

# Paid access to journal articles not a significant barrier for scientists

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They say the best things in life are free, but when it comes to online scientific publishing, a new research report in *The FASEB Journal* suggests otherwise. In the report, Philip M. Davis from Cornell University shows that free access to scientific journal articles leads to increases in downloads, but not to increases in citations (their use), a key factor used in scientific publishing to assess a research article's relative importance and value. This study should help scientists make informed decisions about where they publish their work and assist governments, granting institutions and universities with evaluating whether or not their open access policies are leading to greater dissemination of useful scientific knowledge.

"The widely-accepted 'open access citation advantage' appears to be spurious," said Davis.

"There are many benefits to the free access of scientific information," Davis maintained, "but a citation advantage doesn't appear to be one of them."

To reach his conclusions, Davis ran several parallel randomized controlled trials. Upon publication, articles, including those from The FASEB Journal, were randomly assigned to either the [open access](#) or the subscription-access group. He then observed how these articles performed in terms of downloads and citations over three years. He found that free access did not affect the number of citations a paper received, rejecting a widely-held belief that open access articles are cited

more frequently because of their [free-access](#) status. The results are consistent over time across 36 journals covering the sciences, social sciences and humanities.

"A study like this is long overdue," said Gerald Weissmann, MD, Editor-in-Chief of The [FASEB Journal](#). "For years, institutions and organizations have promoted 'open access' policies under the assumption that some scientists cannot gain access to research reports because they or their institutions have to pay for subscriptions. Now we learn that 'open access' articles may be seen by more, but not cited (used) by more fellow scientists. It's probably time to drop the 'open access advantage' assumption and policies that follow from it."

**More information:** Philip M. Davis. Open access, readership, citations: a randomized controlled trial of scientific journal publishing. FASEB J.; [doi:10.1096/fj.11-183988](https://doi.org/10.1096/fj.11-183988)

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