

Guide to Transitioning Journals to Open Access Publishing

Open access (OA) journal publishing -- whereby articles in a given journal are made immediately and freely available online without any financial, legal, or technical barriers -- can [dramatically increase](#) the reach and visibility of scholarship, facilitate sharing and reuse, and position authors to retain copyright in their works. If OA fits your journal's mission, because you would like your published content to reach its maximum audience and achieve its greatest potential impact, with time and attention you can find the right business model to make this possible. UC's Office of Scholarly Communication would like to support your efforts to transitioning your journal to OA. That's why we have developed this guide.

This guide is aimed at anyone, but it is specifically designed for scholars (faculty, students, professional researchers) from all disciplines who are involved in editing or managing journals and are considering transitioning their affiliated journals to OA, by either:

- a) Converting (sometimes called "flipping") an existing subscription journal to OA, or
- b) Stepping away from responsibilities at an existing subscription journal to create a new, open access journal in its place.

This document is intended to help you gather information that you will need throughout the transition process -- everything from understanding how a journal currently funds its publishing, to identifying the stakeholders with whom you will need to work, and communicating your new publishing model once the transition is complete.

The first section will help you gather important information about your journal's current ownership and funding models. The subsequent sections will guide you through specific scenarios for transitioning to OA based on the information you determined up front. In all sections, we make clear *why* this context is important, *how* you can get this information, and *who* can help you.

A caveat: Some subscription journals offer "OA options" by publishing a mix of subscription and open access articles; these are commonly known as "hybrid journals." Please note that hybrid journals are still fundamentally subscription journals with an OA option and are not the type of open access under consideration here. This guide addresses the intention to publish all journal content as OA.

Step 1: Understand your journal's current publishing situation

1.1 Who owns the journal?

Before any business decision can be made about a journal, the owner of the journal has to agree. The owner would be the entity that makes or approves a decision to move to open access, even if another entity manages the transition. Affiliated societies and organizations, while they might be the intellectual force behind a journal and might be able to influence decisions, are not able to *execute* business decisions for a journal if they are not the owner.

Unpacking ownership

The owner is usually a publishing company, a scholarly society, an organization, or an academic or medical institution. Please note that specific branding or logos on the cover or website of the journal, or the words "Official Journal of the Society of XXXXX" do not necessarily mean the journal is owned by that society or that brand. The easiest way to find the owner is to see what name appears in the Copyright line for published article, which can be found in many places, but is most consistently available on the first page of an article PDF.

Example: "© by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved." indicates that the journal is owned by the University of California.

Who/what can help you determine ownership?

- Journal article copyright line, e.g. <http://socdev.ucpress.edu/content/4/1/1.article-info>
- A journal's website footer, e.g. <http://socdev.ucpress.edu/>
- Ulrich's Global Serials Directory (<http://ulrichsweb.serialsolutions.com/>) (subscription required)
- Note: you need to look up the "Publisher & Ordering Details" section. If the publisher is not the owner, there should also be a "Corporate Author" listed in addition to the publisher. Note #2: information can occasionally be out of date.

1.2 Who earns income/revenue from the journal? What operations/personnel are supported by the journal?

While open access journals can earn plenty of income/revenue and be sustainable, they operate in a financially different way (i.e. with a different kind of business model) than traditional subscription journals. Any change to the business model has an effect on how income is earned, and might also have an effect on how *much* income is earned. If there are operations, people, or organizations that either need or rely on this income, this information should be known in advance.

Understanding your journal's financial operations

The money that journals earn from subscriptions, licensing content, advertising, or other income sources may support a variety of publishing-related functions, and may not entirely cover status quo costs. Some journals operate at a loss. Some journals only cover their direct costs, such as production and hosting, and are staffed by volunteers. Some journals earn enough income to cover direct costs and the salaries of dedicated staff. Some journals earn enough income to support all the above plus an entire organization. All these types of journals can earn income for one party, usually the owner, or multiple parties, usually the owner and an affiliated party like a scholarly society. At this early stage it is not necessary to know *how much* income/revenue is earned, but simply to be aware of *who* earns this income, and to understand *what* activities or organization rely on this income.

Who/what can help you determine who and what the journal revenue supports?

- A journal website's "about" page.
- The owner and/or publisher and/or editors of a journal, themselves.
- The publication committee or leadership (e.g., Treasurer) of a professional society.
- An experienced publishing professional (e.g. for UC-affiliates, a member of the OSC OA Publishing Workgroup), can estimate costs or explore the operational structure of a journal.

1.3 How does your discipline feel about OA publishing?

Getting a sense of your community's needs and preferences for OA publishing is extremely important, as you may want to consider early on how to bring stakeholders on board and develop a plan for disseminating information about the transition. Perhaps your journal is within a discipline in which research results and data must be rapidly disseminated or made readily available to practitioners or policy-makers. Alternatively, perhaps scholars within your relatively small field are generally interested in open access but less familiar with how the model would work and what it means. Getting a sense of what journals within your discipline already publish open access, and community opinions about OA publishing generally, may inform the outreach you undertake to conduct next steps in the transition process.

Who/what can help you gauge support for OA in your discipline?

- Develop a short list of similar journals in the same field. Look at their publications, composition, and operations. Which are fully OA and which are not? Can you get a sense of why this may be the case?

- Determine which similar journals publish OA and what OA funding strategies they rely on by consulting the Directory of Open Access Journals (<https://doaj.org/>) and reviewing each journal's home page.
- Consult websites of scholarly societies in your discipline or field for references to OA publishing
- Search for topical blog posts or articles by colleagues within your field

Step 2: Approaching the Transition

This section offers guidance on how to move toward open access publishing based on the journal ownership framework you identified above. For each ownership scenario, we offer suggestions for how to either (1) convert or “flip” an existing journal to OA, or (2) start a new OA journal.

2.1 Publisher-owned journal scenario

2.1.1 Converting an existing publisher-owned journal to open access

Most journal publishers -- from small university presses to the biggest commercials -- have already established or are actively experimenting with some kind of open access model for at least some of their journals. This group includes publishers that have been traditionally non-OA publishers, have in the past spoken out against OA publishing, or have even tried to block it via lobbying. If you are involved in a journal as an Editor or Editorial Board member (or are otherwise linked to a journal's community) and would like to investigate open access, first ask the publisher whether the journal is already or could be a candidate to flip to OA. Many publishers are looking for candidate journals, especially if there is a community around the journal which is already engaged with OA.

Some subscription journals offer “OA options” by publishing a mix of subscription and open access articles; these are commonly known as “hybrid journals.” Please note that hybrid journals are still fundamentally subscription journals with an OA option and are not the type of open access under consideration in this document. In this regard, OA payments in hybrid journals often provide an additional sources of revenue for publishers on top of the subscription revenue, which is why many OA advocates and funders are pushing back against hybrid journals. However, some hybrid journals may make the best candidates for a flip to full OA because their authors may already be more familiar with OA.

If you are involved with a journal and want to encourage its flip to an OA model, you will need to speak to the publisher/owner and suggest this. While you may be able to influence them, a flip is still the decision of the publisher/owner of the journal; we recommend that you include as many like-minded editors and journal community members as you can in your communication to the publisher. Many publishers in the past have rejected suggestions for specific journals to move to OA citing that there is no interest from the community to do so. In addition to influencing the publisher it is equally important to educate or reassure any remaining community members who are not sure about open access, or who

inaccurately equate OA with lesser quality or rigor. On this latter point, you can emphasize that the whole point of flipping a subscription journal to OA is to keep all the existing standards of quality and rigor (i.e., peer review and editorial oversight) intact as well as impact; the only thing that changes in a flip to OA is the business model that is used to sustain the journal.

That said, if the publisher/owner does not want to support this change, it ultimately does not matter how many people in the community of authors, editors, reviewers, and readers would like a journal to flip to OA. The change cannot be forced. If the publisher is reticent, the community could choose to abandon the journal and consider migrating to a different journal or starting a new journal (see [2.1.2 below](#)). In some cases the possibility of this action could strongly influence the publisher to support the flip to OA. Please note that a publisher's reticence to flip the journal may indicate a particular concern (e.g. the journal could be making a considerable profit, which could be harder, but not impossible, to achieve in an OA scenario).

Who/what can help you approach the journal about flipping?

- An experienced publishing professional (e.g. a member of the OSC OA Publishing Workgroup) can likely help you identify who, specifically, at a publisher could be approached to suggest the change.
- An example of an online petition calling for open access and directed toward a journal's editors and editorial board: <https://petitions.moveon.org/sign/support-fair-open-access>
- A list of subscription journals flipped to OA: http://oad.simmons.edu/oadwiki/Journals_that_converted_from_TA_to_OA
- Two helpful and relevant resources from Scholastica: "[How to start or flip an open access journal: Academic-led publishing primer](#)" and [Academic-Led OA Publishing](#)
- A video describing a project at Taylor & Francis to flip a collection of journals: <https://tv.theiet.org/?videoid=11801>
- Journal-Flipping Project (Harvard's 2015-16 project to gather best practices for converting subscription-based scholarly journals to open access): <https://osc.hul.harvard.edu/programs/journal-flipping/>
- A review article by Laakso, Solomon, and Björk, exploring the ways in which subscription journals have converted to open access: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/leap.1056>

2.1.2 Leaving an existing publisher-owned journal to create a new journal that publishes open access

If you are unsuccessful in convincing a publisher-owner to flip a journal to OA, but have either the journal editorial board or the author community's support to push for OA (see [Section 1.3](#), above), you could consider organizing a resignation of the editorial board in order to start anew (but essentially the same) journal -- but as an OA publication with a new name.

This editorial exodus was successfully achieved with the resignation of the board from the linguistics journal *Lingua* in 2015, and the consequent launch of *Glossa* in 2016. Another example is the recent resignation of the *Journal of Informetrics* editorial board and their reformation as the OA journal of *Quantitative Science Studies* at MIT Press. (See the section below for useful links.) Such actions have sometimes been called a “journal declaration of independence.” Similar to efforts to influence a publisher to flip to OA, this activity requires a great deal of organization; the editorial board must coordinate its resignation and then organize the founding and publication of a new journal. However, the examples above prove that transitioning to OA is possible if the community is strongly behind the initiative and is able to work with a publisher or facilitator that is aligned with their new mission.

Important note: While it is possible to set up new OA journals in this way, bear in mind that the original journal *usually* (though not always) continues, especially if it is published by a large commercial publisher with a large network of potential new editors willing to step into those vacated editorial board positions.

Who/what can help you with establishing a new OA journal?

- An experienced publishing professional e.g. a member of the OSC OA Publishing Workgroup, can offer some advice, and resources, as to next steps.
- Learn more about the *Lingua*—*Glossa* transition: [Inside Higher Education](#). [Language Log](#).
- Read about the *Journal of Informetrics*—*Quantitative Science Studies* transition: <https://blogs.tib.eu/wp/tib/2019/01/14/support-journal-flipping-qss/>
- SPARC has also put together a useful web guide to [Declaring Independence](#) as an editorial board. The best place to start is [Determining if your journal is a good fit for open access](#).
- A list of examples of journal declarations of independence: http://oad.simmons.edu/oadwiki/Journal_declarations_of_independence
- Two helpful and relevant resources from Scholastica:’s “[How to start or flip an open access journal: Academic-led publishing primer](#)” and [Academic-Led OA Publishing](#)
- Other publishers: certain publishers are interested in launching competitive OA journals, as long as they can be sustainable and fit with their publishing portfolio and/or strategy (i.e. a publisher that only publishes in engineering is unlikely to be interested in a sociology journal). If you have an appropriate publisher in mind, you should simply contact them and ask. Try to avoid, however, replacing one problematic partner with another. A member of the OSC OA Publishing Workgroup can offer candid and confidential advice on publishers. The Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association ([OASPA](#)) and the Association of University Presses ([AUP](#)) can both help guide you in choosing a reputable OA partner.
- Certain high quality publishing services providers/publishing technology companies are now well set up to quickly and efficiently launch a new OA journal, as long as there is an enthusiastic and committed community of editors, reviewers, and authors who can support the journal. A non-exhaustive list is below in alphabetical order. Please note that the example journals are given as illustrations of the respective platforms—please contact the platform, and not the example journal, if reaching out to these providers:

- **eScholarship (California Digital Library, University of California)** - https://www.cdlib.org/services/access_publishing/publishing/
 - Example journal - [*PaleoBios*](#)
- **Hindawi** - <https://about.hindawi.com/publishers/>
 - Example journal - [*Contrast Media and Molecular Imaging*](#)
- **Open Journal Systems** - <https://pkpservices.sfu.ca/content/journal-hosting>
 - Example journal - [*Semantics and Pragmatics*](#)
- **Pensoft Publishers** - <https://pensoft.net/>
 - Example journal - [*Evolutionary Systematics*](#)
- **PubPub (MIT)** - <https://www.pubpub.org/>
 - Example journal - [*Stanford Journal of Blockchain Law & Policy*](#)
- **Scholastica** - <https://scholasticahq.com/>
 - Example journal - [*Survey Practice*](#)
- **Science.ai** - <https://science.ai/overview>
 - Example journal - [Pending]
- **Ubiquity Press** - <https://www.ubiquitypress.com/>
 - Example journal - [*Glossa - A Journal of General Linguistics*](#)
- **Veruscript** - <https://www.veruscript.com/>
 - Example journal - [*Functional Nanomaterials*](#)
- A list of (almost) ALL platform providers, whether or not they can assist in launching OA journals, is here: <https://digital.bmj.com/an-almost-a-z-list-of-publishing-platform-providers/>
- Certain mission driven University Press/non-profit/fair-profit/independent publishers have made it clear they are actively launching or acquiring OA journals. In many cases, these publishers are limited to certain disciplines, but it is always worth approaching them to ask your journal fits their area of activity.
 - [Company of Biologists](#)
 - Example journal - [*Biology Open*](#)
 - [MIT Press](#)
 - Example journal - [*Network Neuroscience*](#)
 - [Purdue University Press](#)
 - Example journal - [*Gifted Children*](#)
 - [University of California Press](#)
 - Example journal - [*Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene*](#)
 - [University of Cincinnati Press](#) (new)
 - [University of Michigan Press/Michigan Publishing](#)
 - Example journal - [*Journal of Electronic Publishing*](#)

2.2 Society or third-party owned journal on a publisher platform

An extension of Section 2.1, this section is relevant to journals that are published via publishers but are owned by societies or independent third parties such as [*Molecular Biology of the Cell*](#). All the

information in Section 2.1 remains relevant; this discussion merely adds specific advice which should be considered for this particular scenario. **Please note that from here onwards we will refer to a “society-owned” journal for simplicity, but we are not discussing society-owned journals which are self-published.**

2.2.1 Flipping a society-owned journal to an open access model

There are two key considerations in this scenario:

1. Most society-owned journals which are published via a publisher are on fixed-term publication contracts.
2. The society-owner may be receiving an income stream without (m)any journal-related costs.

If you are involved in a journal and a society, you can, at any time, begin the process of influencing or advocating for a flip to open access. The most important moment in which to have this conversation with your journal or society, however, is in the build up to your contract renewal with the publisher. If you have convinced the society-owner to flip to OA or are yourself the society-owner, most publishers will be more amenable to flipping the journal to open access in order to retain your journal and your business. Remember, there is no big publisher that does not have good, current experience with open access publishing at this point in time (2019). Flipping to OA is no longer the radical proposition it may once have been, especially at the point of the previous contract renewal.

However, you should pay attention to royalty considerations and changes, since, as discussed above, business model changes can bring with them revenue and income changes. If you feel that, while the publisher is agreeing to transition to OA, you are not getting as good a deal as before, consider consulting with an independent publishing professional (again, from the OSC OA Publishing Workgroup or elsewhere) or ask for detailed revenue information from the publisher retaining your business. Pay particular attention to the profit margins or markups that a publisher may be requiring and also consider whether you may actually be comfortable with reduced income if access to your publication can be dramatically enhanced. Some of the largest commercial publishers have profit margins on the order of [30-40%](#) and your society might only be sharing in a small portion of that revenue. Therefore in some cases, a given society might be able to cover all of its operating costs and maintain expected income levels if its journal were instead published by a non-profit entity.

If the current publisher is still not interested in a transition to OA and you are considering taking your business elsewhere, rest assured that there WILL be a publisher who will want to partner with you to transition the journal (see the list above in [Section 2.1](#) or discuss potential new partners with someone from the OSC OA Publishing Workgroup.

2.2.2 Leaving an existing society-owned journal to create a new open access society-owned journal

If your current publisher is not interested in transitioning to OA and you are unable to find another publisher that is interested in winning your business by transitioning your journal to OA, then your options revert to those discussed in [Section 2.1.2](#).

Who/what can help you with this?

- An experienced publishing professional can offer some advice and resources. If you are affiliated with an academic institution that has a publishing service, repository, or press, they may be a great first contact to make.
- All the same entities from [Section 2.1.2](#)

Step 3: Evaluating OA financial models

Remember that open access is an *outcome*, not a specific *business model*, and that various business models can underpin an OA journal. OA journals have proven to be sustainable at any scale (from *PLoS ONE* and *Scientific Reports*, to *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*) and in any field, via a range of different business models.

When considering which OA business model is right for your journal, keep in mind the work you did in Step 1. Analyzing a journal's current financial model and setting up a future OA model are context-specific tasks that require the detailed financial data regarding your journal and any related third party, as well as a strategic plan for the future. However, the following general considerations can still apply.

3.1 # Articles, APC-based models

One business model that has become the standard for hybrid journals and many full OA journals involves Article Processing Charges (APCs). To determine if the APC model is appropriate for your journal you will need to determine the numbers of *articles* (not issues or volumes) at play each year. Look at how many articles requiring peer review (e.g., original research, reviews, and case studies) have been published every year, for at least the last five years, and how many articles are submitted to the journal each of those years. This calculus will establish the total amount of editorial activity (measured in # articles) that occurs at the journal, in order to achieve current publication levels.

Once you know how many articles are published in a year, you can determine the amount of potential income/revenue an APC-based business model could generate for your publication. If, for example, you publish 240 articles per year in a field where a common APC is \$2000, then there is a potential revenue of \$480,000. At this point, you can investigate the costs and overheads are for your current journal and roughly determine whether this ballpark revenue figure is enough to cover these costs. You can also

think hard about which of the current costs are necessities for your publication. Also, keep in mind that articles which end up being rejected (and therefore do not earn income) may still generate costs that need to be covered, especially regarding time and overheads.

3.2 Community models, cost-based models

If an article-based or APC-based model is not suitable or simply not desirable for your journal, there are other established and emerging financial models that can help. One such option works in a similar way to the subscription model, in that organizations/institutions/libraries (a community of supporters) pay a fee to support the journal collectively. While the journal is still OA and accessible to anyone in the world, it is these specific organizations and institutions who have elected to collectively support the journal for the benefit of the larger community. Examples of this model include the [Open Library of Humanities](#), and [Knowledge Unlatched](#). The most important figure to establish, in this scenario, is the absolute total figure required to run the journal at the level that you wish to run it (i.e. what are the total essential costs and overheads). Once this figure is established, it then becomes the minimum target to obtain via a community support model. Be careful in this scenario to ensure you have calculated all essential costs, accommodating any natural fluctuations (e.g. publishing slightly more or fewer articles per year) and that you have built in any essential surplus required by any stakeholder (e.g. a society).