Authors: beware of the elephant traps!

Philip Wiffen

Elephant traps are nasty devices designed by hunters to capture large animals for profit. They are cleverly designed so that the terrain looks normal and it is only when the prey steps onto the trap that capture occurs.

There are an increasing number of traps designed to capture authors of biomedical literature. They often look ‘normal’. I think it is useful to list some of these to alert you to what can happen. I will then outline some tips to help get your research into print.

First, there is the frequent unsolicited email designed to flatter. In the past week, I have received several with statements such as “Being impressed by your quality work, we invite you to submit your unpublished manuscript…” These frequently come from disciplines outside our experience such as Plastic Surgery—about which I know nothing of value!

Second, we can become trapped by journals with similar sounding names. I recently learned of another journal-wijack—The editor of a reputable Scandinavian journal tells his story. Journals are hijacked using a scam website which looks very much like the original one, the motive being to defraud authors by charging fees to publish when often this is the case for the genuine journal.

The experience for authors so trapped can be disturbing, even traumatic. A list of such scam journals can be found on the retraction watch website. 1

The editor in this particular scenario—Dr Müller states:

‘The problem is in part attributable to increased pressure on researchers (by institutions) to publish their work in journals indexed in Scopus. Researchers of all experience levels fall prey to such scams. This susceptibility often stems from the tendency to be off guard when communicating with seemingly authentic and trustworthy academic journals, particularly when links to these journals are found on otherwise credible bibliographical databases’.

Both these scenarios are a request for payment. Sometimes that can be legitimate, for example, if you require open access however many times that can be legitimate, for example, if you require open access however many legitimate journals with similar names. The trap is that you submit to the ‘wrong’ journal, often acceptance of the paper is almost immediate and then you are sent an invoice to publish. At this stage, you realise your mistake and find that your work cannot be submitted elsewhere even if you do not proceed.

I was recently made aware of another trap—that of journal hijacking. 2 In this, the editor of a reputable Scandinavian journal tells his story. Journals are hijacked using a scam website which looks very much like the original one, the motive being to defraud authors by charging fees to publish when often this is the case for the genuine journal.

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One of the red flags in all these scenarios is a request for payment. Sometimes that can be legitimate, for example, if you require open access however many journals including European Journal of Hospital Pharmacy do not routinely levy a publishing charge.

Here are some key points to help get your paper considered by your chosen journal:

► Make sure your paper is a good fit for the scope of the journal.
► Single author papers are less likely to be accepted so even if you are the main author add others. This will improve your work.
► Do not copy text from other papers without the appropriate attribution—including your own publications. Journals have plagiarism checkers and you will be found out.
► Finally, in this brief list do not give up if your work is rejected. Often it is not because your paper is poor but there are others that are a better fit for the journal, especially when submissions exceed available space. It is not uncommon for journals to reject upward of 60% of the submissions received.

So beware of the elephant traps but do not let that put you off publishing. Much research goes to waste by not being published—wasting your time, often the costs of the work and not infrequently the contribution of your patients. That is not acceptable!

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ORCID ID
Philip Wiffen http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6085-1307

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Correspondence to: Professor Philip Wiffen, M, Thame, UK; pwiffen@oxfordrsrs.org.uk