

Open Access: Making Scholarly Content Freely Available

What is Open Access?

Open-access (OA) literature is digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions (and subject to proper author attribution). OA is made possible by the internet and the consent of the author or copyright-holder.

OA is entirely compatible with peer review, and all the major OA initiatives for scientific and scholarly literature insist on its importance. Just as authors of journal articles donate their labor, so do most journal editors and referees participating in peer review.

OA literature is not free to produce, even if it is less expensive to produce than conventionally published literature. The question is not whether scholarly literature can be made costless, but whether there are better ways to pay the bills than by charging readers and creating access barriers. Business models for paying the bills depend on how OA is delivered.

Examples of Open Access Journals and Repositories

PubMed Central (PMC) [<http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/>] is the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) free digital archive of biomedical and life sciences journal literature. The NIH Public Access Policy requires all NIH-funded researchers to deposit a copy of their article in PMC within 12 months of publication.

Public Library of Science (PLOS) [<http://www.plos.org/>] is a nonprofit organization of scientists and physicians committed to making the world's scientific and medical literature a public resource.

Behavior and Social Issues [<http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php>] is a peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary journal that serves as a primary scholarly outlet for articles that advance the analysis of human social behavior. Published by the University of Illinois, Chicago.

Linguistic Society of America's eLanguage platform [<http://www.elanguage.net/home.php>] provides researchers in the academic discipline of Linguistics with a platform for the management of peer-reviewed, open-access electronic journals by effectively utilizing modern, web-based publishing technologies

Open Humanities Press [<http://openhumanitiespress.org/>] is an international open access publishing collective in critical and cultural theory.

Philosophers' Imprint [<http://www.philosophersimprint.org/>] is a refereed series of original papers in philosophy. Published by the University of Michigan Digital Library.

There are two primary vehicles for delivering OA to research articles: OA journals and OA archives or repositories.

OA Journals:

OA journals perform peer review and then make the approved contents freely available to the world. Their expenses consist of peer review, manuscript preparation, and server space.

OA journals pay their bills very much the way broadcast television and radio stations do: those with an interest in disseminating the content pay the production costs upfront so that access can be free of charge for everyone with the right equipment. Sometimes this means that journals have a subsidy from the hosting university or professional society. Sometimes it means that journals charge a processing fee on accepted articles, to be paid by the author or the author's sponsor (employer, funding agency).

OA journals that charge processing fees usually waive them in cases of economic hardship.

OA journals with institutional subsidies tend to charge no processing fees.

OA journals can get by on lower subsidies or fees if they have income from other publications, advertising, priced add-ons, or auxiliary services. Some institutions and consortia arrange fee discounts. Some OA publishers waive the fee for all researchers affiliated with institutions that have purchased an annual membership. There's a lot of room for creativity in finding ways to pay the costs of a peer-reviewed OA journal, and we're far from having exhausted our cleverness and imagination.

OA Archives or Repositories:

OA archives or repositories do not perform peer review, but simply make their contents freely available to the world. They may contain unrefereed preprints, refereed postprints, or both.

Archives may belong to institutions, such as universities and laboratories, or disciplines, such as physics and economics.

Authors may archive their preprints without anyone else's permission, and a majority of journals already permit authors to archive their postprints (check SHERPA/RoMEO for archiving permissions: <http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo/>). When archives comply with the metadata harvesting protocol of the Open Archives Initiative, then they are interoperable and users can find their contents without knowing which archives exist, where they are located, or what they contain. There is now open-source software for building and maintaining OAI-compliant archives and worldwide momentum for using it. The costs of an archive are negligible: some server space and a fraction of the time of a technician.

Iowa Research Online (IRO) (<http://ir.uiowa.edu/>) is a dynamic archive created to increase the impact of scholarly and creative work at The University of Iowa. IRO offers the ability to view publications by department, academic discipline or author.

Handout is adapted from Peter Suber's "A Very Brief Introduction to Open Access." <http://www.openaccessweek.org/wp-content/uploads/a-very-brief-intro-a4.pdf> (9/4/09)