Choosing a journal for your research

Checklist for researchers and librarians

Compiled by Milica Ševkušić, EIFL Open Access Programme Project Coordinator

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Introduction

This guide provides tips for researchers on how to choose an appropriate journal for their research and guides research support librarians who are seeking to help researchers to choose a journal.

Choosing where to publish is a very important issue for researchers. Choices are often influenced by researchers' desire to ensure timely and wide dissemination of their research results while at the same time meeting requirements set by their institutions and/or research funders, as well as requirements that researchers need to meet for research evaluation, assessment and promotion. Choices are therefore often not easy to make.

Building upon the Diamond OA Standard (DOAS), developed by the Developing Institutional Open Access Publishing Models to Advance Scholarly Communication (DIAMAS) project, and the checklist Think. Check. Submit, this guide explains how to analyze the main elements of a journal and the information provided on its website to understand if it is right for your research. Ultimately, however, the quality of the research published in a journal remains the most important criterion to guide your choice. Therefore, analysis of the journal and related material should always be accompanied by expert insight into the published content.

The guide has been developed using a hands-on approach – through research support activities, training and a series of conversations with researchers and librarians. Along with guiding selection of journals in which to publish, it can be used by librarians for scenario-based training (e.g. researchers participating in training can be asked to analyze a journal using the checklist). It can also be combined with other guides and tools (e.g. Think. Check. Submit, cOAlition S Journal Checker Tool) and adjusted to suit the needs of different contexts (e.g. by adding new elements or providing additional locally specific instructions).

The order of items in the checklist reflects the order of actions in information checking from the perspective of a researcher, i.e. the author: after the main formal elements (journal title, ISSN, publisher, website URL) are verified, the analysis focuses on the policies, bodies and practices that should ensure the quality of content, followed by open access, copyright, and licensing policies, which are particularly important for researchers who have to meet funder or institutional policy requirements. All the other journal policies, though very important, would be analyzed by most researchers only if a journal has passed the above-mentioned checks. Finally, digital preservation, a functional website and transparent metrics are still an aspiration for many journals and are not likely to be determining factors in making choices.

This guide is conceived as a living resource and your feedback is welcome. If you want to suggest new elements, tips and resources, please contact us at: oa@eifl.net.

Note
We choose not to use the term '**predatory**' as it often adds more confusion than clarity. The original definition of 'predatory publishing' was introduced in 2010 and was largely limited to open access journals that charged publication fees. This definition has led to the misleading assumption that only open access journals, particularly those from less developed countries, can be questionable. Additionally, there is a lack of transparency about the assessment criteria used to compile lists of so-called 'predatory' publishers and journals, and the lists may therefore be biased or unjust.

We use the term '**hijacked**' journals, which stands for fraudulent websites that mimic legitimate journals by displaying the correct ISSN, postal address, aims and scope, even the editorial board. However the content is different from that of the genuine journal. The affected journals (those whose identity is stolen) usually have technically poor websites, or are hosted on institutional websites, or are even print-only. The fraudulent journal usually publishes articles that aren't in line with the aims and scope of the original journal and access to the content is sometimes restricted, making it more difficult to detect the fraud. As the original (affected) journals are usually indexed in major indexing databases, the easiest way to identify a hijacked journal is by comparing the article titles on the website with those listed in the indexing database.

The most comprehensive list of hijacked journals can be found here: Retraction Watch Hijacked Journals Checker.

More resources on questionable journals: Questionable Journals Zotero Library

General advice for researchers

- Indexation in databases such as the Web of Science or Scopus isn't a warranty of quality.
- If you are required by your institution or funder to publish in a journal included in a particular index or list, select a journal from the index/list and analyze it against this checklist.
- Don't respond to unsolicited invitations to publish.
- Check the information provided on the journal's/publisher's website.
- If you're not 100% sure the journal is legitimate and publishes scholarly content of good quality, don't submit your manuscript there.
- If you're looking for an open access journal to publish your research in, use the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) as a starting point.
- You don't have to pay to publish as there are many journals that don't charge publication fees or there might be free publishing agreements negotiated for you (e.g. check EIFL-negotiated agreements with publishers for Article Processing Charges).
- Search the Internet to see if the journal is mentioned in a negative context.
- Ask your librarian for help and advice!

Recommendations for librarians

- Consult the resources provided in the 'Publish' section of the EIFL Digital Research Literacy Training Programme Outline for Librarians.
- Provide training and one-on-one support.
- Try to identify challenges faced by researchers when choosing journals to publish in.
- Try to understand the mechanisms behind the practice of publishing with questionable journals (isolated cases or a common practice; how researchers come across questionable journals, etc.), if your institution is affected by such a practice
- Encourage researchers to forward to you unsolicited emails sent by publishers. This will help you warn the others not to respond to suspicious ones.

Checklist: Is this journal good for my work?

Unique title
Unique journal serial number (ISSN, eISSN)
Dedicated URL and homepage
Landing pages and DOIs for articles
The name and the contact information of the publisher
Scholarly content and original research articles
Mission, aims and scope, languages
Editorial Board
Peer review
Author guidelines
Regular schedule of publication
Transparent information about publication fees (if any)
Open access status
Copyright and licensing information
Publicly available journal policies
Digital preservation
Functional journal website
Online publishing workflows
Indexing information
Metrics
It is a plus for a journal if it

Unique title

The journal must have a unique title.

Action

Check the journal's title on the ISSN Portal. You can also use library records, e.g. WorldCat, the global aggregator of library catalogues, is a good place to start searching.

Challenge

Questionable journals often use titles that are identical or similar to those of other journals to mislead authors. However, journals can have similar titles for legitimate reasons. In non-English speaking countries, long-established journals may adopt an English title after decades of publication. This new title might coincidentally resemble another journal's title. In such cases, the title history can be easily traced through the ISSN Portal, where the title is typically followed by the publication place in brackets.

Solution

ISSN Portal provides information about journal titles (and their changes) and serial numbers.
If you cannot verify a journal's title with certainty, it is best to avoid publishing in that journal.

Unique journal serial number (ISSN, eISSN)

The journal must have a unique journal serial number (ISSN, eISSN or both).
ISSN stands for the International Standard Serial Number (ISSN). This eight-digit number uniquely identifies a journal. The ISSN can help you disambiguate journals with the same title. ISSN is used for print journals and eISSN is used for those published online. A journal that has both print and online editions should have both serial numbers.

Actions

- Find the ISSN/eISSN on the journal website. If a journal doesn't have an ISSN/eISSN, avoid publishing in that journal.
- Check the ISSN from the website on the ISSN Portal.

Challenge

There are fraudulent websites that look like real journal websites (the so-called hijacked journals). The ISSN and title found on such a website will be valid and this may mislead potential authors.

Solution

The ISSN Portal provides information about journal titles, serial numbers and URLs of their websites.

Dedicated URL and homepage

The journal should have a proper website on its own domain or a subdomain within the publisher's website, or it should have a dedicated space on a publishing platform.

Actions

- Check the URL of the journal's website on the ISSN Portal.
- Check the URL against the Retraction Watch Hijacked Journals Checker to see whether you're dealing with a hijacked journal. Learn more.

Challenge

It's still possible to find journals that don't have a proper website but rather upload content on the website of the publishing institution or even on social networking sites and file-sharing platforms.

Solutions

Avoid publishing in journals that don't have a proper website, though this doesn't automatically make them questionable. Such journals often fail to provide adequate visibility for your articles and are vulnerable to 'hijacking'.
Check the journal's and publisher's web domains using tools such as DomainTools. Although domain registration details are not always publicly available and the information available free of charge is limited, it is possible to see when the domain was registered and sometimes even the name of the entity that has registered it.
You can also use the Wayback Machine to see the history of a domain. By entering the URL, you can see snapshots of pages from different points in time. This can help you determine if a questionable publisher has reused the same domain for various purposes, not necessarily related to publishing.

Landing pages and DOIs for articles

Each article should have a dedicated URL, where the article metadata are displayed (article landing pages).
Each article should be assigned a DOI.

Actions

- Check whether the links in the table of contents open article landing pages.
- Have a look at the metadata (titles, author names, abstracts, keywords, etc.) displayed on landing pages. Is it detailed enough? Is the information sufficiently detailed?
- Check whether DOIs are displayed on landing pages, if a journal assigns DOIs.
- Check whether clicking on the hyperlinked DOI takes you to the exact article for that DOI. Ideally, it should lead to the article landing page rather than the PDF.

Challenge

It's still possible to find journals that don't have separate landing pages for each article and don't assign DOIs to articles.

Solutions

- Avoid publishing in journals that don't assign DOIs (unless these are your institutional/disciplinary journals that you fully trust), though they aren't necessarily questionable.
- If there are no separate landing pages for each article (e.g. the entire volume is uploaded as a PDF file), the journal won't be able to ensure an optimal discoverability of the published content.
- Check for DOI errors. A doi error may occur if a DOI doesn't exist (because it's invented/fake) or the publisher doesn't deposit metadata regularly, see DOI Not Found Error.
- Check who owns the DOI prefix: http://api.crossref.org/prefixes/**PREFIX**/works (replace PREFIX with the DOI prefix used by the journal; you'll get the information in the JSON format; use Firefox because it's easier to read it). This check can reveal if the journal is managed by an ill-reputed entity.

The name and the contact information of the publisher

The name and the contact information of the publisher are clearly displayed on the journal website. This information must be the same as that declared in the record on the ISSN Portal.
If multiple entities are listed, their roles must be clearly indicated (who is the main publisher, co-publishers, service providers, sponsoring societies, etc.)

Actions

- Find the information on the website. If there is no dedicated page for the contact information, check the website footer and any ‘about‘ pages.
- Compare this information with the data on the ISSN Portal (journal directories, library catalogues).
- If you don’t know the publisher, have a look on their website and, if available, a relevant registry of academic institutions or a business registry.
- Search the Internet for the postal address. Questionable publishers often do not disclose their locations or list false postal addresses.

Challenges

- The information is incomplete and it’s impossible to verify the information about the publisher.
- There is no contact information, just the contact form.

Solution

Avoid publishing in such a journal.

Scholarly content and original research articles

The journal must publish scholarly content and contain original research articles.

Actions

- Find the criteria for acceptance of manuscripts and other contributions on the journal website. The likely places for this information include ‘about’ pages, journal policies or author guidelines. If the information is missing, avoid publishing in the journal.
- Examine the table of contents and sample published articles. If the content fails to meet the journal's declared criteria for quality and relevance, it’s advisable to avoid submitting to that journal.

Challenge

Despite declared criteria, the published content may not be scholarly and original.

Tips

For some journals you may be able to check whether there are any ongoing discussions about the articles published in the journal. A useful tool for this is PubPeer, a platform dedicated to post-publication discussions. To search for discussions related to the journal, paste its DOI prefix into PubPeer. Be aware that if multiple journals share the same DOI prefix (e.g. because they are hosted on the

same platform), the search results will include discussions from all of them. Look out for signs of serious issues such as plagiarism or articles produced by paper mills. If such concerns are raised, check whether the journal has responded appropriately, for example, by retracting problematic articles. If the journal has failed to address these issues, it's a strong indicator to avoid publishing in that jounrnal.
Unfortunately, PubPeer seems to track only Crossref DOIs.

Mission, aims and scope, languages

The information about the mission, aims and scope, as well as the languages in which manuscripts can be submitted should be displayed on the journal website.

Actions

Find the information on the journal website. Likely places for this information include 'about' pages and author guidelines.

Challenges

- The information is incomplete.
- The declared scope is too broad or too generic.
- The published content isn't aligned with the declared mission, aims and scope.

Solution

Avoid publishing in such a journal.
Publishing articles outside of the journal's scope can indicate that the journal is questionable.

Editorial Board

The journal must have an editorial board. The composition of the editorial bodies should be publicly displayed (i.e. with the editorial team names, functions and roles; affiliations) on the journal's website.

The journal can also have other editorial bodies. The editorial bodies should be institutionally and geographically diverse (i.e. from different institutions and countries) and ideally with a good gender balance.

Actions

- Find the information on the journal website.
- Check whether the information is verifiable (e.g. whether the persons can be found on the websites of the listed institutions).
- Check how many articles are authored by the members of editorial bodies.

Challenges

- The information is incomplete.
- If a journal has many editorial board members, it can be hard to figure out who they are and what they do. There's no clear rule on how many is too many, but if the list seems really long, it might be worth taking a closer look before submitting your work to this journal.

Solution

If there is anything that looks suspicious, avoid publishing in such a journal.

Peer review

The journal must practise one of the forms of anonymised peer review or open peer review. Manuscripts submitted to the journal must pass peer review in order to be published. Each manuscript is reviewed by at least two reviewers.

The information about the type of peer review must be publicly displayed on the journal website. The review procedure should be explained in detail. There should be an option for authors to complain or appeal in case of a rejected or withdrawn manuscript.

The journal should have a mechanism to prevent manuscripts from being reviewed by a closed circle of people who are well acquainted with each other or work in the same institution.

Open peer review can include potential disclosure of the identity of reviewers, publicly available reviews, and the ability for a broader community to participate in the review process).

Actions

- Find the information on the journal website. If there is no information, or if it is ambiguous or incomplete, avoid submitting your work ro the journal.
- Check whether there is information about the average duration of the review process. Check also the dates of submission and acceptance in published articles. Journals should provide this information.
- Check the guidelines for reviewers as they can provide valuable information about the process.
- If the journal publishes review reports, examine them.
- Check whether the journal publishes a list of reviewers.
- Are the reviewers also members of the editorial board and do they publish in the journal? While there is no consensus as to what percentage of articles authored by editorial board members and reviewers is too much, the frequent recurrence of the same names among authors may indicate that the journal is managed by a closed circle.

Challenges

- The review procedure is unrealistically quick.
- The information is incomplete.

Solutions

- Check the quality of the published articles. Poor quality can indicate that something is not right with peer review.
- If you're not sure, avoid submitting your work to the journal.

Author guidelines

Clear and detailed author guidelines must be publicly available on the journal website. They include at least:

- An explanation of the types of manuscript that a journal will consider.
- A detailed style guide (that includes a referencing style).
- A description of how to submit an article.

Actions

- Find the guidelines on the journal website.
- Examine recently published articles to see whether they are compliant to author guidelines.

Challenges

- The journal provides detailed author guidelines but the citation styles and other elements in the published articles don't reflect the requirements set out in the guidelines.
- The guidelines don't provide sufficient details.
- The journal doesn't have author guidelines or makes a reference to the guidelines provided by another publisher (e.g. requires the authors to follow the author guidelines of a major commercial publisher).

Tips

If the guidelines are misleading, outdated, or the journal publishes articles that don't follow the journal guidelines, this is probably not the right journal for you.

Regular schedule of publication

The journal can be published either issue by issue or via continuous publication. Continuous publication has advantages for authors because the Version of Record (copyedited, typeset and formatted version of the article as published) is published immediately.

Actions

- Find the information about the publication schedule.
- Check whether there are any gaps in the publication schedule.

Challenges

- Some journals publish double issues to make up for delays.
- When special issues are published in some journals, the status of these special issues isn't clear (is there peer review, who is responsible, are these conference papers, etc.).

Solutions

- If issues are skipped or merged (double issues) this may indicate that the journal is struggling to keep up with the publication schedule. While this doesn't raise ethical concerns, irregular publication schedules can affect the journal's indexation and visibility.
- If a journal publishes special issues, check whether policies and rules applying to them are clearly defined (e.g. whether the topics covered in special issues are aligned with the journal's scope; whether the submitted manuscripts are peer reviewed; whether the roles of guest editors are defined, if issues are managed by guest editors, etc.). See Guest edited collections best practice

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Transparent information about publication fees (if any)

The information about fees must be displayed on the journal website. If no fees are charged, this should be stated on the journal website.
The lack of transparency regarding fees usually indicates that a journal is questionable.

Distinguish among:

- Submission fees: charged at submission regardless of whether the article will be accepted or not. Can be charged by both open access (OA) and non-OA journals.
- Article processing charges: charged upon acceptance for publication. Usually charged by open access journals.
- Colour image charges: charged by print journals because colour printing involves higher costs. Can be charged by both open access and non-open access journals.

- Page charges: charged per page to cover prepress and printing costs. In journals where the length of articles is limited, page charges apply only to pages above the limit. Can be charged by both open access and non-open access journals.
- Voluntary Author Contribution: monetary contribution made to the journal to help sustain its operations. Such contributions are not mandatory.

Colour image charges and partly page charges aren't justified if the journal is published online only. There are journals that charge multiple fees, though such cases are fairly rare.

Action

Find the information on the website. Likely places include the ‘about’ section, a dedicated section in journal policies and author guidelines.

Challenges

- The author is informed that there is a fee only after manuscript acceptance.
- Authors are required to pay a particular type of membership fee or a subscription fee for the print version in order to publish.
- Although some questionable journals charge rather ‘low’ article processing charges, a ‘low’ amount doesn’t necessarily mean that a journal is questionable. What is considered a ‘low’ amount varies across countries.

Solutions

- If you’re informed that there is a fee only after starting the submission process, stop the submission process and find another journal.
- If you’re informed that there is a fee only after your manuscript is accepted, withdraw the manuscript. This might be difficult, as the publisher may be unresponsive, may refuse to withdraw the manuscript or may even proceed to publish it, though the author hasn’t paid. Be persistent and threaten them with legal action.
- If the purpose of the fee is not clear or justified, avoid submitting to such a journal even though the information about the fee is clearly displayed on the website.

Open access status

If the journal is open access (OA), its OA status must be clearly stated on the journal website. This can be a simple statement saying that the content is available to everyone without charges, accompanied by an open licence (usually a Creative Commons licence, preferably CC BY).

The full text of all content must be available for free and open access without delay and without the need to register on the journal website with or without charges.

The information about the OA status and the licence used are particularly important for authors who have to meet funder requirements.

Actions

- Find the statement on the journal website and then also check which licence the journal uses and whether it charges any fees.
- Try to find the journal in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)

Challenges

- The journal content can be accessed but there is no information about the OA status, nor is there a licence.
- The content can be accessed free of charge but login is required.

Solutions

- If there is no information about the OA status of the journal and you can still access its content, check whether you are connected to your academic network at the moment of access. If yes, you may be accessing a subscription-based journal (not OA) using the institutional access. If this is not the case, the journal may be temporarily or permanently free to read, which means that it doesn't meet the criteria for an OA journal.
- If login is required, the journal doesn't meet the criteria for an OA journal even if no charges are paid to access the content.

Copyright and licensing information

The information about copyright and licensing must be publicly available on the journal website.

This information is particularly important for authors who have to comply with an OA mandate

Both OA and non-OA journals should have a self-archiving policy detailing which version of the article can be deposited in a repository and under which conditions.

Actions

- Find the information on the website. Likely places include a separate page or section dedicated to copyright and licensing, terms of use, footer and article landing page.
- Make a distinction between the website licence and the article licence.
- If no licence is indicated, it is assumed that all rights are reserved.
- Check whether the journal copyright and licensing conditions are compliant with funder or other requirements you have to meet.

Challenges

- The copyright information is contradictory or inconsistent (e.g. both the statement that copyright transfer is required and the claim that authors retain all the rights can be found on the website).
- Different licences on the article landing page and in the full text.
- Different licences in the journal policy and in articles.
- Additional conditions contradicting the licence terms (e.g. a licence allowing commercial use and derivatives and additional terms limiting use to educational purposes or a limited group of users).

Solution

Avoid submitting your work to journals with unclear copyright and licensing policies.

Publicly available journal policies

A journal must have publicly available policies.
The policy should address:

- Publication ethics and research integrity control procedures (e.g. similarity check, checks for falsification and fabrication of data, image manipulation, etc).
- Editor roles and responsibilities (towards authors, reviewers, readers and the scientific community, journal owners/publishers, public).
- Reviewer roles and responsibilities.
- Authors' responsibilities.
- Data availability.

The journal (or the platform on which it is hosted) should have a publicly available **General Terms and Conditions** (or the Terms of Use/Service), a **data protection policy** and a **privacy policy** in line with relevant national and international legislation.

Action

- Read journal policies very carefully and check whether the information provided covers all the important issues.

Challenges

- Policies are incomplete and/or inconsistent.
- Questionable publishers often copy journal policies from other publishers at random.

Solution

Even if the journal isn't questionable, inconsistent and contradicting claims in publishing policies may reveal the lack of expertise and you'd better avoid publishing in such a journal.

Digital preservation

The journal should have a digital preservation policy: the published content is deposited in at least one digital preservation service (e.g. LOCKSS, CLOCKSS, Portico) and/or the national library (e.g through legal deposit).
If no preservation is ensured, there is a risk that the journal content may disappear from the Internet.

Action

Find the information on the journal website.

Challenge

A significant number of journals don't ensure digital preservation.

Solution

If you've published with a journal that doesn't ensure digital preservation, make sure that your work is deposited in an institutional, disciplinary or general-purpose repository (e.g. Zenodo).

Functional journal website

A journal website should support searching and browsing. Navigation should be straightforward.
The web design should be appropriate (without over-decorated, flashing and low-quality images).
The interface should be user-friendly and adjusted to low bandwidths and various screen resolutions.

Actions

- Explore the journal website.
- Check how it looks in different browsers and on different screen sizes.
- Check whether it is easily findable in general search engines like Google.

Challenge

It is possible to find journals with good content and poor design and *vice versa.*

Tips

While poor design doesn't automatically mean that a journal is questionable, such a journal may fail to provide adequate visibility to your work.

Online publishing workflows

The journal should support online publishing workflows. Authors should be able to submit manuscripts, communicate with editors and respond to peer review via the online platform.

Action

Explore the submission system.

Challenges

- Some journals don't have an online journal management system.
- A number of journals still manage publishing workflows via email, though they have a system that can support online publishing workflows.

Solution

Avoid submitting to journals that request submissions via email if you're not familiar with them.

Indexing information

The information about the indexing status of a journal in indexing databases and search engines should be accurate and transparent.

Action

Visit the indexing services and search engines listed on the journal website to check the journal's indexing status, see Check indexing status of a journal.

Challenges

- Journals sometimes mention indexing services and search engines that aren't widely known, making it difficult to verify the credibility of indexing information.

- Along with reliable indexing services and search engines, the list on the journal website includes obscure services.

Tips

- Search indexing services (e.g. DOAJ, MEDLINE, Science Citation Index Expanded, etc.) both by the journal title and ISSN; see Check indexing status of a journal.
- Be careful with the lists of the so-called predatory indexers. They sometimes include legitimate services.
- Seek the help of a librarian.

Metrics

Metric indicators should be displayed in a responsible way.
It is a good practice for journals to publish on their websites the basic statistics (number of submissions, number of reviews requested, the number of reviews received, the approval rate, and the average time between submission and publication).

Action

Compare the average time between submission and publication indicated on the journal website with the information provided in individual articles.

Challenges

- The journals that have a Clarivate Analytics Journal Impact Factor (JIF), Scimago Journal Rank and the Scimago quartile usually display those indicators on their websites. As the information provided by journals can be obsolete or misleading, verifying it in relevant sources is recommended. The Scimago Journal & Country Rank database is publicly available, but you might not have access to Clarivate Analytics Journal Citation Reports.
- The journal displays obscure rankings that can be misleading for authors.

Solutions and tips

- Seek the help of a librarian.
- Displaying obscure rankings is a practice common among questionable journals. Though the presence of such information doesn't automatically mean that the journal is questionable, be careful.
- High rejection rates are not a warranty of quality!

It is a plus for a journal if it:

- Requires the use of persistent identifiers (such as ORCID, ROR)
- Allows the deposit of the "Version of Record" or the "Publisher Version" of its articles in repositories.
- Accepts manuscripts presenting and discussing negative or unexpected scientific results and data that do not confirm the initial hypotheses.
- Accepts manuscripts already published as preprints in open repositories, including preprint repositories and encourages authors to share their manuscripts as preprints by depositing them and making them immediately available in open repositories, including preprint repositories, at all stages of the publication process.
- Encourages authors to publish / make available research protocols and methods, research software, e.g. through a source code repository, and details of their research in a public registry before conducting the study (as a preregistration report)
- Displays article-level metrics (visits, views, downloads, citations).