilling the requirements. The ISSN is simply an identifier. The governing body of the ISSN [specifically states](#) that "[The ISSN] is a digital code without any intrinsic meaning.... [I]t does not guarantee the quality or validity of the contents."

- 4 Payment and (no) “refund” policies**

The primary focus of legitimate journals is the contents of the journal, not the contents of your grant budget or bank account. Perhaps surprisingly, this can result in higher APCs because legitimate journals incur more expenses than predatory journals. An excessive focus on payment and refund policies can indicate that receiving payments—rather than publishing—is the primary goal of the journal.
- 5 An anonymous or fictitious editorial board**

Legitimate journals will list the editorial board and their university affiliations. If you are doubtful about any of them, this allows you to contact them directly to verify their involvement with the journal.

Q7. Where can I get information about specific journals?

Some good starting points are Beall’s list to see whether a journal is listed as a possibly predatory journal and indexing services like PubMed Central and Web of Science to see whether a journal is included. Also, as in many aspects of scholarly research, your peers and mentors are likely to be an excellent source of information and a second opinion. By keeping in mind what journals are intended to do, and what publication is intended to accomplish, you are less likely to be lured into submitting to a predatory publisher.

Q8. Can you help me evaluate a journal?

At ThinkSCIENCE, we continually strive to set ourselves apart as the best at what we do, and most of the researchers we know do the same. Upgrading the linguistic quality of papers or translating them into high-quality writing lets us help researchers get published in better journals—but it’s not the only way we help. We’re happy to help if you need assistance with selecting or verifying a journal or publisher.

Summary

Academic publishing fundamentally relies on the integrity of the system’s participants: publishers have a duty to support their journals’ editors; journals have a duty to effectively review submitted manuscripts, communicate clearly with authors, and perform the promised services; and authors have a duty to submit ethically conducted research that is free of plagiarism. When some parties act unethically, however, problems like predatory publishing arise.

I hope that this article has been helpful in making you aware of the issues that should be considered in choosing a publisher and journal, whether for yourself or for your students. At ThinkSCIENCE, we offer support at each stage of the publishing process, so please let us know if you need assistance in selecting a journal or book publisher (or responding to a book publisher’s invitation to publish).