

SUBMITTING YOUR MANUSCRIPT TO AN UNFAMILIAR JOURNAL? TEN WARNING SIGNS

Where should you publish? The explosion of online open access (OA) journals makes it harder to pick out good journals with high editorial standards. The worst "pay-for-play" journals that publish anything for money are easy to spot, but there is a grey zone occupied by legitimate-sounding journals with dubious publication practices and inadequate peer review. Why waste your research (and potentially damage your career) by publishing in a low-grade or predatory journal? Look for these 10 warning signs before deciding where to submit your manuscript.

1. Spamming for submissions. Good journals do not solicit manuscripts via unselective mass e-mails. Be especially wary of flattering e-mails in poor English from "editorial assistants" with fake westernized names using accounts such as gmail or hotmail.

2. Vague or unrealistically broad journal scope. This is a common feature of low-grade journals trawling for papers (and author fees). Watch also for grandiose journal names implying a global audience ("International Journal of....", "European Journal of....." etc.) Will a journal advertising a long list of topics have an adequate reviewer pool with relevant expertise?

3. Unknown publisher with no identifiable office address. Run an internet search on the publisher and/or the office address. Many predatory publishers operate out of private homes while advertising an "editorial office" that is actually a mail box or business center rental, sometimes in a different country. Be suspicious if the "Contact" tab on a journal website merely opens a generic web form to fill out. A legitimate journal website should provide a complete and verifiable publisher's office address with phone and e-mail contact information.

4. Fake impact factors and indexing. Genuine journal impact factors (based on the average number of citations per article over a 2-year period) are published annually in Journal Citation Reports (JCR) by Clarivate Analytics (formerly Thompson Reuters' Institute for Scientific Information). Journals must meet rigorous standards to get onto the JCR master list that is integrated with Web of Science. If you cannot access the JCR master list to see if a journal is included (the list is behind a paywall) ask an academic librarian for help. Low-grade journals not on the JCR list frequently claim fake impact factors. Watch out for "ISI" impact factors - these are not connected with the Institute for Scientific Information, but are sold by "International Scientific Indexing" out of an apartment in Jumeirah Village, UAE.

Don't be impressed if an unfamiliar journal claims to be "indexed" in numerous databases. Many of these are merely general lists or directories (e.g. Cabell's, Ulrich's). Google Scholar automatically indexes any online content, and CrossRef provides DOIs (Digital Object Identifiers) for any content produced by fee-paying members. Inclusion in these non-selective databases does not indicate journal quality, and good journals rarely advertise such listings as they are an automatic part of publishing.

5. Unknown or unqualified editorial board members. Editorial board members - and their affiliations - should be listed on the journal website. Check them out, using faculty directories on university websites to see academic positions held by editorial board members. Are they

experts suitably qualified to make decisions on your manuscript? Watch out for fake boards, where a journal lists well-known scientists as editorial board members without their knowledge or permission. If you are unsure whether someone is genuinely associated with a journal, contact them and ask about the extent of their involvement. Be wary of "honorary" editorships where someone known in the field agrees to be listed as a journal editor, but has little involvement in developing journal content. Ask who reviews the manuscripts? Who selects the reviewers?

6. Promises of rapid manuscript acceptance. This means little or no peer review. Even high-profile journals with fast turn-around times typically take at least 3-4 weeks from manuscript submission to first decision. Watch out for the "we need one more paper to complete the next issue" scam, and for requests to submit manuscripts for "special issues" with short deadlines. Assembling a genuine special issue takes months, and invitations to contribute are usually via personal communication from the editor.

7. Submissions as e-mail attachments. Legitimate journals use online platforms (e.g. ScholarOne, Editorial Manager, BenchPress etc.) to handle manuscript submission, track manuscripts during review, and to archive files and correspondence. Manuscripts submitted as e-mail attachments indicate a low-grade journal with poorly organized or non-existent reviewer management and editorial procedures.

8. Publication charges not clearly stated. Online OA journals generate income by charging publication fees to authors. The journal website should provide clear and complete information about author fees, which should be payable only after the manuscript is accepted for publication. Beware of journals that require payment when the manuscript is submitted, or that demand unexpected additional fees as a condition of publication.

9. Limited or nonexistent archive. Check out previous issues online - are they all accessible and well-organized? Were previous issues well-populated with good articles, or does each issue consist of a mere handful of papers from authors you've never heard of? If the journal publishes your manuscript, it will be properly archived and remain available to future readers? Will your paper disappear if the journal ceases publication?

10. No mention of publication ethics. A good journal should provide information on ethics policies, such as requirements for authorship, handling plagiarism, disclosure of funding sources, and declaring conflicts of interest. Look for this in the author instructions or in the general journal information, and check if the journal publisher is a member of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) - see <https://publicationethics.org/>. Find out if the journal uses iThenticate or other screening software to screen for plagiarized content, image manipulation etc. in submitted manuscripts. Be suspicious of journals that do not mention any of this, or that simply post ethics statements lifted from other journals (cut and paste the verbiage into an online search and see if you get any hits elsewhere). Be very suspicious if a journal claiming to be fully OA requires authors to transfer copyright on published articles. Under "gold" OA (i.e.

articles are freely and permanently accessible to anyone as soon as they are published) the author should retain copyright.

Finally: get to know the journals in your field. Think about where you regularly find good articles to read and cite, and if in doubt about a new or unfamiliar journal, ask your colleagues.

Sarah Ward
Director of Publications
Weed Science Society of America

For more detailed information, see "The rise of predatory publishing: How to avoid being scammed" in Weed Science 64:772-778. You can read the article here:

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