

# Predatory Journals and Conferences

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

This FAQ document has been prepared by the authors of the InterAcademy Partnership (IAP) study, “Combatting predatory academic journals and conferences”, published in March 2022. The full report and summaries in seven languages are available at <https://www.interacademies.org/project/predatorypublishing>.

The questions listed below are those most often asked during the study’s online regional webinar programme (in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas) and global launch event.

The answers provided draw on learning from the IAP study and supplement other resources already in the public domain.



### Identifying predatory journals and conferences

#### Q1: What are predatory journals and conferences?

**A1:** Predatory journals and conferences are those that solicit articles and abstracts from researchers through deceitful or misleading practices that exploit the pressure on researchers to publish and present their work. Motivated purely by self-interest and profit rather than scholarship, their practices include rapid pay-to-publish models with little or no peer review, fake editorial boards falsely listing respected scientists, fraudulent impact factors, hijacked titles and aggressive spam invitations.

#### Q2: Why should we address them?

**A2:** We should address them because they help poor research flourish and compromise good research. They can destroy careers, ruin individual and institutional reputations, and distort the knowledge base. In charging for services they do not provide, at least to an appropriate standard, they can dupe researchers (an estimated 1.2 million of them to-date) and waste valuable resources (in terms of billions of dollars). Furthermore, they are rising at a concerning rate (hundreds every month): at the time of writing (April 2022), there are over 16,000 predatory journals and, whilst the number of predatory conferences is not well documented, anecdotal evidence suggests they may outnumber quality ones.

#### Q3: How can early career researchers identify a predatory journal or conference?

**A3:** Early career researchers (ECRs) can familiarise themselves with the common and most reliable characteristics/traits of predatory journals and conferences. If a journal or conference meets more than two of these, this should ring alarm bells and they should be avoided.

Self-help tools are preferable to any list of supposedly “good” or “bad” journals and conferences. ECRs can refer to the spectra of predatory practices/behaviours in the [IAP report](#): these include typical markers to help researchers make more informed decisions about where they publish and present their work. The spectra are downloadable in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Arabic and Russian [HERE](#). Supplementing these spectra are numerous checklists or “red flag” lists that identify typical traits or markers of predatory outlets and are available at numerous sources, e.g. [Cabells Predatory Reports](#), [OHRI One-Stop-Shop](#), [The False Academy](#).

ECRs can also seek advice from their supervisors or mentors, or seek out any institutional policies or guidance, including training on research ethics. Supervisors and mentors can familiarise themselves with the spectra and other available tools and resources. Supervisors can also provide training to their students on how to conduct proper peer review and on good publishing practices, and provide subject-matter specific guidance on quality journal and conference outlets in their field to their trainees and students.



**Q4: Is there a reliable, comprehensive list or database of legitimate, reliable journals or conferences that I can check? If not, should there be?**

**A4:** No, not really. Binary lists of “good” and “bad” journals can be quick to use and convenient BUT they are problematic: they oversimplify the issue (they do not account for low-quality or unethical practices, for example), are difficult to maintain (so that lists are rarely up-to-date), can have mistakes or criteria that are not transparent for listing decisions, and can be libellous (list hosts can be taken to court for defamation). The most reliable lists are generally pay-for services, like [Cabells](#), which is now included in the reference checker, [Edifix](#). If your institution subscribes to one of these, then they are worth referring to. But you are advised to use the self-help tools such as the IAP spectra and numerous guides and checklists to maximise your own resilience (see chapter 4 of the [IAP report](#)).

**Q5: Is it possible for legitimate journals to become predatory or vice versa?**

**A5:** Yes, if you look at a spectrum of predatory practices, a journal can move in either direction i.e. the spectrum is dynamic. Any legitimate, reputable journal that errs into questionable or unethical practices should respond to criticism and amend its policies accordingly.

**Q6: Why would institutions have differing opinions regarding if a journal is predatory?**

**A6:** Because predatory behaviours evolve and are complex: they are not binary (good vs bad) as lists would suggest.

**Q7: Are predatory journals more prevalent in different disciplines? If so, which disciplines are most frequently targeted by predatory journals?**

**A7:** The short answer is that the literature is inconclusive and more analysis is needed. Some articles report that social sciences and life sciences are more likely to be encountered in predatory journals than health and physical sciences; yet most analyses of predatory publishing have been conducted in biomedicine, medical and dental sciences, where predatory practices do appear to be rife. According to [Cabells](#), medical disciplines are particularly targeted by predatory journals, with about a third of the journals listed in its Predatory Reports database in medical subjects. In a global survey of researchers, the data suggest that researchers in arts and humanities may be more vulnerable to predatory journals than those in natural sciences, and that those in transdisciplinary studies and engineering may be more vulnerable to predatory conferences. But this requires more analysis.



## Actions against predatory outlets

**Q8: Are there any institutions responsible for combatting predatory journals and conferences?**

**A8:** Yes, as part of their wider mandate. Libraries, abstracting and indexing services work at the interface between knowledge production and publishing, and in many ways much of the workload in combatting predatory journals falls to them. There are several leading agencies at the global level who work tirelessly to distinguish legitimate journals and publishers from non-legitimate ones, and set principles of transparency and editorial best practice. These include [Committee on Publication Ethics, \(COPE\)](#), [Directory of Open Access Journals \(DOAJ\)](#), and [Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association \(OASPA\)](#). There are no equivalent services for conferences.

Check if a journal is listed in DOAJ ([Directory of Open Access Journals](#)); if it is, the journal is less likely to be problematic because it has been vetted. Similarly, check if a journal is a member of COPE ([Committee on Publication Ethics](#)), where it must follow COPE’s publication ethics ([COPE Core Practices](#)).



**Q9: What role can universities play in combatting predatory journals and conferences?**

**A9:** Universities play an important role in combatting practices that diminish and damage academic life, by- for example - (i) raising awareness of the dangers of predatory journals and conferences amongst their faculty and students through robust training and mentoring services; (ii) mainstreaming publishing, conferencing and peer review good practice, and disincentivising poor practice; (iii) revising recruitment and career progression criteria to reduce the reliance on quantity of research outputs and purely bibliometric evaluation practices, and reinforce the value of peer review responsibilities.

**Q10: What role can libraries play in combatting predatory journals and conferences?**

**A10:** Along with indexing services, libraries work at the research–publishing interface and have an important role in (i) promoting good practices and identifying fraudulent ones; (ii) providing editorial and peer review guidelines; (iii) conducting periodic reviews and strengthening the criteria for the incorporation of journals on their databases, cross-referencing periodically with Cabells and similar services; and (iv) developing common tools to improve coherence e.g. through library associations.

**Q11: What can poorly-resourced institutions, e.g. many in Africa, do to encourage their students and faculty to use legitimate journals and conferences, when predatory ones are often cheaper?**

**A11:** Legitimate journals and conferences will make discounts<sup>1</sup> for researchers in low and middle income countries. Some do this automatically, and others will do so if requested. It is always worth asking! Students and faculty who are tempted to publish in predatory outlets will find that though the monetary costs may be lower, the potential reputational and career impacts can be much more damaging and long-lasting.

**Q12: What should I do if I find out I've inadvertently published in a predatory journal?**

**A12:** Unfortunately, once you've published in a predatory journal, it is generally very difficult to remove the article. You may not be able to publish the research elsewhere, and the article may not be counted towards promotion or grant criteria. Your best recourse is to ask the publisher to retract the article, but they may not comply, even after repeated follow-up attempts. This is why every effort must be taken to avoid publishing in predatory journals. If you nevertheless do, you can either make the paper into a manuscript (if you are a PhD student needing the paper in your thesis), or publish it as a pre-print (if you are a researcher). In both cases, the paper in question should be accompanied by an explanation to help you distance yourself from predatory practices.

**Q13: Are there other sanctions that can be used against predatory outlets?**

**A13:** You can report the predatory outlet for fraud to the trade commission of your country.

**Q14: What actions can be taken against researchers who are intentionally using predatory journals and conferences for promotion?**

**A14:** Host institutions should put in place mechanisms to disregard predatory publications and presentations for promotion and recruitment purposes if submitted, in order to disincentivise their use. If a researcher engages with predatory practices in a more systematic way (repeatedly, or serving as an editor for a predatory journal, for example), then they are not following good research practice (GRP). Depending on national policies, they could be reported to the proper authority for deviating from GRP and be investigated accordingly.

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<sup>1</sup> Discounts or waivers are usually conditional e.g. all authors should be from low income countries (which by itself discourages collaboration across countries and continents), and discounted rates can still be exorbitant to poorly-resourced researchers.



### Q15: How can I warn others about predatory outlets?

**A15:** By sharing the [IAP report](#) with others- it contains a wealth of information on predatory practices, and tools and resources to avoid them. You can also actively participate in committees/other platforms to raise awareness of them, and advocate for systemic change to reduce the drivers of predatory behaviour e.g. advocate for quality-not-quantity research evaluation and the importance of transparent peer review processes. Use journals and indexing services, universities and academies fora as platforms for change.

## Journal indexing and impact factors

### Q16: If journals are indexed in a well-known indexing service (e.g. PubMed, Scopus), does that mean they are legitimate?

**A16:** Some predatory journals have been found in well-known indexes, so even if they are indexed there, it does not necessarily mean they are legitimate. If a journal purports to be indexed in a reputable index e.g. Scopus, Web of Science, check personally and if found untrue, avoid such journals.

### Q17: Can I use a journal's impact factor to help identify it as legitimate?

**A17:** No. Unfortunately, impact factors can be subject to manipulation, are difficult to verify and can be invented: they are unreliable metrics for new journals. Many “predatory journals” use alternative, non-authoritative metrics.

On the other hand, if a journal has an impact factor from Clarivate Analytics' Journal Citation Reports (JCR), then it is highly unlikely to be a “predatory journal”. Though JCR requires a subscription, the Master Journal List (MJL) listing the included titles without the Impact Factors is freely available and may be used as a (highly selective) safelist. Here, a journal in MJL may be considered safe, but one excluded should not be considered predatory, as many legitimate and good journals do not make it into MJL/JCR.

## Publishing models and costs

### Q18: Are open access journals more likely to be predatory?

**A18:** The business model of predatory journals is dependent on the author-pays model, and they are mostly author-pays open-access journals. But not all author-pays open access journals are predatory.

### Q19: If a journal has an article processing charge, does that mean that it is predatory? Could a journal be predatory if no fee is charged?

**A19:** No: many legitimate journals have article processing charges (APCs). A journal that does not charge fees is unlikely to be predatory since they would make no business and predatory journals are motivated by profit rather than scholarship.

### Q20: If research is published in a predatory journal, isn't it better than the research not being disseminated at all?

**A20:** No. If you are caught publishing in a predatory journal, this could have serious repercussions for your career. And by doing this, you continue to fuel this industry. If your discipline has pre-peer review/preprint, open publishing services like arXiv (for physics, <https://arxiv.org/>) and bioRxiv (for biology, <https://www.biorxiv.org/>), or if your institution has a digital repository, you can publish there first. Then you can look for an appropriate journal in which to publish your work.

