



Description

The economics of scholarly publishing have shifted substantially in the past decade: global spending on article processing charges (APCs) grew rapidly between 2019 and 2023, and authors increasingly encounter a patchwork of submission, processing, and publication charges during the submission lifecycle. These fees affect where and how research is submitted, who can afford open access, and how institutions and funders must plan budgets. This article defines the common fee types, explains how charges differ across publishing models (open access, hybrid, and subscription), analyses current price trends, and provides practical steps researchers and administrators can use to manage costs effectively.

What fees might an author encounter and what they mean

Submission fee

A *submission fee* (sometimes called a review fee) is charged at the time of [manuscript submission](#) to offset editorial and peer-review administrative costs. Submission fees are nonrefundable in most journals and typically range from modest amounts (about \$25–\$125) to higher sums for some society or specialty journals. This fee does not guarantee acceptance; rather, it pays for initial checks and managing peer review. Some reputable journals and publishers use submission fees selectively for example, some society journals and certain Elsevier economics titles display submission fees in their author guidelines. ([aje.com](#))

Article processing charge (APC) / publication fee

An *article processing charge (APC)* is the fee most commonly associated with open access (OA) publishing. APCs are paid after acceptance to make the final article immediately and permanently available under an open license. APC levels vary widely by publisher, journal standing, and model: many gold OA journals charge a few hundred to several thousand dollars, while some high-profile journals or hybrid options can exceed \$5,000–\$10,000. APCs are usually borne by the author's funder, institution, or author themselves when no funding is available.

Page, color, and production charges

Traditional subscription journals historically charged page or color-figure fees to cover print production. These charges still exist in some venues. Page fees often range from \$100 to \$300 per page; color-figure charges can be several hundred dollars per figure if print reproduction is required. In OA contexts, some journals use separate production fees instead of an all-inclusive APC.

Fast-track and optional service fees

Some journals offer *fast-track* or rapid-review options for a fee, which shortens editorial processing time but does not influence editorial decision outcomes. Other optional services such as extensive language polishing, figure enhancement, or post-publication open-access retroactive processing may attract additional charges. Fast-track fees and optional costs are typically transparent in journal policies.

How fees differ across publishing models

Gold open access

Gold OA journals rely primarily on APCs to cover peer review coordination, typesetting, hosting, and archiving. Some gold journals charge modest APCs or none at all (diamond OA), depending on institutional sponsorship or society backing. A [recent systematic look](#) at OA metrics shows that APCs for gold OA-only journals are often lower than hybrid APCs.

Hybrid journals

Hybrid journals remain subscription-based but allow authors to make individual articles OA by paying an APC. Hybrid APCs tend to be higher than APCs at fully OA publishers, a dynamic that has sparked criticism about “double dipping” when subscription revenue is not adjusted accordingly. Hybrid APCs are generally more expensive and skew toward journals with higher impact metrics.

Subscription (paywalled) journals

Most subscription journals do not charge APCs for standard publication if the author elects the paywalled route, but they may charge page or color fees, and some societies levy submission fees. Authors may also be charged if they request post-publication open access conversion. Transparency varies by publisher.

What recent data show about pricing trends and distribution of costs

Rapid growth in APC spending

Estimates compiled from major publishers indicate a steep rise in global APC spending: one [recent analysis](#) estimated that spending on APCs for six large publishers increased from approximately \$910 million in 2019 to about \$2.54 billion in 2023, and that total APC expenditures across those publishers for 2019–2023 exceeded \$8 billion. The study highlights lack of transparency and shows that hybrid

APCs often exceed gold APCs. These trends underscore both the scale of author-borne costs and the need for clearer reporting by publishers.

Variation by journal type and impact

Studies covering biomedical and health journals find median APCs vary substantially: for a sample of [health journals](#), the overall median APC was approximately \$2,820, with gold OA-only journals often charging less (median near \$1,000) and hybrid journals charging more (median above \$3,300). APCs also positively correlate with journal impact metrics – higher impact often means higher APC. These patterns affect where authors choose to submit if open access is a priority.

Publisher pricing transparency

Major publishers now publish APC lists and explain fee rationale, though the granularity and accessibility of pricing information differ. For example, Elsevier provides per-journal APC ranges on its [policy pages](#) and emphasizes per-journal listings; prices across major publishers cover a broad spectrum from a few hundred to more than \$10,000 for certain high-profile journals. Authors should consult the journal's website for the definitive fee schedule.

Why these differences matter for authors and institutions

Equity and access

When APCs are high, researchers without institutional or funder support particularly those from low- and middle-income countries or small institutions face barriers to publishing OA. Diamond OA and targeted waivers mitigate this but are not universal. Institutions and consortia increasingly negotiate transformative agreements to shift costs, but such deals benefit authors unequally across regions and fields. Evidence of rapid APC growth signals the need for funder and institutional budgeting and equitable waiver policies.

Budget planning and grant writing

Authors should anticipate potential charges when preparing grant budgets or institutional funding requests. Many funders explicitly allow APCs, but policy rules (eligible costs, caps, and licensing requirements) vary. Advance planning prevents unexpected out-of-pocket expenses and supports compliance with funder open-access mandates.

Practical guidance: how to evaluate and manage fees

Checklist: steps to reduce cost surprises and choose the most appropriate route

- Check the journal's "instructions for authors" for explicit statements about submission, APCs, page, color, and optional fees before preparing your submission.
- Search for institutional and funder APC policies or memberships that cover APCs; verify whether transformative agreements apply to the target journal.
- Consider diamond OA or lower-APC journals in the same field; assess indexing and scope rather

than prestige alone.

- Where submission fees exist, evaluate whether the journal's editorial profile and acceptance rates justify the upfront cost.
- If rapid publication is important, compare fast-track fees with normal timelines and weigh cost vs. benefit; confirm that fast-track does not bias editorial decisions.
- For authors with limited funds, contact the journal editorial office about waivers or discounts before submission.
- Build APC estimates into grant budgets and institutional allocations; keep receipts and document payment responsibility for compliance.

How to spot problematic fee practices

Legitimate journals clearly disclose fee types and timing on their websites. Red flags include requests for payment before peer review, unclear justification for charges, or fees that change during review without prior notice. If unsure, consult the publisher's pricing policy or ask the editorial office in writing; reputable organizations (publishers, societies) will respond with transparent guidance.

Examples that illustrate common approaches

- Society journals may charge a small submission fee to deter low-quality submissions (for example, some society journals list submission fees around \$50–\$100). Authors should weigh this against the journal's relevance and audience.
- Some journals are diamond OA (no APCs) because publication costs are sponsored by a society or institution; authors can benefit from immediate OA without APCs when such journals fit the research scope.
- Rapid or optional services (fast-track, color print) are commonly itemized on journal sites; they can be helpful but add to total cost. Confirm that optional services are indeed optional and that editorial integrity is preserved.

How Enago's publication support can help (integrated, outcome-focused)

When managing fees and submission requirements becomes time-consuming, professional support can help authors prepare cost-effective submissions. Services such as Enago's [journal selection](#) and [submission assistance](#) provide targeted support to align manuscripts with appropriate journals and to clearly identify likely fees before submission. These services can help reduce desk rejections, avoid mismatched journal choices that lead to wasted fees, and prepare the documentation needed to secure institutional or funder payment.

Conclusion

Journal fees now form a complex and consequential part of the research publication process. Understanding the difference between submission fees, APCs, page and color charges, and optional service costs allows authors and administrators to make informed choices. Authors should always verify fee details on the journal's website, check for funder or institutional support, and weigh journal fit against fees. For actionable next steps: confirm fee schedules before submission, budget APCs into grant proposals when appropriate, and consider [professional support](#) to reduce the risk of unnecessary

costs and delays.

Category

1. Reporting Research

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