

A beginner's guide to avoiding 'predatory' journals (using your critical thinking skills)

By Andy Nobes | July 24, 2018 |

You may have heard a lot about the dangers of so-called 'predatory'^[1] journals from your colleagues, your supervisor, or in online forums and webpages. Such journals often charge a fee for fast publication but have poor publishing practices, fail to carry out legitimate peer review, and fake their inclusion in important indexes. You should avoid publishing your research in these journals, or you could risk ruining your reputation or career. But there is often unclear and conflicting advice on how to tell a credible journal from a 'predatory' one, even from experienced researchers and supervisors.

At AuthorAID we recommend that researchers use their own critical analysis skills and decide for themselves whether a journal is appropriate for their research. It's extremely important for researchers to choose a reputable, reliable journal that provides rigorous peer review and disseminates their research to a wide audience; and that they can be confident and proud of listing this on their CV. One good resource you can use for this purpose is the [Think.Check.Submit](#) website which provides a straightforward checklist to identify trustworthy journals (we recommend that you evaluate journals using several checks from the checklist rather than relying on just one indicator).

Some researchers may be told to use journal 'blacklists', but you should exercise caution. We do not recommend using the 'Beall's List' blacklist to identify 'predatory' journals as it is not considered a reliable, unbiased, or transparent source of information, and has not been updated by Beall since January 2017.^[2]

Below we have also provided some practical tips and advice for early career researchers who are unfamiliar with the online publishing landscape. They are based on the AuthorAID team's experience with helping members over the last few years, trawling through all sorts of interesting and unusual journal websites. If you can familiarise yourself with what good and bad digital publishing looks like, you should be able to tell quite quickly whether a journal is suitable for your research, or whether you should stay well clear (and also warn your colleagues to do likewise).

1. Don't trust email invites and 'Call for Papers' (unless you recognise the sender)



Make sure you do some background research before handing over your payment details to an unknown journal

This is the simplest and most effective step to avoid 'predatory' journals. One of the most common questions we are asked on [AuthorAID](#) is 'Is 'X' a predatory journal?'. The reason why the questioner is asking about a specific journal is probably because they have just received a flattering spam email inviting

them to submit a paper for fast and easy publication, and this can be very tempting for some people, as this researcher reported in a [recent survey of authors who have published in 'predatory' journals](#):

"I received an invitation. They wanted my paper and that made me feel good. I thought that they contacted me because of my expertise in my field, and so I sent it."

Be careful – 'predatory' publishers trawl the internet for authors' and academics' email addresses and send out thousands of emails every day – and it's a tactic that works very effectively. **NEVER** respond to emails from journals or journal publishers unless you recognise the sender or have registered for their mailing list. If you are tempted by an email offer or 'Call for Papers' **always** visit their website to find out more about the journal – we will cover this in the next steps.

Please also remember that **you don't necessarily need to pay to publish your work in a journal**. There are plenty of free publishing options (see ['how do I find a suitable journal and how can I afford the publishing fees?'](#)). You should certainly not be paying a journal to publish your paper unless they can demonstrate good digital publishing practices, quality editorial processes and suitable indexing. Be careful before parting with your hard-earned money!

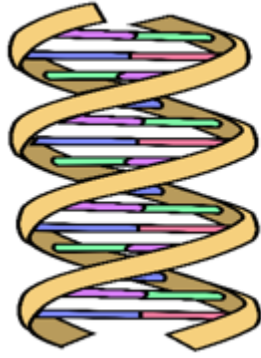
2. Be sceptical of 'international' or 'global' journals, and those with a wide scope

This rule may also seem very simple, but you can often tell a deceptive journal from its title. 'Predatory' publishers are looking to 'prey' on early career researchers who have been told that their ultimate goal is to get published in 'international' journals (which is usually a big achievement), and such journals provide a **very quick and cheap** opportunity. If this sounds too good to be true, it probably is! Try to follow these two rules:

1. If the journal name has the word 'international', 'world' or 'global' in the title be **sceptical**. Most 'predatory' journals use impressive titles like this to fool uncritical researchers. If a journal uses such a title it should be able to demonstrate this. Does it have a *truly* international editorial board? Is the journal included in international indexes? Do you recognise any of the editors? (You may also want to check the editor's official webpage to see if he/she mentions their role with the journal – as mentioned [here](#).)
2. If the title has an extremely wide subject scope, for example, '*International Journal of Advanced Research*', '*Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*', or '*International Journal of Natural and Applied Sciences*', **be sceptical**. Most 'normal' academic journals are actually quite niche, both in terms of subject focus and geography. Be aware that 'predatory' publishers create journals with a very wide scope to target as many potential authors as possible.

For some more examples of dubiously-named journals, see [this blog post](#).

3. Double-check claims of prestigious indexing and impact factors



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF NEARLY EVERYTHING

IMPACT FACTOR 8.08594!

Fast and cheap publication in
peer-reviewed journal

Don't believe everything you read on the internet

Does the journal say it's listed in prestigious indexes? Does it claim to have an Impact Factor? Be wary – 'predatory' journals usually lie about their indexing status, using fake logos and fake impact factors. The good news is that you can easily check this information yourself!

Does the journal *really* have an Impact Factor? You can check that this is true by searching for the journal on the Clarivate Web of Science database: <http://mjl.clarivate.com/>. If the journal is not listed, **then it does not have a real Impact Factor**, and the 'impact factor' being advertised is probably fake or irrelevant. (Please note that many legitimate journals are *not* indexed in the Web of Science, and Impact Factor is a limited metric that measures citations and not necessarily quality of research – for more information see [the Wikipedia page](#) on Impact Factors and [how to target a suitable journal](#)).

Scopus

Does your journal claim to be indexed on Scopus (another reputable index owned by Elsevier)? You can check to see if it is listed here: <http://www.scimagojr.com/journalsearch.php>. You can also find lots of other interesting metrics on the journal, if it is listed.

PubMed

Lots of medical journals claim to be indexed in PubMed. You can check the database here: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/nlmcatalog/>.

Lots of journals are catalogued in PubMed, but not all have passed the quality criteria for indexation, so make sure the information page clearly says "**In:** PubMed" or "**In:** Index medicus" or "**In:** MEDLINE". The best journals will probably have all three (MEDLINE uses the most stringent indexing criteria). Journals that have *not* been officially catalogued will show as: "Collection Status: Not in the NLM Collection".

The Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) provides a listing of Open Access journals that have passed its basic entry criteria: <https://doaj.org/search>. This is a good database to find legitimate Open Access journals from all over the world, many of which do not charge a publishing fee ([see here for more information on article processing fees](#)).

Please note that just because journals are not included in any of the above indexes does not mean they are 'predatory' or not credible. It can be a major challenge and take many years for new and small journals to be accepted by these indexes. The big problem is journals that **deceptively claim** to be indexed even though they are not.

4. Read the 'Aims and scope' or 'About' page – check the journal understands your field

There are several ways you can check the expertise of the journal editorial staff.

As [Think.Check.Submit](#) mentions, it's useful to check the editorial board for familiar names. Another way is to critically read the 'Aims and scope' or 'About the journal' pages. I like to check this page because you

can tell a lot about the publisher and the journal, and bad journals are easy to spot because they tend to write nonsense in this section.

This is where the journal should provide a brief introduction to the publication, an outline of the type of articles published (and sometimes what it doesn't publish), its peer review policy, and sometimes the journal's indexing information. This page should make you feel confident about the scholarly credibility of the publisher and authority of the journal in your subject discipline.

The page shouldn't contain factual errors or spelling mistakes (within reason - some human error is inevitable). The aims and objectives of the journal should be clear, and you should easily be able to tell if your work is suitable for this journal.

Bad journals stand out because they fake their credibility and knowledge of the subject areas. They write vague statements or flowery language like: 'an opportunity to share research amongst the global community'. You may also find that some journals have copied and pasted (plagiarised) information from Wikipedia or other webpages to make it sound like they understand your field – **try it out**: copy and paste the opening sentence into Google and check it's not plagiarised!

5. Check who is publishing the journal – are they a credible scholarly organisation?

This is a surprisingly easy way to tell if a journal is legitimate or not, because it reveals *why* the journal is being published. 'Predatory' journals are concerned with making money from author payments – they don't care about the quality of the science being published. Look at the website and try to find out:

a) Who is the publisher? (i.e. which organisation is responsible for running this journal?) Is their name familiar? Do a quick Google search and try to find out more information about them. Sometimes a physical address is given which is clearly residential, or in the middle of a field. I've discovered a few 'UK' publishers who provide a 'virtual' forwarding address in London as their headquarters. If the publisher is unfamiliar, or you are unable to tell if they are legitimate or not, then the next step is to ask:

b) Is there a scholarly organisation aligned or affiliated with the journal, such as a university, a research institute or a learned society? Do they seem like a genuine organisation? Ideally you should have heard of them.

If the answer to both of the above questions is 'No', then you should consider looking elsewhere.

6. Check your reference lists – familiarise yourself with good journals in your field

References

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Reference lists are a good place to look for credible journals

Last, but certainly not least, the best way to ensure you don't get fooled, is to 'future-proof' yourself by getting familiar with what good journals look and feel like.

As AuthorAID mentor Sian Harris suggests, the easiest place to start looking for suitable journals is by looking at the [journals you are reading and referencing in your work](#).

Similarly, AuthorAID community member Maria Zinger shares her own learning:

"From what I have been taught from many trainings on publication of an article, the first thing you do after you think you have a research question is to do a literature review where you read all the literature important to answer your question of interest ...

It means that once you finish your research and article writing you are going to select at least the top three journal names that have come up during your literature review.

It is very difficult to ask other people to do this for you because you know your work better than anyone else."

Follow your references and recommended reading in articles you like. Have you done any literature reviews for your research? Go back and check out the journals that were mentioned – these are the journals you should be targeting, whether they be small, regional, niche journals or high-impact international journals. Visit their journal webpages to get an idea of their scope and style.

Ultimately, it's your decision where to publish your research, so take some time to make sure it's being reliably published and shared as widely as possible amongst your target audience. But be careful not to be swayed by flattering emails, impressive-sounding journal names, fancy impact factors, or too-good-to-be-true offers without doing your research first!

Do you have any of your own tips, or experiences that you would like to share? Please comment below.

[Other recommended articles:](#)

[My experience of predatory journals and how to avoid them](#) (Aamir Raof Memon)

[Identifying Predatory Publishers – How to tell reputable journals from shady ones](#) (The Scientist)

[GUIDE: How to spot predatory academic journals in the wild](#) (Africa Check)

Andy Nobes is a Programme Coordinator for AuthorAID at INASP

Notes:

[1] It has been argued (for example [here](#) and [here](#)) that the term ‘predatory’ is an inaccurate and inappropriate label, and that it discriminates against scholarly publishing in developing countries. Perhaps such journals are more accurately described as ‘deceptive’, ‘fake’ or ‘unethical’ journals. But, for clarity, we use the most commonly-used term: ‘predatory’.

[2] “... *the Beall blog* – which became defunct in January of 2017 [was] broad and contained errors, misclassifications, and false negatives. Thus, those extant lists should not be used in any formal capacity to limit authors’ choice of publishing venue.” [Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva](#)

<http://thinkchecksubmit.org/>



Choose the right journal for your research



¿Está enviando su investigación a una revista confiable?

¿Es esta la revista indicada para su trabajo?

- Cada vez más investigaciones se publican a nivel mundial
- Nuevas revistas académicas/científicas son creadas cada semana
- También han aumentado las noticias sobre malas prácticas y engaños de las editoriales
- Puede ser desafiante encontrar guías que estén actualizadas cuando se trata de elegir dónde publicar

¿Cómo se puede estar seguro de que la revista que está considerando es la adecuada para su investigación?



Utilice esta lista para controlar si la revista que ha elegido es confiable.

- ¿Usted o sus colegas conocen a la revista
 - ¿Ha leído antes algún artículo de esa revista?
 - ¿Es fácil encontrar los últimos artículos de la revista?
- ¿Puede identificar y contactar fácilmente a la editorial?
 - ¿Se encuentra el nombre de la editorial claramente consignado en la página web de la revista?
 - ¿Puede contactar a la editorial por teléfono, correo electrónico y postal?
- ¿La revista es clara respecto al tipo de revisión por pares que utiliza?

- ¿Están los artículos indexados en servicios que usted utiliza?
- ¿Son claros los costos de publicación?
 - ¿En el sitio web de la revista se explica para qué son/dichos costos y cuándo serán/cobrados?
- ¿Reconoce al comité editorial?
 - ¿Ha oído hablar de los miembros del comité editorial?
 - ¿Los miembros del comité editorial mencionan a la revista en sus páginas web personales?
- ¿La editorial es miembro de alguna reconocida?
 - ¿Pertenece al Comité de Ética de Publicación (COPE, por sus siglas en inglés)?
 - Si la revista es de acceso abierto, ¿se encuentra en la lista del Directorio de Revistas de Acceso Abierto (DOAJ, por sus siglas en inglés)?
 - Si la revista es de acceso abierto, ¿pertenece la editorial a la Asociación de Editoriales Académicas de Acceso Abierto (OASPA, por sus siglas en inglés)?
 - ¿La revista se encuentra alojada en alguna de las plataformas de Revistas Electrónicas de INASP (para revistas publicadas en Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, América Central y Mongolia) o en Revistas Africanas Electrónicas (AJO, por sus siglas en inglés, para las revistas africanas), o en SciELO, Latindex o RedALyC (para revistas de Iberoamérica)?
 - ¿La editorial es miembro de alguna asociación comercial?



Si la respuesta a la mayoría de las preguntas de esta lista es “sí”

Complete la lista de verificación y envíe su artículo sólo si está conforme con responder “sí” a la mayoría de las preguntas

- Usted tiene que estar seguro de que la revista que ha elegido tendrá un perfil adecuado para sus pares, mejorando tanto su reputación como sus posibilidades de ser citado.
- Publicar en la revista indicada para su investigación mejorará su perfil profesional, y lo ayudará a progresar en su carrera.
- Su trabajo debería ser indexado y/o archivado siendo fácilmente descubrible.
- Usted debería esperar una experiencia de publicación profesional, en la cual su trabajo sea revisado y editado.
- Solo entonces usted debería enviar su artículo.