Is Fast-Track Publication Better for Researchers?

Description

A rapidly changing literature and strong pressures for career advancement mean that peer review speed increasingly shapes researchers' submission choices. During the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, many journals shortened peer-review cycles dramatically. Some analyses report median submission-to-acceptance times for COVID-19 work measured in days rather than months, yet that surge in speed coincided with more retractions and editorial corrections. This article examines what peer review speed means for researchers, when faster review is beneficial, when it poses risks, and practical steps authors can take to gain the benefits of speed without compromising quality.

Why Does Peer Review Speed Matter

Peer review is the evaluation of scholarly work by experts in the same field; it acts as a quality-control and validation mechanism before formal publication. It helps maintain standards, improve manuscripts, and lend credibility to published findings. Peer review speed matters because publication timing affects tenure and promotion, grant decisions, and the rapid dissemination of scientific results to peers, clinicians, and policymakers. In competitive fields where multiple teams work on the same research question, the first to publish achieves the recognition and impact. However, faster review also raises questions about the thoroughness of editorial checks and reviewer scrutiny.

How Fast Track Publication Works

Fast track publication is a process offered by some academic journals that accelerates the typical peer review and publication timeline for research articles. The aim is to publish research more quickly than under the traditional review model, which is often a priority for high-impact or urgent studies.

1. **Quicker Review Process**: In the fast track model, manuscripts are prioritized and sent for a faster review. This means that the peer review process is expedited reviewers are often given shorter timeframes to complete their reviews, sometimes within weeks rather than months.
2. **Pre-Emptive Editorial Decisions**: Some journals may make an editorial decision based on an initial screening (such as a quick assessment by the editor) before sending the manuscript to peer review. If the editor sees potential, the article may proceed more quickly through the process.
3. **Priority Handling**: Fast track articles may receive priority handling at every stage from

submission to peer review, and eventually to publication. Authors often pay a fee to ensure their article is processed faster.

4. **Online First or Early Access**: Once a manuscript has been accepted, it is often published online before it appears in a print issue. This is referred to as "online first" or "early access" publication, which allows articles to be cited and shared even before being formally included in an issue.

How It Differs from the Traditional Review Model:

Aspect	Traditional Review	Fast Track
Review Time	Takes several months (typically 3-6months), depending on complexity andreviewer availability.	Review time is significantly shortened,so for time-sensitive research.
Prioritization	Reviewed in the order received, followingstandard timelines.	Fast track articles are prioritized, bypassi acceptanceand publication.
Acceptance Rate	Thorough evaluation, leading to higherrejection rates due to detailed scrutiny.	Rigorous review but may result in slightly quicker decisions.
Cost	No extra charges (except in open accessjournals), handled within the journal'snormal budget.	Involves additional fees to cover expedite sometimes online-firstpublication.

Aspect	Traditional Review	Fast Track
Impact and Use Cases	Suitable for non-time-sensitive articles.Typically used for research that doesn't require immediate dissemination.	Ideal for groundbreaking, time-sensitive dissemination, such as emerging discoveries or policy implications.

When Fast Review Benefits Researchers

Rapid peer review can be advantageous in several situations:

- **Public-health emergencies and time-sensitive findings**: Accelerated review allows results to inform practice or policy quickly. Analyses of COVID-19 publishing found that journals processed relevant manuscripts faster than non?COVID work, and many rapidly reviewed COVID-19 articles achieved high citation impact.
- **Career timing**: Early-career researchers facing promotion or grant deadlines benefit from faster decisions that lower opportunity costs and speed progress on subsequent projects.
- **Suitable manuscript types**: Short communications, methods notes, and editorials often require less extensive peer review and can move from submission to publication more quickly.

Many reputable journals now report median times to first decision or acceptance in weeks rather than months. Editorial triage and improved online workflows account for some of this acceleration, and transparent editorial statistics help authors choose targets that align with their timelines.

When Fast Review Can Harm Research Quality

Speed becomes risky when essential editorial safeguards are shortened or bypassed. Pandemic-era studies documented both rapid acceptances and an uptick in retractions for COVID-19 research, with causes including plagiarism, undeclared conflicts, ethical lapses, and manipulated peer review issues that standard review could detect. Very fast acceptances (within days or on the submission day) correlated in some cases with later corrections and withdrawals. These examples highlight a trade-off: faster dissemination sometimes reduces the time available for careful scrutiny.

Factors That Determine Whether Speed is Safe

Not all fast review workflows are equivalent. Several mediators affect whether accelerated timelines preserve quality:

- **Editorial triage and screening**: Robust initial checks for ethics approvals, conflicts of interest, plagiarism, and obvious methodological flaws reduce reviewer burden and improve the odds that a fast track still yields reliable publications.
- **Reviewer selection and workload**: Recruiting multiple experienced reviewers, monitoring review turnaround, and providing reviewer support can shorten cycles without losing rigor. Reviewer training and realistic workload expectations are crucial for sustainable speed.
- **Field norms and article type**: Disciplines and manuscript types differ; methods papers or short reports typically require less extensive revision than full empirical studies, and journal-to-journal variation in review time is large.
- **Transparency and accountability**: Journals that publish review timelines, peer-review histories, and post-publication corrections allow authors to judge whether a fast path is trustworthy.

How Researchers Can Benefit from Speed Without Increasing Risk

Authors can take concrete steps to align with high-quality, fast review:

- **Select journals with transparent timelines**: Prefer journals that publish editorial statistics (time to first decision, time to acceptance) and clear peer-review policies so you can set realistic expectations.
- **Prepare submissions for rapid evaluation**: A concise cover letter that clearly states novelty and urgency (if justified), well-formatted figures and tables, and organized supplementary files reduce reviewer friction. Use reporting guidelines (PRISMA, CONSORT, STROBE) to make methods and reporting transparent; this both speeds review and lowers the chance of revision requests.
- **Use preprints strategically**: Posting a preprint accelerates dissemination while formal peer review proceeds and allows community feedback; clearly label preprints to avoid confusion.
- **Suggest qualified, independent reviewers and respond promptly to revisions**: Editors appreciate reviewer suggestions with institutional emails and clear conflict-of-interest statements; timely, well-structured revision responses shorten subsequent cycles.
- **Prioritize ethical and methodological integrity**: Transparent data availability, documented ethics approvals, and clear authorship statements reduce the risk of later corrections or retractions.

Practical Checklist for Navigating Fast Review (Apply Before Submission)

1. Verify the journal's peer-review statistics and editorial policies.
2. Confirm the journal's scope and indexing status.
3. Prepare a succinct cover letter highlighting novelty and urgency (if applicable).
4. Ensure compliance with reporting guidelines (PRISMA, CONSORT, STROBE).
5. Compile a list of potential independent reviewers with institutional emails and COI statements.
6. Post a clearly labeled preprint if rapid dissemination matters.

Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Submitting to journals that promise rapid publication for a fee without checking editorial independence is a frequent error. Some paid "fast-track" options correlate with weaker editorial safeguards; verify editorial governance and reputation before paying for speed. Rushing submission without solid documentation (ethics approval, data availability, or code) increases the likelihood of post-publication issues. Pandemic examples show that too-rapid acceptance can lead to retractions or lengthy corrections, damaging the scientific record and authors' reputations.

How Peer Review is Changing – and What to Watch For

Emerging practices transparent peer review, registered reports, and broader use of preprints help

authors combine speed with rigor. Some journals publish peer-review histories alongside articles; others use editorial triage and dedicated fast-track teams for priority topics. Monitor journal policies, publisher editorial reports, and community initiatives (e.g., Peer Review Week) to find pathways that balance speed and quality.

Practical Wrap-up and Support Options

Fast peer review is neither inherently good nor bad; its value depends on context, editorial safeguards, and how well authors prepare submissions. When timely dissemination is essential, accelerated review can be invaluable but only when coupled with rigorous editorial screening and ethical transparency. Authors can protect both speed and quality by choosing journals with transparent practices, preparing materials carefully, using preprints appropriately, and proposing qualified reviewers.

For hands-on help, consider professional manuscript support: editing services improve clarity and adherence to reporting guidelines; journal?selection support can identify reputable journals whose timelines match your needs reducing desk rejections and improving the odds that a legitimately fast path leads to a durable publication; end-to-end publication support can help optimize the manuscript and the submission package and therefore reduce time wasted in iterative revisions.

Category

1. Reporting Research

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