
Viewpoints

“Do I really have to ... pay?”

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“Do I really have to pay to publish my article?” is a question that is increasingly heard in laboratories, research offices, and meeting rooms. At first glance, it may seem to you that, for many reasons, you are compelled to pay. 1) You have heard that colleagues had paid once or more often and were published, rather easily and quickly! 2) Most, if not all, journals you intend to submit your article to do ask for payment. 3) You have received hundreds of invitations to publish in journals willing to accept your article — provided publishing costs are paid. 4) The budget for your study project has already set aside a certain sum of money for publication charges. 5) You want to be recognized for your hard work. 6) You want your results to be read and cited worldwide. 7) You want to boost your curriculum vitae. 8) You want to add your name to the list of ‘honourable’ – the favourite adjective of those who solicit research papers for for-profit journals – specialists in your field. Nevertheless, I would answer, and urge you or your colleague to answer, with a single, decisive word: “NO”.

I sincerely and objectively maintain that you do not have to pay. Here are my reasons. 1) You may not want to imitate your colleagues and succumb to the temptation of taking the easy route to publication. 2) Not all journals ask for publication fees. 3) A considerable number of prospective publishers are simply interested in money, not in science. 4) The money set aside to pay for publication may be used for paying and training an assistant. 5) Serious hard work *will* be recognized sooner or later. 6) In any case, outstanding results are always recognized and cited. 7) Your curriculum vitae does not probably need a ‘cheap’ upgrade. 8) You may not want to be added to dubious lists of ‘honourable’ specialists!

Two or three decades ago, journals did not ask authors to pay and managed to get by with subscriptions, funds from scholarly societies or academic institutions, donations from friendly and affiliated foundations or patient associations, subsidies from the government and various organizations, and advertising revenues.¹ Today, some journals that ask authors to pay – various open access (OA) formulas – continue to seek funds, unabashedly, from one or more of the above sources, especially now that electronic publishing has enlarged the advertising space. Why, despite some fee-waiving formulas, do some journals seek to boost their income through such unfair or inappropriate means as charging a fee for merely examining an abstract or as green or gold OA? Why have journals been unable to solve the problem of inequality in access or of enriching scientific knowledge?

Refuse to pay, at the time of submission, to have your paper merely examined. Given the very low probability of the paper being accepted (roughly less than 30% for most

journals and less than 10% for first-rank journals),²⁻⁶ your money will probably be wasted. Journals that reimburse these kinds of fees are very rare, and the procedure, when applicable, might be painstaking.

Refuse to pay ‘article processing charges.’ Processing is precisely the journal’s job. You or your institution has already paid for office space and equipment, laboratory apparatus and reagents, part-time assistants, expert support ... and now, for your final step towards visibility, you are asked to pay also for typesetting, website posting, archiving — even before being read. Refuse to pay to either give or gain unrestricted open access to all articles in a given journal. You might need this oversized service very rarely; most of the time, you will only need a few articles, and these are available on a ‘pay-per-download’ or ‘single-article access’ basis or through your institution’s library subscription to a global publisher.

Refuse to pay and urge your colleagues to do the same. A reasonable yearly publication budget for a team of ten researchers is \$100,000. Is the finance manager of your publicly funded research institution willing to accept this cost? I am sure this is a highly controversial issue that you would hardly dare to raise at your next team meeting!

While drafting your manuscript and before selecting a journal, be aware of the sudden appearance of an inevitable and unfortunate lose-lose dilemma. Consider whether 1) you have plenty of money and can pay to publish in almost any journal (sometimes more than \$3500 per manuscript) or 2) you have a couple of hours to browse the websites of a dozen journals in search of a way to publish without paying. Even if you have the money, beware of paying a predatory or semi-predatory journal that will not give your manuscript the attention it deserves (no review, no layout, no international visibility, only a few citations ...).⁷⁻⁹ If you have the time, you will surely find the right journal that pays attention to your manuscript and leaves you the choice of paying or not (a ‘hybrid’ journal). A good number of journals have come to adopt this compromise formula after trying to impose article-processing charges.

In my opinion, no, you don’t have to pay to publish the results of your research: neither you nor your superior nor your institution and perhaps not even your sponsor or your government. Fortunately, this is not merely a casual opinion but the result of years of first-hand experience since the intrusion of fees, costs, or article-processing charges into scientific and medical publishing.

Take heart from my experience; do not rush to pay; be patient. When it comes to research and publishing, patience always pays.

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Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or non-financial competing interests in publishing this article. He has no relationships with editorial associations, commercial editing companies, or other organizations that might have an interest in submitting this viewpoint.

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The screenshot shows the website for the Mediterranean Editors and Translators Meeting (METM) 2019. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links for About, Join MET, Conference, Workshops, Members, Resources, News, and Contact. Below the navigation is a breadcrumb trail: Home > Conference > METM19 > Presentation. The main content area features three images of historical buildings in Split, Croatia. A sidebar on the left lists various event details such as Presentation, About METM, Keynote speakers, Programme, Call for proposals, Fees, How to register, Getting there, Where to stay, About Split, Off-METM preview, Attendees, Sponsors, and Feedback from METM18. The central text reads 'Mediterranean Editors and Translators Meeting 2019' and 'Make it count: communicating with clarity and concision'. It also displays logos for the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, the University of Split, and the School of Medicine. A 'Members' section includes a login form with fields for email and password, a 'Sign in' button, and a link for 'I forgot my password'. On the right, there are promotional banners for METM19 (Split, Croatia, 26-28 September) and METM18 feedback.