



## Format-free submission: gain for some, pain for others?

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### Introduction

Many authors find that submitting to a scholarly journal can be difficult. This essay asks how publishers can make the process easier, and responds to concerns of editors that manuscript quality will deteriorate if authors are allowed to submit in any format they wish.

This is the story of a junior researcher, fresh and relatively naive, after they have completed their first research study. With excitement they start mapping out a publication plan. They seek guidance from their supervisor, they draft the manuscript, they obtain input from their collaborators and co-authors, and they eventually have a final draft of a manuscript ready for submission. In their publication plan, they and their co-authors have identified a list of target journals—they will aim first for the most reputed journal in the field, of course, but they have a few other journals in reserve on the list in case they are rejected from the top one. They check the submission guidelines for the first journal and—to their disappointment—they discover that they need to reformat the manuscript to conform to the guidelines.

After a few hours of reformatting and redrafting, and perhaps seeking more input from their co-authors, they eventually submit the manuscript and await the outcome of the editorial process. A few days elapse before they receive a rejection email. Disappointed but undeterred, they prepare to resubmit the manuscript to their next target journal. With a sigh they discover that they need to format their manuscript yet again because this journal has different guidelines. They find a few hours, perhaps late into the evening after a full day working in the lab on their next research project, to reformat and resubmit the manuscript, and they await the next outcome.

And so the process might continue with other journals on the list, until our junior researcher receives the longed-for email, perhaps after peer review and a few rounds of revision, confirming that their article is accepted for publication. However, it has taken them several hours to reach this point—not just in revising the manuscript in line with editorial and peer review feedback, but just to format the manuscript to suit journal styles. Moreover, once the article is accepted, our junior researcher is puzzled to note, upon receiving the article proofs, that the typesetter has reformatted the manuscript once again before publication in the journal. Was their own reformatting really worth the effort? Could they not just have focused solely on the scientific content of the article and left the formatting up to the publisher?

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## How Many Hours Researchers Use for Manuscript Formatting

Our junior researcher is not a fiction of the imagination. An article published in 2018 estimated that around 1.5 million hours of researchers' time was spent in formatting [1]. A study published in 2019 found that a typical researcher spends 52 hours per year formatting manuscripts, at an estimated cost of around \$2,000/yr [2]. These are truly the “hidden costs of academia” [3]. Why waste a researcher's time on a task that the journal's typesetter can do much more efficiently and more accurately? Researchers are not funded to format manuscripts or, as someone wrote, to be “desktop publishers” [4]; they are funded to conduct research. It is wasteful of time and resources—indeed, one might go so far as to say, it is anti-science—to expect researchers to expend energy on formatting.

## Format Free Approaches

A format-free approach has existed since at least 2013, when Elsevier formally launched its “Your Paper, Your Way” initiative [5], the first large-scale rollout by a commercial publisher. Many publishers and journals have since followed: for example, Taylor & Francis offers “format-free submission” [6], and PLOS One offers “format-free initial submission” with formatting only required once the article has been provisionally accepted for publication [7]. At the time of writing, over 680 journals published by Wiley offer “free format”. Although a num-

ber of Wiley journals offered a format-free approach many years ago, we formalized this in 2019 to provide a uniform approach with consistent guidance for authors adopted by all journals offering free format. All 250 or so journals in the Hindawi portfolio have also offered a format-free approach from inception. The author guidelines explain that manuscripts can be submitted in whatever format the author wishes [8]. Our submission and peer review platform, Research Exchange [9], assumes a format-free approach insofar as it parses submitted manuscript files at submission and extracts all the key metadata, regardless of how the manuscript is formatted. A format-free approach also enables more rapid and seamless transfer between journals, assuming the receiving journal offers free format.

Format-free submission is, unsurprisingly, hugely popular among authors, yielding positive sentiments on social media (indicated by responses and likes) [10–13] and in surveys of authors. It clearly offers them plenty of gain. Not every editor has, however, welcomed the concept of free format with open arms. Given that editors are themselves authors, this seems surprising, not least because editors who support free format often do so because they appreciate the author's pain in the submission process. But researchers who serve as editors face different challenges, not least the need to handle a large volume of submissions effectively. The solution to this is not to require authors to jump through more hoops, but to find effective ways of managing the workload, whether through (for example) more resourcing or through implementing screening software.

**Table 1.** Concerns raised by editors, and possible responses to those concerns

Concern	Response
Free format encourages a lax, free-for-all approach	Is there any evidence of this, or is it based on supposition? It is in authors' own interests to make their manuscript presentable.
Free format lowers the bar for quality	High-quality research is not always the best presented. What quality do you really want to measure—quality of content or of presentation?
Free format opens the floodgates for many more submissions, and I don't have time to handle them	It should yield more submissions. It can encourage good as well as (potentially) bad submissions. It better supports inexperienced authors and authors from under-represented demographics. There are other strategies for handling an increase in submissions; raising barriers for authors is not an appropriate solution.
Free format makes the job of editing and reviewing more difficult	Is there any evidence for this, or is it based on supposition? Let's rethink what we expect editors and reviewers to spend their time doing. How can artificial intelligence and machine learning technology help?
Our reviewers find it easier to review a manuscript in our journal format	Is there any evidence for this, or is it based on supposition? Reviewers review manuscripts for many different journals as well as preprints, all in different formats. Removing formatting requirements can help reviewers focus correctly on assessing the actual content rather than the presentation.

## Concerns Raised by Editors on Free Format Submissions

Table 1 displays a range of concerns that I have heard editors raise, along with suggested responses for countering those concerns. Listening to the experiences of peer editors can also provide effective reassurance that they have little or nothing to lose by offering a format-free approach [14].

Some of this antipathy is based on misconceptions about what a format-free approach entails, and in tackling these I have found it helpful to distinguish between the “content” of a scientific article and the “container”—that is, the way an article is formatted. What is inside the “container” is the critically important element; what the “container” looks like is immaterial. Allowing authors to submit format-free empowers them to focus on the scientific content without the distraction of having also to beautify it. Of course, most authors will want to create a good impression when they submit their manuscript, making an effort to ensure the presentation is acceptable.

As for the “content,” it is helpful to think of this in terms of the requirements that any reputable journal might impose. Most important is the need for compliance with high standards of integrity. Manuscripts should include, as applicable, ethical approval statements, conflict of interest disclosures, patient consent, funding statements, acknowledgments, statements of authorship, and so on. Figures should be clear, and references should be complete, and the manuscript should be readable so that it can be assessed easily and fairly by editors and reviewers. If one editor cannot follow the manuscript, and if it presents ethical concerns, these need to be resolved whether or not the journal offers format-free submission.

## Conclusion

Format-free submission is unquestionably here to stay. As consumers of publishing services, authors have great power in choosing where to submit their research for publication. Journals which make efforts to attract authors, by implementing initiatives such as a format-free submission, will grow stronger at the expense of journals which require authors to clear strictly unnecessary hurdles. Moreover, journals offering format-free submission empower researchers to spend time and money conducting more research, for the greater scientific good.

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Michael Willis is a Researcher Advocate at John Wiley & Sons. No other potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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