



Open access: What is it?

Simply put, open access describes unrestricted access to peer-reviewed scholarly research. Unrestricted access most frequently refers to an online version (HTML or PDF) that does not require payment or subscription. Not all versions of the content must be freely accessible to qualify as open access, so a publisher may make the HTML version free, while charging a reader for the PDF.

So open access means free?

Not entirely. Open access content is usually published with additional usage rights as defined by Creative Commons licenses. For example, an article published under the *attribution license*, or CC BY, grants readers the ability to “copy, distribute, display and perform the work and make derivative works based on it only if they give the author or licensor the credits in the manner specified.” At the other end of the spectrum, the *non-commercial no derivative works license* (CC BY-NC-ND) restricts usage to non-commercial purposes and does not allow for derivative works (unless those rights are granted by the authors). The type of license to be used is often dictated by the funding agency.

What are “green,” “gold” and “hybrid” open access?

Sometimes referred to as the “flavors” of open access, these describe the method via which open access is being provided. If an author self-archives his or her work in an open access repository (e.g., PubMed Central, institutional repository), this is considered “green” open access. “Gold” open access refers to publishing in an open access journal that provides immediate open access to all content. “Hybrid” refers to a journal that will provide immediate open access to select articles via an article processing charge (APC), though other content remains restricted.

The APC referred to above should only be required following peer review and the notification of acceptance. Simply being an open access journal does not remove the obligations of a journal to follow editorial standards pertaining to peer review and conflict of interest. The existence of so-called “predatory” journals—those that exist solely to collect publishing fees with no consideration of academic integrity—means that authors should be wary of submitting to journals that make promises of acceptance and engage in questionable editorial practices. In order to make an informed decision, authors can consult Beall’s List (<http://scholarlyoa.com/publishers>), a website that identifies journals and publishers that could be considered “predatory.”

How do I find an open access journal?

The Directory of Open Access Journals (<https://doaj.org>) is an online directory that indexes and provides access to quality open access, peer-reviewed journals. Journals listed in the DOAJ must submit to an application and review process to ensure that the standards of an open access journal have been met. A journal indexed by the DOAJ must 1) use a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access, and 2) must exercise peer-review or editorial review led by an editor, or an editor and an editorial board.

One of the greatest misconceptions regarding open access publishing is that open access journals are fundamentally low in quality. As early as 2004, Thomson Scientific established that across all specialties "there was at least one open access title that ranked at or near the top of its field" in citation impact. Since that report, the number of high-quality and high-impact open access journals has only grown. The truth is that the quality of a scholarly journal is a function of its authors, editors and referees, not its business model or access policy.