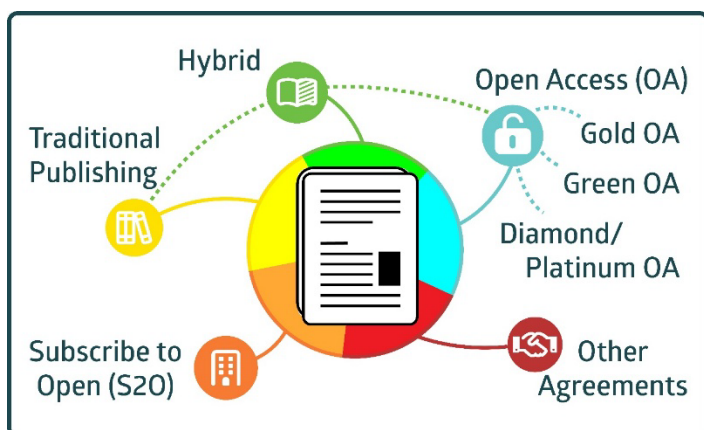


Choosing the right publishing model for your research

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Publishing is more than the final step of your research—how your research is published has important impacts on whether your findings are accessible to readers and how your findings might influence your field and contribute to the global body of knowledge. But with scholarly publishing evolving rapidly, authors now face a wider range of

choices than ever before.

Should you submit to a traditional subscription-based journal, a fully open access (OA) journal, or one of the newer hybrid or collective models such as subscribe-to-open (S2O)?

Understanding these options is essential for maximizing visibility, complying with funder requirements, and managing costs, and the “best” choice may very well change depending on the researcher and even the research in question.

In this featured article, we will briefly outline the main publishing models available to authors. We discuss their advantages and disadvantages, as well as factors to consider when choosing the best option for your goals, audience, and resources.

Traditional (subscription-based) publishing

Traditional publishing remains a dominant model in many fields and for a number of high-impact, prestige journals. Under this system, publishers manage peer review, editing, and distribution, with journals financed primarily through subscriptions paid by libraries or individuals. Authors typically do not need to pay an article processing charge (APC) to publish.



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Institutions subscribe to a journal or publisher's bundle, providing revenue to support editorial services and infrastructure. Access is restricted to subscribers, and readers outside these institutions often must pay for individual articles.

Over the last decade there has been strong push toward OA and other alternative publishing models. Meanwhile, rising costs and shrinking library budgets create pressure on subscription models, leading to "[serials crises](#)" in which access is limited or canceled.

The push for OA by funders and governments is accelerating the transition away from subscriptions, but traditional journals often retain strong reputations, and several prestige journals with high-impact factors still operate under the traditional subscription-based model. In addition, while some large publishing houses like Springer Nature have made [efforts to increase the number of OA-friendly journals](#), many still maintain extensive subscription portfolios.

In some disciplines, researchers tend to view established journals with high impact factors and strong reputations, many of which are subscription-based, as more prestigious. This perception often influences authors' publication choices.

Advantages	Disadvantages
→ Used by many established, prestigious journals → No author-facing APCs required	→ Accessible only to subscribers, possibly limiting dissemination → May not meet funder OA requirements

Open access

OA removes paywalls, allowing anyone with internet access to read published articles immediately. This model supports the principle that publicly funded research should be publicly accessible. While there are several models that fall under the umbrella of OA, there are two main models authors are likely to encounter:

Gold OA: Articles are published in fully OA journals or made OA on a publisher's platform. Most Gold OA journals finance operations through APCs paid by authors or funders.

Green OA: Authors deposit a version of their manuscript in an institutional or subject repository, often after an embargo period

Numerous studies, such as [a 2024 paper in the journal *Scientometrics*](#), have suggested that OA articles are cited more frequently than paywalled articles, and that these citations are often

more varied. In addition, [OA has been reported to facilitate a broader societal impact](#), enabling educators, policymakers, and practitioners to access findings without barriers.

Scientific, technical, and medical disciplines have higher OA adoption rates, partly driven by funder policies like Plan S and the NIH Public Access Policy, while social sciences and humanities show slower OA uptake, influenced by funding structures and publisher cultures. However, interest across disciplines is growing, particularly in gold OA models [<https://stm-assoc.org/oa-dashboard/oa-dashboard-2023/open-access-uptake-by-discipline>].

Choosing OA doesn't come without its challenges, though. APCs can be a barrier for authors without dedicated funding, especially in low- and middle-income countries. In addition, the rise of predatory journals that exploit the OA model has created concerns, necessitating [careful journal selection](#).

Advantages	Disadvantages
→ Maximizes visibility and readership → Complies with most funder OA policies	→ APCs can strain budgets → Quality varies among journals, and the model is often abused by predatory journals

Hybrid open access

individual articles open access within a subscription journal. This offers flexibility and allows researchers to comply with OA mandates while publishing in established, prestigious journals.

However, APCs in hybrid journals tend to be higher than in fully OA journals, and the model has been criticized for “double dipping,” where publishers receive both subscription and APC revenues. In fact, some funders now prohibit the use of funds to cover APCs for hybrid journals—for example, Plan S, an initiative launched by cOAlition S to accelerate the transition to full and immediate open access, requires that participating funders explicitly [refuse to cover article processing charges APCs for hybrid journals](#).

Advantages	Disadvantages
→ Provides OA option in subscription journals, including high-impact prestigious publications	→ Often requires higher APCs than full OA → May not be covered by some funding organizations





Subscribe-to-open and other emerging models

S2O is a newer approach that seeks to transition subscription journals to open access without charging APCs. Under this model, libraries continue paying subscriptions; when enough renew or join to meet a revenue target, the journal content becomes open access for that year. This collective funding method relies on institutional commitment rather than shifting costs to authors, while aiming to preserve many benefits to readers of more conventional OA publication.

The [Royal Society plans to convert eight journals to S2O in 2026](#), and the [American Society for Microbiology adopted S2O for six journals in 2025](#). Other publishers like [EDP Sciences](#) and [De Gruyter](#) have also experimented with S2O.

The benefits of S2O include removing financial barriers for authors by eliminating APCs, maintaining sustainable revenue via library support, and providing permanent open access content. However, success depends on consistent library participation, which may be vulnerable to budget cuts. In addition, because it is relatively new, long-term sustainability data are limited.

Advantages

- Shifts payment responsibilities to libraries and institutions
- Offers a path toward free access to readers

Disadvantages

- Relies on ongoing subscriptions to maintain OA status

Other emerging models contributing to the transformation of scholarly publishing include:

Diamond and platinum OA: Under these models, neither authors nor readers are charged—instead, publishing is often funded by institutions, consortia, or scholarly societies. While highly equitable, these models remain relatively rare and can face sustainability challenges, since long-term funding must be secured to maintain operations without APC revenue.

Read and publish agreements: These are contracts between a library or consortium and a publisher that combine subscription access to paywalled content (“read”) with the ability for affiliated authors to publish open access without paying an individual article processing charge (“publish”). In essence, an institution makes one payment that covers both reading and publishing for its authors. These agreements are usually journal- or publisher-specific and negotiated at the institutional or consortial level. While not available to all authors, those at institutions with such agreements can publish open access without paying APCs.



Considerations when choosing a publishing model

When choosing a publishing model, authors should keep several key considerations in mind to ensure their research reaches the right audience while staying within practical constraints.

Budget: Evaluate available funds for APCs or other publication fees; prioritize models that fit within grant or departmental budgets.

Importance of dissemination: Consider how widely and quickly your findings should be shared; high-impact or time-sensitive work may benefit from full OA, for example.

Funder mandates: Check whether your funding agency requires OA publication, and if so, which models or licenses are acceptable.

Impact and visibility: If relevant to your research, identify target journals for reach and prestige. Note, however, that high-impact journals may limit OA options or require higher APCs.

Institutional support: Assess what your institution offers, such as S2O participation, central APC funds, or read and publish agreements, which can offset costs and expand options.

Concluding remarks

The choice of publishing under a traditional subscription model or some variation of OA is an important one and can depend on a number of factors. As the publishing landscape continues to evolve, this choice can become even more complicated. Our editors at ThinkSCIENCE have helped many authors decide which journals best suit their research, and we would be [happy to help](#) if you have any questions about publishing.

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