

Choosing the right journal for your paper: A flowchart and tips

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When we want to submit a research paper for publication, the top-tier journals in our specialist field are usually the first that come to mind. However, these journals might not always fit our publication goals or the content of our latest paper. We all know that submitting a manuscript to an unsuitable

journal can mean our manuscript is rejected before peer review. So, how can we make a final suitable choice for our particular paper as quickly and easily as possible?

In this article, we offer a systematic approach for authors to follow, and we've summarized the factors to consider in a flowchart.

[Download a checklist for choosing the right journal](#)

Whether you decide which journal you will submit to (often called the "target journal") before, during, or after writing your paper, there are many factors to consider in your decision. The process can be time-consuming if the journals familiar to you won't meet your publication needs this time. Taking a systematic approach can help to narrow down the list of suitable choices and reach a final decision quickly.

Also, because your publication needs can differ from one paper to the next (e.g., this time you want fast publication, have a tight budget to cover publication fees, and are targeting readers across different disciplines), it's helpful to systematically



weigh up and consider the many factors involved, so you can be sure to make the best choice each time.

Shortlisting suitable journals

When you want to find journals in your field, there are a number of ways to search. For example:

- In journals that you read regularly in your field, check journal names that appear in the reference sections of published papers that are related to your work.
- Use online tools to identify potential journals. Enter different key words that describe your research, highlight the most suitable journals in the search results, and then check the journals' websites for detailed information. For example, you could use the comprehensive [Master Journal List](#) (free) or the more targeted [Journal/Author Name Estimator](#) that searches biomedical journals (free).

A systematic approach to choosing the right journal

Work through the four-step approach below, answering the questions listed for each factor to help you decide the right journal for your particular paper. Note that the first two steps are specific to you, and not to the journal — if you're not clear what your publications goals are, then you're not yet ready to choose among journals.

Just a quick caveat: We consider only the general case here. You should keep in mind your actual publication needs at the specific time. Some of the factors will be more important than others for certain submissions. Also, many answers are interrelated. So, you will always need to take an overview of your answers to reach a decision.

Step 1. Write out your take-home message

Your take-home message is your key message that you want your readers to remember about your research. It is the focus of your paper's arguments and claims. It should be no more than 3 sentences long.

Your take-home message will help you determine who your ideal audience will be, and thus which journal is best to reach this audience.



Whether you're about to start writing your paper (this is the ideal situation) or you've already written it, you might want to write out your take-home message and keep it visible to help you stay focused as you work through the following steps.

Step 2. Decide your specific publication goals

Which audience do you want to reach? Check your take-home message and write down who would really benefit from knowing your research findings; in other words, write down who your ideal audience is.

- **Which audience would benefit from reading your work?**
 - A general audience (i.e., those reading a transdisciplinary journal, such as *Science* or *Nature*)?
 - A more specialist, multidisciplinary audience (e.g., *New England Journal of Medicine* and *Journal of the American Chemical Society*)?
 - A single discipline audience (e.g., *Topology*)?
 - A highly specialized audience in a subfield of a single discipline (e.g., *Journal of Knot Theory and Its Ramifications*)?
- **Would an international, regional, or national audience be the best fit?**
 - An international audience is not always the best target for your message. Maybe a regional or domestic audience would find your message more valuable, especially when geographical or cultural factors are involved in the research.
 - Language: Do you need translation to reach a key audience? Do you need language support to write a paper in English? Can you get that support, and do you have funds available to pay if you can't get it free of charge?
 - Related to the next question about access: If your target audience includes authors from less affluent countries, open access publishing can be a good option because it will be free for readers to access your published article. Open access publications can reach wider audiences – but how wide an audience do you actually need?

Do you want open or closed access to your published paper?

For brevity, only the main characteristics are stated; variations exist within each type.



Open access: Readers (and their institutions) pay nothing to read the paper. The author may pay an article processing charge (APC).

Closed access: The author does not pay to publish because the publication fee is covered, either by academic society membership fees or by individuals/institutions paying for reading access.

Some funding bodies who award research grants stipulate that the resulting research papers must be published in open access journals only. If your funding body does not stipulate open access, then you must decide whether to target a journal with open or closed access (or a hybrid journal which offers both types of access). Debate continues over whether open access actually achieves higher citations (see, for example, [here](#) and [here](#)), and the prestigious journals of many academic societies have closed access, where articles are published behind a pay-wall.

- Does your funding body (if you have one) stipulate open access publications?
- Do you have enough research funds to pay the APC if you want open access?
- Does the audience you want to reach tend to read closed or open access?

Do you need quick publication?

You might want a quick publication if you think your results are valuable to the community and warrant quick dissemination, or you might need a publication quickly for career/employment purposes. Some journals have fewer submitted papers than others and may be able to publish accepted articles more quickly, and some popular journals have a fast-track route for important papers warranting rapid publication. If you want a quicker publication, then some regional and national journals don't have as many submitted papers waiting to be reviewed as international journals do – if the journal editor thinks your paper is a good match for the journal, your work might enter peer review more quickly than at international journals and, if accepted, it could enter the publication queue more quickly.

- Does the journal fast track submissions for original articles?
- If the journal you prefer doesn't accept fast-track original articles, does it accept short/brief communications? Would it be a good choice to write up your research as a short/brief communication?
- Does the journal's website give the average time from manuscript receipt to first decision (reject or enter peer review), time until final decision, and then time to publication? Or can you see from scanning published papers what the average times might be from "Received", "Accepted", and "Published" dates, which indicate the time taken for peer review and publication?



- How many issues does the journal publish each year? Does the journal publish regularly, when planned? Does it publish continuously online?

Step 3. Check journal's scope, setup, reputation, and impact

Now that your message, target audience, and publication goals are clear, you need to check whether your shortlisted journals can help you achieve these goals. If they can't, then you need to find other journals that can meet your goals (but at least now you can search for new journals using your key terms and terms describing your audience type, article type, and choice on open access).

Does your paper meet the journal's requirements?

- Does your paper meet the journal's aims and scope? Check this aspect first on the journal's website. If your research doesn't fall under the journal's stated aims and scope, you'll be wasting time submitting your paper.
- Does the journal publish the article type that you want to write? Can your paper meet the word, citation, and figure and table limits in the guidelines for authors?
- Can you meet the ethical requirements of the journal (regarding authorship, consent, ethics committee approval, data availability, etc.)?

What type of peer review system is used?

Certain types of peer review are more common in some disciplines than others. The main types of peer review are:

Blind review (single blind): The authors' names are disclosed to the reviewers, but the reviewers' names are not disclosed to the authors.

Double-blind review: The authors' and reviewers' names are not disclosed to each other.

Open review: The authors' and reviewers' names are disclosed to each other. In some cases, the reviews and author responses may be published alongside the paper. (Some journals offer open post-publication review.)

- Does the journal offer the type of peer review you are comfortable with and is common in your research field?



- Does the average time taken for peer review (from receipt to acceptance) seem reasonable to you: not too fast (suggesting that peer review is not sufficiently rigorous) and not too long (suggesting you will have a long wait until your work is available to readers)?
- Are there usually 2 or more reviewers?
- Does the journal offer cascade peer review, where if the journal rejects your paper, it offers to pass on your paper and the accompanying reviews to another journal (usually within the same publisher's portfolio)?

Is the journal reputable and legitimate?

Concern continues in the academic publishing world about so-called predatory journals, which exploit authors by charging them APCs without providing the services offered by legitimate publishers.

We have written about how to [identify predatory journals](#) before and our advice stands. Also, check the [Retraction Watch Hijacked Journal Checker](#) to be sure you are not unwittingly submitting to a “hijacked” (illegitimately copied) journal. We suggest you read our previous article on predatory journals for full details, as well as consider the following questions.

- How transparent are the journal's procedures and policies (e.g., about payments, publication ethics, copyright)?
- Is it clear whether you would have to pay an APC to publish? If so, how much is the charge?
- Does the editorial board have recognizable and reputable members listed, with their affiliations? Do those members list the journal on their affiliations' websites? Is there diversity of membership?
- If you search for the journal name online, do you find many negative comments about it?
- Does the journal publish manuscripts free from typographical, grammatical, and other obvious errors? Are copyediting services offered to polish the text before publication?
- Does the journal offer indexing services? What other services does the journal offer the author?
- Are there clear ways to contact the journal by telephone, email, and post?
- What international publishing organizations does the journal belong to?
- How old is the journal? Of course, new legitimate journals are being created all the time, but as with everything without a history to check, careful evaluation is important.



- Does the journal have a reputable publisher? Are the publisher details easily found?

What is the journal's impact?

- Do you need to consider the journal's impact factor? The impact factor of a journal is not a perfect metric and has many critics, but it is likely to remain in use for the foreseeable future. Many journals with a high impact factor have a high rejection rate because of the fierce competition to publish in them. Unless you need a high impact factor publication for a particular reason, then impact factor does not need to be a high-priority consideration. In fact, some highly specialized, reputable journals have a low impact factor precisely because there are not many researchers working and publishing in the field, so citations to its published papers are naturally fewer.
- How does the journal rank in terms of h-index score in [Google Scholar Metrics](#)?
- Does the journal show impact in other ways? For example, does it show a paper's social media impact (altmetrics)? The publisher [Wiley explains its altmetrics score](#) using the example shown to the right. The published paper has an altmetrics score of 18. Clicking on the score button shows where the article has been mentioned so far.
- How well established is the journal? An older journal will probably have a more dedicated readership than a newer journal, although not necessarily a large readership: a highly specialized journal may be well established but still have a small readership.
- Does the journal state the size of its audience? For example, the [New England Journal of Medicine](#) states:

How many readers does the *Journal* have?

The *Journal* has the largest paid circulation among medical journals, with almost 200,000 paying subscribers. It is printed simultaneously each week in the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, and Japan, and a selection of translated articles



reaches approximately 140,000 physicians in China through the China Medical Tribune.

Online, the *Journal* reaches between 300,000 and 400,000 readers each week; the *Journal* is also provided online at no charge in approximately 120 economically disadvantaged countries.

Studies published in the *Journal* receive extensive coverage in the news media worldwide, reaching millions of additional health care professionals and patients each week.

Step 4. Decide which journal best meets your requirements

Now it's time to weigh up your answers to the questions above to rank your shortlisted journals and choose the journal that best meets your publication needs.

- If you have time, quickly scan the last few issues of each journal (and any supplement issues) to see whether papers similar to yours have been published recently, which might mean yours would not be considered novel enough for that journal. However, in the opposite vein, your findings might connect well with a recently published paper and you could include discussion of this in your paper.
- If you happen to get rejected by your first choice of journal, you'll have your shortlist ready for a quick submission to the next most suitable journal.

Summary

We hope that this article helps you set your priorities for publication and decide your target journal smoothly and quickly.

We often help authors to select the right journal for their paper – researching and shortlisting suitable journals and explaining the difference between the choices – so they can make the best decision for their particular paper. Please [let us know](#) if we can assist you in choosing the right journal (or even the right conference).

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