Description

A journal's [peer review](link) timeline and its Impact Factor often pull in opposite directions. Many researchers learn this the hard way: the journals that look best on a CV (often top-quartile/Q1 titles in a category) can take months to deliver a peer-reviewed decision, while "fast" journals may respond quickly but vary widely in rigor and prestige. The challenge is not simply choosing between speed and prestige. It is learning how to interpret journal review timelines so that a fast decision does not become a costly mistake in the research publication process.

This article explains what "normal" timelines look like, what the available evidence suggests about how prestige and peer review behavior relate, and how to spot predatory or suspiciously turnaround times. It also provides practical steps to balance deadlines with publication goals, without compromising research integrity.

What "review timeline" actually means (and why definitions matter)

Before comparing journals, it helps to separate several commonly mixed-up milestones. These definitions matter because "fast" can mean very different things:

- **Time to first editorial decision** usually includes desk rejections and decisions to send out for peer review. It is often faster than peer-reviewed decisions because it may not involve external reviewers.
- **Time to first peer-reviewed decision** is more comparable across journals because it reflects the point at which reviewer reports have been returned and evaluated.
- **Time to final decision** includes revisions, re-review (when required), and editorial deliberation.
- **Time from acceptance to publication** reflects production speed, not peer review rigor.

Many publishers now display these metrics publicly. For example, Elsevier directs authors to each journal's "Journal Insights" page for historical review-time data and suggests contacting the editor if a submission runs far beyond the journal's typical averages.

Typical review timelines

Across fields, credible peer review tends to take weeks to months, not days. A 2024 analysis of 57 health policy journals reported a median 60.5 days to first peer-reviewed decision and 198.0 days to final peer-reviewed decision, with substantial variation across journals.

Some journals are transparent enough to publish detailed timing tables. PLOS ONE, for instance, reports median times (in days) across half-year windows. For Jan to Jun 2023, it listed 45 days to first decision, 87 days to final decision, and 188 days to acceptance (median). It also describes how its workflow affects speed. For example, reviewers "typically have 10 days to submit their review," and the journal follows up with late reviewers.

These figures matter because they show a key reality. Even journals designed to be efficient and high-throughput rarely compress genuine peer review and editorial assessment into a handful of days.

Impact factor vs. speed: What the evidence suggests

Researchers often assume that a higher Impact Factor automatically means longer review time. The reality is more nuanced, because "speed" has multiple components, and journals can optimize some parts, such as editorial triage, reviewer reminders, and editorial staffing, without reducing rigor.

One useful lens is to distinguish reviewer behavior from overall decision time:

- Reviewers may return reports faster for prestigious journals, likely because these invitations are prioritized. Clarivate's Global State of Peer Review report (Publons) noted that median days to complete a review decreases as Journal Impact Factor increases, and that reviewers also tend to write longer reports for more prestigious journals.
- However, the overall timeline can still be longer in selective journals due to higher rejection rates after review, more extensive revision cycles, additional rounds of review, and greater editorial deliberation, especially when journals evaluate not only methodological soundness but also novelty and field-level significance.

In other words, higher-impact venues may not always have slower reviewers, but they often have longer paths to acceptance because the bar is higher and the decision-making is more layered.

Why rigorous peer review tends to slow things down

Even when reviewers are fast, robust peer review requires several steps that are difficult to compress without trade-offs:

- **Editorial fit and triage.** Strong journals often invest time in scope checks, ethics screening, data availability requirements, plagiarism checks, and editorial board consultation before sending manuscripts out.
- **Reviewer recruitment friction.** Finding qualified reviewers is often the slowest variable. If invitations are declined or ignored, editors must invite additional reviewers, which extends the clock.

- **Depth of critique and revision.** More rigorous journals often request clarifications, robustness checks, additional analyses, or stronger positioning in the literature, improving the manuscript but increasing cycle time.
- **Second-round review.** Major revisions frequently trigger re-review, which can add weeks.

The key point for authors is that a longer timeline is not automatically "better," but timelines that are too short are often inconsistent with credible peer review.

Fast review journals: When speed is legitimate, and when it is a red flag

Many reputable journals offer efficient peer review, and speed itself is not a sign of poor quality. The goal is to distinguish well-managed speed from implausible speed.

A practical warning threshold many integrity experts highlight is acceptance in under two weeks, especially if it includes "peer review." While edge cases exist, such as immediate desk rejection or clearly scoped transfers, peer-reviewed acceptance within days is difficult to reconcile with real reviewer recruitment, evaluation, and editorial synthesis.

Commentary on publication ethics frequently treats extremely short times as a red flag. For example, one ethics-focused discussion notes that review times under a week, and even under a month, should raise concern because it is unusual for multiple independent reviewers to complete substantive reviews that quickly.

In parallel, analyses of publishers criticized in the "predatory" debate have pointed to unusually compressed acceptance-time distributions at scale. One dataset-driven critique reported large volumes of papers accepted within 20 to 30 days, including revisions, for a major OA publisher's 2020 output, arguing that such uniform speed patterns suggest strong systemic coordination.

This does not, by itself, prove predation for any specific journal, but it illustrates why authors should treat very short and highly standardized acceptance times as a signal to investigate carefully.

How to identify predatory or low-integrity turnaround times

Predatory publishing is best detected through a pattern of signals, not one metric. Turnaround time becomes especially suspicious when paired with other inconsistencies.

A journal's timeline deserves heightened scrutiny when it shows one or more of the following:

1. Promises or guarantees such as "publication in 3 to 7 days" or "acceptance guaranteed," especially for complex empirical work.
2. Peer-review claims that do not match the workflow, such as acceptance emails with minimal or generic reviewer feedback.
3. Vague peer review descriptions, with no clarity on reviewer selection, number of reviewers, or decision criteria.
4. Unverifiable editorial board members, unclear contact information, or misleading indexing claims.
5. APCs framed as the primary selling point, rather than as a transparency item in a legitimate OA

model.

A 2025 guide on predatory journals summarizes "suspiciously fast publication timelines" as a key warning sign and notes that publication within days is inconsistent with genuine peer review processes.

Because third-party blogs vary in quality, it is best to use such checklists as prompts for verification, such as checking indexing status directly in Web of Science or Scopus, confirming editorial board affiliations, and reading published articles for methodological depth.

Concrete metrics authors can use to compare journals

When comparing a Q1 target against a faster alternative, the most actionable approach is to compare three numbers and one qualitative signal:

1. **Time to first decision (peer-reviewed, if available).** Prefer journals that distinguish desk decisions from peer-reviewed decisions. In the health policy sample, the median time to first peer-reviewed decision was about two months.
2. **Time to final decision.** This is the best indicator of how long a revise and resubmit pathway may take.
3. **Time from acceptance to publication.** This is crucial for grant reporting or graduation timelines. For PLOS ONE, the acceptance to publication median was reported as about 10 days in its Jan to Jun 2023 table, showing that production can be fast even when peer review takes longer.
4. **Transparency quality.** Journals that publish timing distributions, decision definitions, and peer review policies make it easier to plan realistically and are generally easier to trust.

Practical strategies to balance speed and prestige without compromising integrity

Early-career researchers and busy PIs often face real constraints, such as graduation deadlines, funding renewals, promotion cycles, and patent-related timing. The following strategies help reduce risk while keeping timelines realistic:

- **Use a two-journal plan.** Identify a prestige-first journal and a credible speed-first backup. Build both around scope fit and transparent metrics, not only quartile rank.
- **Aim to reduce avoidable delays.** Many "slow reviews" are partly self-inflicted through avoidable desk rejections or revision churn. Clear reporting, strong statistical descriptions, complete ethics statements, and journal-compliant formatting can materially reduce back-and-forth.
- **Treat ultra-fast acceptance as a verification trigger.** If a journal accepts within less than two weeks with minimal comments, treat that as a reason to pause and audit the journal, even if it appears indexed.
- **Consider preprints for time-sensitive dissemination.** Preprints can separate speed of visibility from speed of journal acceptance. Always confirm norms and policies in the specific discipline.

Making speed work for, not against, research careers

The peer review speed–prestige trade-off is real, but it is manageable when authors compare journals

using transparent journal review timeline metrics, interpret fast decisions correctly, and treat "too-fast-to-be-true" acceptances as a prompt for deeper checks.

When authors also improve submission readiness, such as language clarity, structure, guideline compliance, and formatting, many of the most frustrating delays become preventable rather than inevitable. In that context, targeted support can function as a timeline strategy. For example, Enago's journal selection service includes matching journals based on review and publication cycle alongside indexing and Impact Factor, which can help researchers build a realistic speed-prestige shortlist. In addition, careful manuscript editing can reduce preventable desk rejections and revision loops by improving readability and guideline compliance before submission.

Ultimately, the best outcome is not simply fast or high impact. It is a publication plan that delivers credible peer review, career-relevant visibility, and timelines that match reality constraints.

Category

1. Journal Guidelines
2. Reporting Research

Date Created
2026/02/24
Author
editor