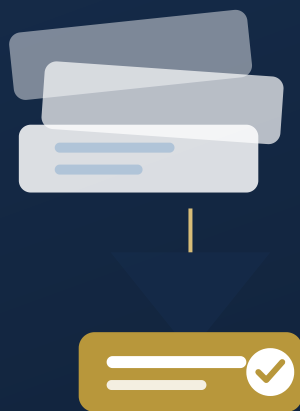


How to Choose the Right Journal

How to read the metrics that actually compare journals, build a defensible target tier, verify legitimacy through the indexes that matter, and avoid the wrong-fit submission that triggers most desk rejections. From PhD methodologists.



Written by PhD methodologists researchgold.org

Most rejections are decided before the paper is read

A large share of manuscripts are rejected by the editor without review, and the most common reason is not quality, it is fit, scope, audience, or article type that did not match. Choosing well, before you format a reference, is the cheapest way to protect months of work. For a doctoral author the decision is also strategic: it sets your tier, your timeline, and how the work will count.

PRINCIPLE

Choose the journal before the final draft. It fixes your length limit, structure, reporting checklist, reference style, and audience. But choose on the right evidence: a single headline metric is the weakest basis. The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), now signed by most major funders and many institutions, exists precisely because the Journal Impact Factor was being used for judgements it cannot support.

The four tests a candidate journal must pass

1 Scope fit

Does it publish your topic, with your methods, for your field? Read the aims and a recent issue. Proximity to what it already publishes is the strongest predictor of passing the editor screen.

2 Article type fit

Does it publish your article type, whether an original study, a systematic review, a registered report, a protocol, or a short communication? Sending a review to a primary-research-only journal is an instant desk rejection.

3 Standing and reach, read correctly

Use a field-normalised metric, not a raw impact factor, to compare across subfields, and set a target tier you can defend against your evidence and timeline.

4 Legitimacy

Is it indexed where your field trusts, and free of predatory markers? This protects your record, your money, and your funder compliance.

Read the metric, not the marketing

Journals quote whichever number flatters them. To compare candidates honestly, know what each metric measures, what distorts it, and which one travels across fields.

WHAT THE COMMON JOURNAL METRICS ACTUALLY MEAN

Metric (source)	What it measures	The distortion to watch
Journal Impact Factor (Clarivate JCR)	Mean citations in 2 years to citable items	Skewed by a few high-cite papers and review content; not field-normalised
5-year IF (JCR)	The same over a 5-year window	Steadier, but still field-bound and review-inflated
Journal Citation Indicator (JCR)	Field-normalised citation impact, 1.0 = world average	Newer; use it to compare across disciplines
CiteScore (Scopus)	Citations over a 4-year window, broader document base	Different document counting than IF; not directly comparable
SJR (SCImago)	Prestige-weighted citations (who cites you, not just how many)	Rewards citations from strong journals; field-relative
SNIP (CWTS Leiden)	Citations normalised by the field's citation density	The cleanest cross-field comparison; less familiar to committees
Quartile (Q1 to Q4)	Rank band within a subject category	Depends entirely on which category the journal is filed under
h5-index (Google Scholar)	Productivity-and-impact over 5 years	Inflated by journal size; useful as a sanity check only

WATCH OUT FOR

Two traps. First, comparing a clinical journal's impact factor with a mathematics journal's is meaningless, because base citation rates differ by an order of magnitude; use SNIP or the Journal Citation Indicator for any cross-field comparison. Second, a journal can be Q1 in a broad, weakly related category and Q4 in the one that fits your paper, so always read the quartile in *your* subject category, and check which category the rank refers to.

Build a shortlist, then verify each candidate

Do not start from one target. Generate candidates, then compare them on the factors that decide acceptance, reach, and compliance, using named tools rather than impressions.

GENERATE, COMPARE, VERIFY

Step	Tool or source	What it settles
Generate candidates	JANE, the publisher-neutral matchers, your own reference list	Journals already publishing your conversation (note: publisher finders suggest only their own titles)
Compare standing	JCR, Scopus Sources, SCImago for SNIP/SJR/quartile	A defensible target tier in your subject category
Read practicality	Instructions for authors; reported acceptance rate and time to first decision	Whether the timeline and format fit your thesis or grant clock
Check access and funding	Journal APC page; your funder's policy; Plan S / Sherpa Romeo	Cost, open-access route, and whether it satisfies your mandate
Verify legitimacy	DOAJ, Web of Science / Scopus master lists, COPE membership, MEDLINE indexing	That the journal is real, indexed, and ethically run

PRINCIPLE

Where the papers you cite most were published is a strong signal: that journal's readers and editors already care about your question. Pair it with one practical filter that authors skip, the acceptance rate and time to first decision, because a marginally higher-standing journal that sits on the paper for ten months can cost you a thesis deadline or a grant renewal.

Tell a legitimate journal from a predatory one, by the index not the invitation

An article processing charge is normal for open access and is not itself a warning. Predatory titles are identified by a cluster of behaviours, and confirmed by absence from the lists that matter. The Think, Check, Submit checklist formalises this.

- ☒ Listed in DOAJ (for open access) and indexed in Scopus or Web of Science, verified on those sites, not from the journal's own claims.
- ☒ Publisher or journal is a member of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), checkable on the COPE site.
- ☒ A named, verifiable editorial board with institutional, not generic free-email, addresses.
- ☒ No unsolicited flattering invitations, and no promise of fast review with guaranteed acceptance.
- ☒ Article processing charges stated up front, not revealed only after acceptance.
- ☒ A focused scope, not one spanning unrelated disciplines to capture any submission.

WATCH OUT FOR

Treat the combination, an unsolicited email, vague praise, and a promise of acceptance within days for a fee, as a strong warning, and verify the journal independently in DOAJ, the Web of Science master list, or your library's tools before replying, never through a link in the invitation. If your work is funder-mandated, confirm the venue is Plan S compliant or offers a compliant green route via Sherpa Romeo before you commit.

The journal selection checklist

Run your chosen journal through this list. Every box ticked means you have matched the paper to a journal that will genuinely consider it, on evidence you can defend.

- ☒ Your topic and methods fall clearly within the journal scope and a recent issue.
- ☒ The journal publishes your article type.
- ☒ You compared candidates on a field-normalised metric, and read the quartile in your own subject category.
- ☒ You checked the acceptance rate and time to first decision against your deadline.
- ☒ You confirmed the access model, any article processing charge, and funder compliance.
- ☒ The journal is indexed in DOAJ and Scopus or Web of Science, verified at source.
- ☒ The publisher or journal is COPE-listed and shows no predatory markers.
- ☒ You have a realistic second-tier choice, and a transfer or cascade option, ready for rejection.

WHEN THE SUBMISSION HAS TO LAND

Give your paper its best chance at the right journal

If you want help matching your manuscript to the right tier, reading the metrics honestly, meeting the journal's reporting requirements, and preparing a package that passes the editor screen, our PhD methodologists work through the manuscript and the strategy with you. You stay the author and make every final call.

Get a quote for your manuscript

researchgold.org . Written by PhD methodologists . We work in writing, on your schedule.