C O P E

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GUIDELINES:

AUTHOR FEES AND WAIVERS

How to disclose, apply, and administer author fees and waivers, discounts, or incentives

GUIDELINES

VERSION 1: February 2025

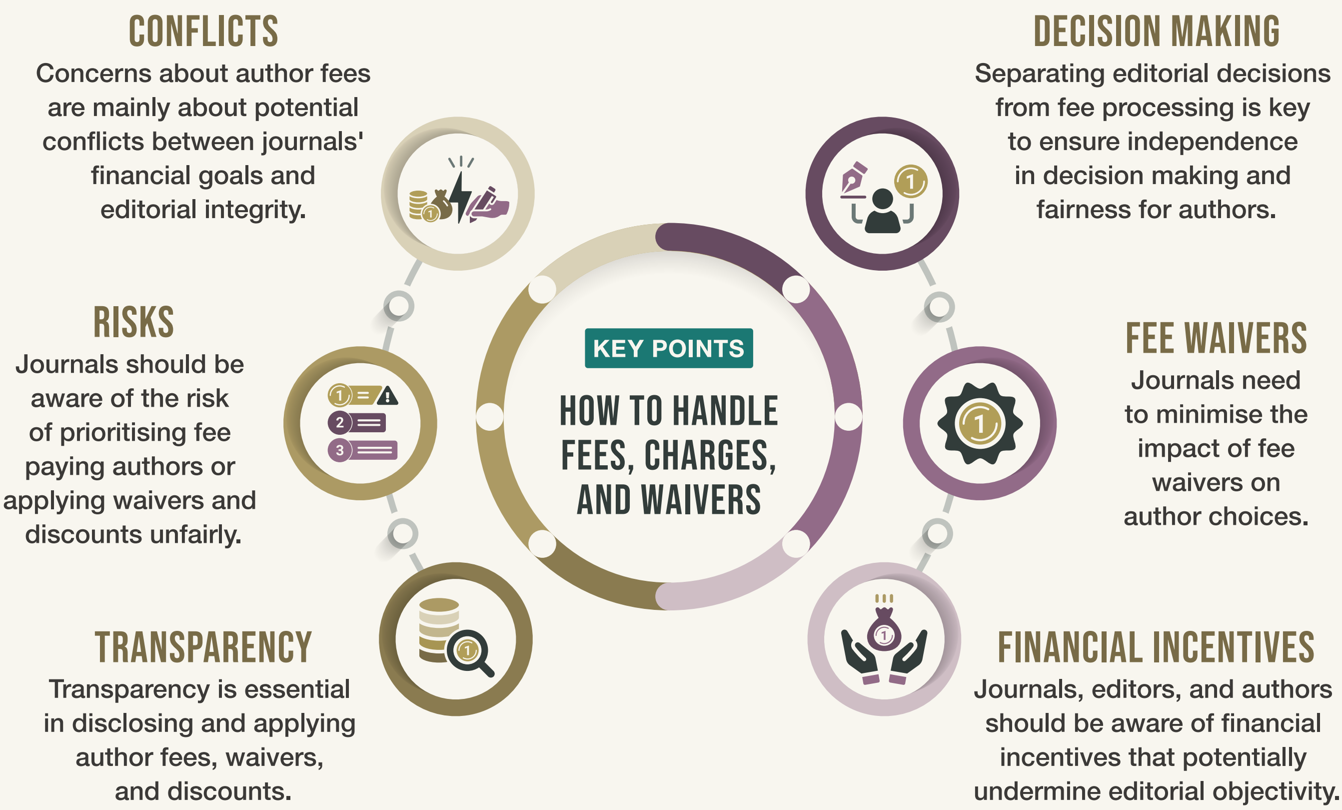
AUTHOR FEES AND WAIVERS

How to disclose, apply, and administer author fees and waivers, discounts, or incentives

COPE guidelines are formal COPE policy and are intended to advise editors and publishers on expected publication ethics practices. If you would like to comment on the content of our guidance then please contact **Natalie Ridgeway, Executive Officer** cope_execofficer@publicationethics.org

Objective

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance on how to eliminate or minimise ethical concerns about the disclosure, application, and administration of author fees charged by journals, as well as waivers, discounts, or incentives, and how to establish and maintain the independence of editorial decision making from the journal's financial decisions.



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Introduction

Scholarly journals may charge a variety of author fees, such as page charges, colour charges, editing, peer review, or article improvement fees, submission fees, fees for uploading supplementary files, and (open access) article processing charges, also called article publishing (or publication) charges (APCs).

> Implementing [journal] policies can help to ensure that charging author fees does not inappropriately influence editorial policy or decisions

Journals should have clear policies in place to deal with direct or indirect conflicts of interest arising from charging author fees, including policies on how and when fees are disclosed, applied, and administered. Implementing these policies can help to ensure that charging author fees does not inappropriately influence editorial policy or decisions, that waivers or discounts are accorded fairly and impartially, and that authors are treated equitably and inclusively.

A journal's policy about its author fees—how much they are, what they are for, how and when fees, discounts, or waivers are applied and administered—should be clearly and prominently displayed for prospective authors.

For journals that charge author fees, their revenue is the income from articles accepted for publication, less expenses, such as conducting peer review, copyediting, and formatting manuscripts for publication, all of which increase with the number of manuscripts received. Thus there is a financial incentive to solicit and accept articles. This incentive could create a conflict between the journal's financial objectives and its editorial policies, including editorial decision making, particularly if editors are involved in the application or administration of these fees, or would benefit personally (directly or indirectly) from these fees. For example, when a journal's editors are aware that its financial viability or performance depends on collecting author fees, they might be more likely to prioritise articles by authors who are able to pay the fee, request changes to lengthen articles, or recommend editorial interventions, such as language editing. When the decision making authority for granting waivers or discounts is the responsibility of the journal, publisher, or owner, there might be further concerns about potential bias or undue influence on editorial policies or decision making.

> A journal's policy about its author fees… should be clearly and prominently displayed for prospective authors

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COPE

Disclosing, applying, and administering author fees

JOURNALS SHOULD CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

To minimise the conflicts of interest noted above—whether explicit, implicit, or perceived—journals should ensure a high level of integrity about the disclosure, application, and administration of author fees. Any obligation to pay a fee, of any kind, must be stated clearly so that authors who wish to submit an article for publication are fully informed. The information provided by the journal should include:

- Type of payment or payments
- Amount
- Timing of payment
- Ways of paying
- Procedure for claiming waivers or refunds
- An explanation of what the fees are paying for

Alternative fee options should be made clear (eg, tiered pricing for APCs according to types of open access licences available). The decision process about the quality, suitability, and acceptability of a submitted article should be independent of the application, administration, or processing of the fee or requests for a discount or waiver. Waivers to those in financial need should be considered regardless of geography (country), discipline, or affiliation of the author.

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Also, journals should consider the following aspects of disclosing, applying, and administering author fees, waivers, discounts, and incentives (eg, cumulative discounts for multiple or subsequent submissions by the same author or authors).

- If the criteria for granting fee waivers, discounts, or incentives are not transparent or are applied unevenly, this can lead to concerns about fairness and impartiality. Therefore, journals should present their fee waiver or discount policy clearly and transparently, including stating which authors can request a waiver or discount, who the waiver or discount policy applies to, details of the criteria, the application process, and how applications will be assessed and by who.
- Many publishers offer fee waivers or discounts to researchers from low and lower-middle income countries (LMICs). A list of these countries should be made available. Publisher guidelines should clearly say which authors must be based in the LMIC (eg, only the corresponding author or all authors) and any special conditions, such as the research having taken place in the LMIC without funding. This information should be available in the author instructions and in the submission platform, making it clear when to request a waiver or discount and also under what circumstances, or when in the publication process a waiver or discount request will not be considered. Authors might be uncomfortable about their need to request a waiver. Publishers should be sensitive to this and provide discrete or automated solutions wherever possible.
- Journals should make clear whether a qualifying author needs to claim a fee waiver or discount, or if it will be allocated automatically on acceptance of their manuscript.
- As far as possible, the decision making editor should not be aware of requests for waivers or discounts.
- Editors who make decisions on the acceptability of manuscripts should not, as far as is practicable, be involved in the process of granting waivers, or in offering discounts or incentives, either before or after a manuscript is submitted. In the case of manuscripts solicited with an offer of a fee waiver, the editor who handles the manuscript should be unaware of that offer or, if that is not possible, disregard the offer and focus on the merits of the manuscript when making editorial decisions.
- Decisions about requests for fee waivers or discounts should, as far as possible, be made following a process that is led by a person who can act independently of the editorial decision making process.
- How fees collected by the publisher are used should be transparent, at least to the level of detail that is feasible.
- A journal's policy on whether to publish an accepted article before or only after receiving payment (ie, whether the article is withheld from publication until the fund transfer has cleared) should be made clear to authors.
- Hybrid journals should implement fair and transparent APC and subscription pricing.

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Journals’ financial objectives versus editorial policy and decision making

- Journals should have clear policies to ensure that the timing or number of fee waivers are appropriate to the journal’s processes for:
  - When a fee waiver is offered to authors (eg, on submission, before or after submission, or after the final editorial decision to accept has been made). In deciding the timing, the advantages and disadvantages of each option should be carefully considered. For example, for journals with high desk rejection or overall rejection rates, it may not be feasible to administer fee waiver requests before the editorial decision is made. Regardless of the timing of waiver decisions, they should be completely independent of the editorial decision making process.
  - Whether there are limits on how many fee waivers or discounts that one author can request from one journal in a specified timeframe. If so, how those limits are determined should be transparent.
- The existence of transformative or read-and-publish agreements (where institutions pre-pay APCs for a specific number of articles to be published by authors affiliated with them) could have perverse impacts on author decisions about which journal to submit their paper to, on accountability frameworks, and possibly on editorial decision making. For example,
  - an author consortium can be incentivised to attribute corresponding authorship to an author whose institution covers the APCs or who is eligible for a fee waiver, rather than on the basis of established authorship criteria. These agreements might also exacerbate problems with gift authorship by incentivising the addition of authors who do not meet authorship criteria in order to benefit from an agreement;
  - similarly, authors might be tempted to add institutions that have had little or no responsibility for the research presented in the manuscript in order to benefit from an agreement. Publishers should do whatever possible to disincentivise authors from changing their affiliation to benefit from a deal. Authors must affirm that any affiliation listed on the manuscript meets the publisher/journal’s affiliation policy. Publishers should review any requests to add authors in connection with read-and-publish agreements as they would for any other changes in authorship;
  - authors might also select which journal to submit their paper to based on the existence of such agreements rather than on criteria related to their research (eg, scope, reach within the field). Editors may be predisposed to favourably consider manuscripts covered by such agreements;
  - under some agreements, certain types of articles are covered (eg, original research), whereas others are not (eg, opinion, review articles), potentially incentivising authors to miscategorise articles in a way that is misleading or confusing for readers, or that leads to inappropriate peer review processes (if this differs by article type);
  - these financial influences on author choice and editorial decision making should be avoided, or at least minimised.

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Journals’ financial objectives versus editorial policy and decision making (continued)

- If a publisher has portfolio cascades (ie, portable peer review and manuscript transfer to another of the publisher’s journals after rejection from the first journal), authors might have to decide whether to pay an author fee or charge if the new journal has author charges. Any fees at the new journal should be made clear to authors during the process of transfer. For fairness, any waivers or discounts applied by the first journal should be transferable during the manuscript transfer or, at the very least, authors should be clearly informed of how this will be handled. In all cases of manuscript transfer, authors retain the decision to approve submission to the new journal.
- Care should be taken when offering partial fee waivers because if there are no clear processes or criteria to determine the amount of the partial waiver, it could be perceived as a form of sales negotiation.
- Charging a fee to publish a post-publication critique of an article published in the same journal as the article was submitted could be a disincentive to productive scientific discussion. This possibility should be considered. Post-publication notices (corrections, expressions of concern) should be free to publish and read.
- For full transparency, journals could require that details of article fee payments are declared in a footnote in published articles. Examples include whether a waiver was granted, if the fee was paid through an institutional read-and-publish agreement, and who paid the fee (eg, institution, funder, or industry sponsor). This declaration should be separate and additional to any declaration of funding for the research presented in the article.
- Many journals offer options for sponsored supplements or thematic or special issues. The sponsor should have no influence on editorial decisions in the sponsored issue, including author, reviewer, or content selection. The sponsored status of any content should be made clear to readers. ICMJE’s guidance on Supplements, Theme Issues and Special Series[1] should be followed to ensure editorial independence is maintained and conflicts of interest are minimised, alongside COPE’s guidance on guest edited collections.[2]

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Journals’ financial objectives versus editorial policy and decision making (continued)

- Once content is published, it enters the scholarly record and should not be retracted or removed in the event of non-payment of APCs or other manuscript fees. Any sanctions for non-payment (eg, placing future manuscripts on hold, rejecting future submissions, or cancellation of publishing agreements) and the potential impact on content submission and publication should be clearly described in the relevant terms and conditions (eg, submission terms and conditions, institutional open access or transformative agreements, or publishing agreements) and made clearly available to all relevant individuals.
  - Terms and conditions should clearly state who the sanctions apply to (eg, all authors, corresponding author, or institution with an open access deal), how and when decisions about sanction will be communicated, and how sanctions can be appealed.
  - Publishers and authors should avoid sanctions affecting principles of transparency and integrity. For example, removal of an author from a manuscript to avoid a sanction creates a ghost authorship situation. Publishers/journals and institutions should not encourage this as a practice, and authors should ensure that their submission adheres to applicable authorship policies and principles.
  - To avoid conflicts of interest and breaches of editorial independence, sanctions for non-payment should be managed independently of the editorial decision making process (eg, by the finance or accounts department).

How fee waivers can disrupt editorial policy or decision making, or introduce bias

- Offering advance fee waivers, discounts, or incentives (eg, quantity discounts) to solicit submissions, particularly if the solicitation comes from an editor or guest editor, could be perceived as undermining editorial objectivity and quality control. Selectively offering waivers for manuscripts in some subjects, about specific viewpoints, or by certain authors could introduce favouritism and potentially lead to editorial and publication bias.
- Offering too many fee waivers can have a negative impact on a journal’s revenue, potentially compromising its ability to maintain high standards. A balance is needed between generating funds to sustain high quality services and financial gains. Journals could consider publicising the number of waivers that they offer, to promote transparency.
- Some journals reward service to the journal, such as peer reviewing or serving as an editorial board member or handling editor, by granting author fee discounts (eg, based on the number of papers handled). This practice encourages reviewers and editors to publish in the journal that they review or edit. Claiming the benefit and announcing it at submission may affect editorial judgement (positively for being a past reviewer, negatively for qualifying for not paying the full fee). This issue could be eliminated or minimised by ensuring that the handling or deciding editor is not influenced by the discount.

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Conclusions

This document provides guidance on ethical issues associated with the way journals disclose, apply, and administer author fees, as well as fee waivers, discounts, and incentives. The concerns are mainly about potential conflicts of interest, where journals' financial objectives might interfere with editorial choices or policies. Journals may be incentivised to prioritise articles by authors who can pay fees, or grant waivers and discounts in an unfair way. To ensure equitable and inclusive treatment of authors, transparency is recommended in displaying author fees, and application of fees, waivers, and discounts. Separating editorial decisions from fee processing is key, to ensure independence in decision making about waivers and discounts, and to minimise the problematic effect of the offering of fee waivers on author choices. Journals, editors, and authors should be aware of the potential negative impact of financial incentives in undermining editorial objectivity, and in introducing submission and publication bias.

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FURTHER READING

WiseA, Estelle L. OASPA Equity in OA Workshop 3 Report. 2023. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8048291

Research4Life. Best practices for APC waivers. https://b.link/4uefmw7v

Research4Life. Eligibility for access to Research4Life. https://b.link/k9xrg2i0

International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). Fees. https://b.link/r1xffgzf

Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Transparency and Best Practice: Author fees https://b.link/e56zoi79

Legge M. (In)equity in open access: OASPA's recommended practices on financial and workflow barriers. 2024. Zenodo https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14261488

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualisation:
Howard Browman

Writing – original draft preparation: Howard Browman

Writing – review and editing:
Jennifer Wright, Kim Eggleton, Mike Streeter, Marie Soulière, Trevor Lane, Nancy Chescheir, Itamar Ashkenazi, Daniel Ucko, Emilio J Sanz, Michael Wise, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA)

Declaration of interests:
Howard Browman is editor-in-chief of a journal whose finances are generated by levying an article processing charge on accepted articles.

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