Description

Open access (OA) journals and traditional publishers both aim to communicate rigorous research, but their manuscript-formatting expectations often diverge in ways that materially affect submission speed, peer review, and production. One visible indicator of the publishing ecosystem's scale is the rapid growth in persistent identifiers: DOI registrations rose markedly in the 2010s and exceeded hundreds of millions by 2025, underscoring the centrality of metadata and versioning across publishing models.

This article explains the technical differences in manuscript formatting between representative OA outlets (for example, PLOS and MDPI) and legacy or traditional publishers (for example, Springer Nature and Elsevier). It covers abstract rules, reference and citation formats, figure presentation and artwork requirements, and DOI and metadata practices. The article also explains why converting a manuscript between OA and traditional formats can be time-consuming and error-prone, and it offers a practical checklist and tips to make conversions smoother.

Why formatting requirements differ

Differences in formatting arise from operational priorities. Many OA publishers operate continuous-publication, web-first workflows that standardize article presentation for rapid online exposure and often encourage authors to supply production-ready files. In contrast, many traditional publishers prioritize editorial evaluation over initial layout consistency; initial submissions are accepted in flexible formats and then standardized at acceptance and production. This leads to two practical consequences: OA journals often publish stricter, author-facing formatting guidance up front, while traditional publishers tend to apply house styles during production.

Abstract length and structure: what to watch for

Abstract length, structure, and allowable content can differ sharply.

- **MDPI** typically requires a single-paragraph abstract of up to about 200 words and encourages an IMRD-style structure within that paragraph; some MDPI journals recommend a separate graphical abstract.
- **PLOS** journals allow more flexibility in manuscript length for main text but require a concise abstract and prohibit citations within the abstract. PLOS encourages concise presentation but

does not generally enforce strict word ceilings in the submission guidelines for many journals.
- **Springer Nature** journals often prioritize concise abstracts and may ask editors to request more compact wording at revision.
- Many scientific, medical, and technical journals require structured abstracts for original research, with labeled sections such as Background, Objectives, Methods, Results, and Conclusions. This format is common in journals following ICMJE guidance and in publishers such as JMIR and IEEE , though section labels may vary.

Why this matters: converting a 300-word structured abstract into MDPI's one-paragraph, 200-word limit (or removing in-abstract citations for PLOS) requires rephrasing and may alter emphasis. Authors should prepare multiple abstract drafts when targeting different journals.

References and citation styles

Citation style differences are among the most time-consuming technical mismatches when converting manuscripts.

- Many OA publishers (for example, PLOS) use a numbered Vancouver or citation-sequence style with references listed in citation order; they may require that references include article titles and DOIs where available. PLOS explicitly forbids citations in abstracts and encourages inclusion of preprints only when they have a citable DOI.
- MDPI journals commonly use numbered bracketed citations ([1], [2–4]) and expect full journal article titles and page or article numbers in references; they provide Word and LaTeX templates to help enforce style. (mdpi.com)
- Traditional publishers such as Springer Nature often use author–year (Harvard-style) citations, though Nature's primary journals may request line-numbered PDF submissions for review and impose house styles at proof stage. Elsevier frequently permits any consistent reference style at initial submission and applies the journal's house style during production.

Conversion burdens: renumbering citations, changing in-text callouts from author-year to numeric systems (or vice versa), and reformatting reference details (abbreviated journal names versus full titles; inclusion or omission of DOIs) are mechanical but error-prone. Reference managers (EndNote, Zotero, Mendeley, BibTeX) reduce effort, but exported styles must be checked for publisher-specific quirks.

Figure presentation and artwork requirements

Expect differences in how figures and supplementary media are supplied.

- **Springer Nature** specifies resolution rules depending on image type (for example, 300 dpi for photos, 600–1200 dpi for line art) and prefers editable vector formats (EPS) or high-resolution TIFF or PNG for raster images. They instruct authors to supply figure captions in the manuscript and figures as separate files.
- **PLOS** asks that figure captions appear after the paragraph where each figure is first cited, with figure files uploaded separately; there are fewer limits on total figures but requirements for accessibility and supporting information.
- **MDPI** encourages color figures in RGB, typically requests high-resolution files (often 600 dpi for line art or combined images, and 300–600 dpi for photos), and permits graphical abstracts. MDPI

provides templates and recommends that all figure text be legible (?12 pt).

Why this matters: converting figures can mean recreating composite images, re-exporting vector files, adjusting DPI, embedding or removing scale bars, and ensuring color specifications match the target journal's production workflow. These tasks often require access to the original source files and basic image-editing skills.

DOIs, metadata, licensing, and preprints

DOIs are central to discoverability and persistent linking; the DOI system is managed through the International DOI Foundation and is implemented by registration agencies such as Crossref and DataCite. Publishers register DOIs and are responsible for updating DOI metadata if a resource's location changes. The DOI ecosystem's scale and responsibilities make proper metadata entry essential for indexing and for automated linking across platforms.

Open access journals often require explicit license declarations at submission (for example, CC BY variants) because licensing determines re-use and repository deposition. Traditional publishers may offer hybrid options and will request copyright transfer or licensing agreements at acceptance. OA practice often encourages inclusion of citable preprints (with DOIs) and direct links to datasets; some traditional journals are more conservative regarding preprint citation but are becoming more accepting.

Common conversion challenges

- **Reference reflow errors:** automated style changes (author-year ? numeric) can misplace punctuation or drop DOIs. Conversion back-and-forth multiplies these errors.
- **Figure artifacts and resolution loss:** exporting low-resolution images or embedding images as JPEGs can produce unusable files for high-resolution requirements.
- **Metadata mismatch:** title, author affiliations, ORCID, funding statements, and keywords may have to be entered separately into different submission portals; automated metadata exchange is not universal.
- **Licensing and supplementary materials:** OA journals often require explicit licensing text and structured supporting information files; converting from a submission formatted for a traditional publisher can require new supplemental-file packaging.

A practical conversion checklist

- Preserve original files: keep editable figure sources (AI, EPS, SVG), raw data for plots, and original table files.
- Use a reference manager: maintain a single authoritative .bib, .ris, or .enl library and export publisher-specific styles as needed.
- Create parallel abstracts: prepare a compact 150–200 word version and a longer 250–350 word version where allowed.
- Export figures in required formats and DPI: create copies in both vector (EPS, SVG, PDF) and high-resolution raster (TIFF, PNG) as required.
- Record metadata in a single master file: title, author order, ORCID iDs, funding statements, keywords, and suggested reviewers.

- Validate DOIs and dataset links: ensure each referenced DOI resolves and that dataset DOIs (DataCite) are registered and accessible.

Tips, tools, and time-saving tricks

- Prepare a submission-ready folder early in the writing process containing high-resolution figures, tables in editable formats, a cleaned reference library, and separate text-only copies of the manuscript.
- Use journal templates only for journals that require them; some OA journals provide Word and LaTeX templates that cut formatting work.
- For multiple submissions, maintain a canonical “source” manuscript (minimally formatted) and generate publisher-specific exports from that source to avoid accumulating incompatible formatting artifacts.
- Validate DOIs with doi.org or Crossref lookup tools and check publisher metadata before submission.

Conclusion and next steps

Formatting differences between OA journals and traditional publishers reflect different editorial and production models, and they create concrete technical tasks such as abstract editing, citation reformatting, figure re-exporting, and metadata management when converting manuscripts between systems. Planning ahead, using reference managers, preserving original figure and data files, and preparing publisher-specific abstracts can significantly reduce conversion time and the risk of production delays.

For researchers seeking operational support, professional manuscript-formatting and artwork – editing services can help translate a manuscript into the exact requirements of a chosen journal. Enago’s manuscript formatting and artwork-editing services provide tailored journal recommendations and production-ready formatting to match target journals’ guidelines, which can reduce desk rejections and shorten time to submission. Consider using these services when preparing simultaneous or sequential submissions to different publisher types.

Category

1. Reporting Research

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