Description

Format-free submission (also marketed as **Free Format** or **Your Paper, Your Way**) is now widely promoted across major scholarly publishers. The promise is straightforward: reduce time spent on cosmetic manuscript formatting so researchers can focus on the science and speed up the research publication process. Wiley, for example, notes that hundreds of its journals accept submissions in any consistent format, without requiring authors to match the journal's exact formatting rules at first submission.

Yet many authors still face delays during the initial technical check because *format-free* does not mean *requirement-free*. Most journals still expect accurate citations, complete submission metadata, and mandatory manuscript sections (plus declarations and required files) before the research manuscript can be sent to an editor or peer reviewers. Elsevier's "Your Paper Your Way" similarly highlights simplified initial formatting and may allow a *single file* for review, but it does not remove the need for complete, readable, policy-compliant content.

This article explains what *format-free submission* really means, what still triggers avoidable technical-check holds, and how to submit an academic manuscript efficiently while meeting manuscript guidelines.

What "Format-Free Submission" Actually Means (and What It Does Not)

At its core, format-free submission means the journal does not require strict adherence to its final layout rules at the first submission. This usually includes flexibility on items such as reference style, line numbering, and whether figures must be placed at the end or embedded in the text. Wiley describes free format submission as allowing manuscripts in any consistent format, making submission "easier and faster," with journal formatting typically enforced after revision or acceptance.

Elsevier's "Your Paper Your Way" approach also allows authors to submit a manuscript as a single file for the refereeing process (for example, a Word document or PDF), with formatting requirements becoming more relevant later in the workflow.

What it *does not* mean is that a journal will overlook missing manuscript components, incomplete

author information, unclear figures, absent declarations, or inconsistent citations. In short, format-free submission reduces styling work, but it does not eliminate technical screening for your research manuscript.

Why Journals Still Run Technical Checks Even for Format-Free Submissions

Before peer review, journals typically perform an administrative screening to confirm the submission is complete, readable, and compliant with journal and publisher policies. This protects editorial time and reduces reviewer burden caused by incomplete or non-compliant research manuscripts.

Even when reference formatting is flexible, journals still need enough structure to:

1. Route the paper to the right editor
2. Assess whether the study type fits the journal
3. Verify required disclosures
4. Ensure the submission can be reviewed without confusion

That is why the "submit academic manuscript" process still includes mandatory portal fields and required statements, even under format-free submission models.

What Still Matters: The Non-Negotiables That "Format-Free" Does Not Remove

Consistent Citations and a Complete Reference List (Style-Flexible, Not Accuracy-Flexible)

Most format-free submission policies relax *reference style*, not *reference quality*. Elsevier explicitly notes there are no strict requirements on reference formatting at submission and references can be in any style, as long as the style is consistent.

In practice, consistency means readers can reliably connect claims to sources. That requires:

- Stable in-text citation behavior (author–date or numbered, but not both)
- A reference list that includes all cited works
- Enough bibliographic detail to identify sources (authors, title, journal/book, year, volume/issue, pages, and DOI when available)

Common technical-check problems that still occur under format-free submission include:

- Missing references that are cited in the text
- References listed but never cited
- Inconsistent author name formatting across entries
- Broken or incomplete DOI details

Complete Submission Metadata (What Authors Type Into the Portal)

Format-free submission does not remove the requirement to fill in the journal's online fields. Journals still rely on accurate metadata for indexing, peer reviewer matching, and editor assignment critical steps in the research publication process.

- Full title and running title (if requested)
- Author names exactly as they should appear in publication
- Institutional affiliations
- Corresponding author details
- Abstract and keywords
- Funding information (if any)
- Conflict of interest disclosures
- Ethical approvals (where applicable)
- Data availability details (if required by the journal)

Taylor & Francis, for example, provides a step-by-step guide to using its submission portal, reflecting how much of the process depends on correct portal completion rather than visual formatting.

Mandatory Manuscript Sections (and Study-Type Requirements)

Format-free submission rarely changes the expectation that the academic manuscript includes the core components editors and reviewers need. While section names vary by discipline and journal, most research manuscripts still require: title, abstract, introduction, methods, results, discussion, conclusions (or an equivalent structure), plus references and figure/table legends as applicable.

Declarations and Policy Statements (Often the Real Technical-Check Gate)

Many delays happen not because the manuscript "looks wrong," but because required declarations are missing. Conflict of interest disclosure is a common requirement across journals and is often supported by standardized forms (for example, the ICMJE disclosure form is widely used in medical publishing).

Similarly, data sharing and data availability expectations are increasingly common across fields, and publishers often require a data availability statement when applicable (even if the dataset is restricted or available on request). A useful starting point for data availability norms is the Center for Open Science's guidance and resources around open research practices.

What "Format-Free" Typically Relaxes (and How Far Authors Can Safely Go)

Reference style: Any consistent style is often acceptable at first submission.

File packaging: Many journals accept a single combined file for initial review.

Layout details: Strict template adherence is often deferred until revision/acceptance.

How to Submit an Academic Manuscript Under Format-Free Rules Without Getting Stuck at Screening

Step-by-Step Workflow That Survives the Technical Check

1. Confirm the journal truly offers format-free submission
2. Choose one citation system and keep it consistent
3. Prepare a complete "metadata pack" before opening the submission portal
4. Include all mandatory sections and required statements
5. Keep figures and tables review-friendly
6. Use the cover letter strategically (even if optional)

Common Mistakes That Still Cause "Format-Free" Submissions to Be Returned

- Inconsistent citation behavior
- Missing required declarations
- Incomplete author metadata
- Poor figure legibility
- Non-compliant file uploads

A Practical Pre-Submission Checklist for Format-Free Submission Journals

- Confirm the journal offers *format-free submission* for initial submission.
- Ensure the research manuscript is complete.
- Use one citation approach consistently.
- Prepare complete portal metadata.
- Add required declarations.
- Confirm figure and table readability.

Conclusion: Efficiency Without Compromising Excellence

While "format-free" submission significantly reduces the time spent on cosmetic adjustments, the responsibility for scientific rigor and policy compliance remains with the author. A manuscript that is internally consistent and metadata-complete will always move through the technical check faster than one treated with an "anything goes" approach.

- **Target the Right Venue:** Journal Selection
- **Audit Your Submission:** Technical Check Report
- **Polished Presentation:** Manuscript Formatting
- **End-to-End Handling:** Journal Submission
- **The Total Solution:** Premium Package

By balancing publisher flexibility with professional oversight, you can focus on your next discovery while we ensure your current one reaches the reviewers without delay.

Category

1. Publishing Research

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