

A guide to starting and running an AuthorAID journal club

Background

In 2019, AuthorAID introduced online journal clubs to promote reading, analyzing, and discussing the latest research papers, as well as learning about research communication. Unlike previous attempts, we aimed to engage a wider, geographically diverse AuthorAID community. We now have four online journal clubs, each led by a coordinator from the AuthorAID network: Biomedicine & Health, Environmental Biology and Toxicology, Social Sciences in Health and Development, and Climate Science.

We created a resource to help you establish your own online journal club. This resource draws from the experiences and insights gained from our first three online journal clubs and one previous face-to-face club at the University of Colombo.

Introduction

We created this resource to help you plan, set up and run your own successful journal club. We believe a thriving club involves global participation with lively discussions, critiquing papers, and gaining valuable insights for better research communication. In contrast, ineffective clubs suffer from low engagement, lack of time, or fear of expressing opinions.

Let's explore the advantages and disadvantages of online journal clubs compared to face-to-face clubs:

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>Wider geographical membership reach</p> <p>Members can in principle access the sessions irrespective of their location.</p> <p>Members from a wider range of professions, disciplines and stages of their research career can join.</p> <p>A greater sharing of ideas between members from academia and industry can take place in order to identify research gaps.</p> <p>Can afford more flexibility in the scheduling of sessions i.e., can be held outside traditional work or study hours.</p>	<p>Poor connectivity can affect member participation.</p> <p>Member participation can be hard to track.</p> <p>It can take more time and effort to organise small 'buzz' groups, where members might be more comfortable in sharing their critical comments and ideas before feeding back to the whole group.</p> <p>Coordinating an online journal club requires a great deal of behind-the-scenes work. Making decisions can be more time-consuming when communicating both verbally and in writing, as opposed to face-to-face discussions.</p>

Goals and objectives

What is the overall goal of your online journal club?

Our online journal clubs help members stay updated with current research, improve critical appraisal skills, and enhance their research writing and communication abilities. Since our members are from diverse locations and career stages, having a common goal and clear objectives is crucial. This ensures everyone knows why they are part of the club and avoids confusion, especially for new members joining later. Develop and share the club's goals and objectives early on, using short write-ups and induction sessions to clarify what members can expect. Regular reminders help members stay focused on your shared aim.

What are the objectives of your online journal club?

The longer-term objectives of your online journal club should be directly related to your main goal. These objectives can be formal, like strengthening members' ability to critique papers from multiple perspectives, or informal, such as reviewing articles, staying updated with new knowledge, and improving ongoing projects.

Some clubs have found an additional benefit in the online format: fostering greater interaction and idea-sharing between members from academia and industry to identify research gaps. Other objectives include encouraging peer learning and collaboration, improving presentation and debating skills, and generating enthusiasm for research, writing, and publishing.

It's a good idea to conduct a short needs assessment to develop your objectives and make sure those meet the needs of your members. Depending on the nature of our membership, you may have to revisit fundamental topics from time to time. For instance, if some members lack experience in critically reviewing texts, you as club coordinator can provide initial support to boost their confidence in evaluating scientific papers during online sessions.

For online clubs with broad research themes and a continuous intake of new members, we recommend performing regular audits by seeking feedback from members. This helps refresh your short-term objectives and develop new activities to meet the changing needs of your community.

Membership

Who do you want as members of your journal club?

As a bottom line, the members of the club should on the whole have shared or complementary interests, but do not discourage multi-disciplinarity. Looking at the question above, there are a number of aspects to consider:

- Do you want to implement an open-door policy where anyone that is interested in the research theme of the club can join?
- What percentage of the membership would you like to be early, mid or late-career researchers?
- What specialities and subspecialities, related to the theme of the club, would you like represented in the club membership?
- What percentage of the membership would you like to come from academia, industry, regulatory bodies, or other sectors for example?
- What kind of geographical reach do you want the club to have – national, regional or international?

From our experience diversity is a key factor of success for the online journal clubs. Diversity in terms of geographical reach, stage of research career, profession and gender.

Most of our online clubs aim to have a diverse group of: early career researchers (likely to benefit the most from the club), mid-career researchers (who give and take in equal measures) and late-career researchers who tend to contribute more, for example as facilitators, than they take away.

Late career researchers however have proven harder to recruit and our clubs would like to have more active members at this stage of their career. These late-career researchers can often set a high standard for the group, sharing their experiences and talking through their own research writing process to other members of the club. This can help both early and mid-career researchers to “get into the shoes” of a reviewer and to understand how their own work would be critically reviewed, which in turn should help them in the writing of their own papers.

What do you want the minimum and maximum number of members to be?

While you may not be able to come up with a definitive answer, it is worth considering this question in terms of the limits of any existing or new online platforms you choose to use for your club. More detail on this is included in the section on ‘technology platforms’ later on in this resource. Another consideration is how much capacity you; your organisation or club membership has to administer the club and facilitate its activities.

What characteristics do you want the journal club members to possess?

From our experience identifying members who are hardworking and committed to the goal and objectives of the journal club is key. Members also need to be able to move out of their comfort zone at times and be willing to share their own work as well as volunteer to review journal articles.

Group structure and leadership

What kind of structure should your online journal club have?

Journal clubs can be held in large multi-disciplinary groups, in smaller sub-speciality focusing on a special interest or discipline or a blend of both.

What kind of leadership model should the online journal club adopt?

We recommend having a designated leader to host a journal club, while also ensuring the active involvement of members in the planning and running of the journal club. This will increase the longevity and success of the club and is a practical strategy to run it successfully. Consider who is best to 'lead' the group in terms of keeping discussion focused. You could consider having two co-coordinators for each subgroup.

Someone has to take leadership of a journal club. This is crucial to its success. That person will need to be committed, genuinely interested in the idea and have the time to do sufficient preparation to ensure that it continues to be effective. Once you have a leader(s), it is important to formalise their role and the involvement they have in each meeting. Remember that leaders can delegate to others to spread work load.

Activities and topics

What can you do to encourage participation in the presentation and critical review of journal papers specifically?

A key activity of our journal clubs is of course the review of journal papers. We have found that the proportion of members who regularly engage is relatively small, and the proportion who complete the reading activities and comment is smaller. It's quite possible that many group members prefer to stay in the background, reading and learning from the discussions but not contributing their thoughts. However, with being online it is difficult to differentiate between these members and those who don't follow the discussions at all.

Proper grounding and introduction to the methodology and benefits of reviewing journal papers e.g., a critical reflective approach and an explanation as to what's in it for them. Learning from the review of papers is a good way to introduce current trends and research in members' various fields. It helps members to think in depth as to how to design their own studies and what kind of data analysis is necessary to produce quality research towards publication.

It perhaps goes without saying that the review of papers works best when the topic is deemed relevant to current practice.

It is important to build a supportive and relaxed learning environment which helps to create psychological safety, build relationships and bonds between participants. People are more likely to move out of their comfort zone and contribute ideas and opinions.

In an ideal world, everyone in the online JC will have read the paper prior to the session but in reality, members may not be able to do this before every single session. JC leaders can encourage pre-reading or even make it mandatory. Some journal clubs ask for different members to present different aspects of the paper. Using this format, several individuals have to pre-read the paper and actively participate during each meeting. Other journal clubs designate one or two individuals, in addition to the presenter, to thoroughly pre-read the paper each week. The pre-readers are asked to help promote discussion by asking questions during the meetings. Organisers can set a schedule so that members know when it's their turn to pre-read.

Here are a few tips to run such a session:

- Split presentation and discussion times 50/50
- Provide guidelines and/or a template with a suggested list of presentation content and best practices. The more engaging a presentation is the more likely members will want to participate in the follow-up discussion.
- Disseminate the chosen article/s in advance, with some guiding questions to stimulate discussion during the virtual session
- A great way to foster community and encourage participation are 'virtual refreshment breaks' this can create a friendly, informal atmosphere conducive to open discussions, which will help encourage the flow of ideas and thoughts on the journal club paper under review.
- From our experience, for sessions involving a large multi-disciplinary group, topics which are hot-trending, cross-cutting and have a broad appeal. Papers about research tools or about writing also seemed to receive more attention.

For sessions with smaller sub-groups focusing on a special interest or discipline, try to:

- Search outside of your usual journal publications to offer a new perspective.
- Look at recent, thematic relevant papers, as well as classic articles that have influenced practice.
- Include a variety of different types of papers for e.g.,
 - Most recent articles, published in last 1 to 2 months
 - Articles from most widely read journals
 - Most thematic relevant articles, published within the last year
 - "Classic" articles that have influenced practice
 - Articles produced by one of the members

How many articles are acceptable to review in one session and perhaps this activity could be run once a quarter to maintain interest?

We recommend that when starting an online journal club it is very important to ensure that the concept is non-threatening and not overwhelming to people who may have never before read an article or seen a journal. Keeping this in mind, our suggestion would be that you discuss one article at each meeting to start with.

Another tactic used by the University of Colombo was using a learning management system to run a discussion forum prior to the virtual journal club session. The participants could engage with the paper and have their discussion going on for about a month or so, then followed by the virtual session.

What other activities could you choose for the online journal club?

Break out of the routine now and again to keep the club fresh and engaging by introducing some opportunities for 'quick wins', for example:

you could invite guest speakers to your journal club, invite a visiting scientist to present their work, ask a science communication expert to give tips.

- invite a guest speaker like another scientist, a science communication expert, a statistician, or an academic writing expert
- introduce something called 'club talk', where the focus of which is not specific to any particular field – for example, the Environmental Biology and Toxicology club discussed plastic pollution. Anyone from any field will benefit from discussing this issue and the discussions involved are not tailored towards any particular field.

Many members are early-career researchers and in the process of doing their PhD. While writing their thesis and going along the PhD journey these members have to critically review articles to be able to write their thesis. So, one idea is that they could be invited to the JC to talk about how they feel about some of these articles. Maybe not in the form of a formal review of the introduction, methodology and discussion of the paper but a much more flexible approach where members can just talk about some of the papers, they've used in their thesis write-up. This might encourage people to participate more as it requires less preparation and scrutiny of papers.

Technology platform(s)

What are the most important criteria to consider when selecting what technologies to use in the running of your online journal club?

The online clubs experimented with a number of different technologies elaborated on in more detail below. Some of the criteria under consideration included:

- What is the quality of the internet connection for (potential) members?
- What are the online technologies the (potential) members are most familiar with and find easiest to use?
- What form should the online journal club activities take i.e., in real time with everyone participating at the same time (synchronous) or where members can participate at their own pace, at a time of their choosing (asynchronous) or a mix of both?
- What is the group limit (maximum number of people who can join) of each of the technologies under consideration?
- Is the platform free or are there costs involved?

Our journal clubs use different approaches in technology, although most use Whatsapp. Most of the clubs used video discussion as a way of supplementing the text-based discussion, which featured both club members and external authors presenting their thoughts on journal papers and taking questions in live sessions. These sessions were conducted on Zoom, recorded, and then uploaded to YouTube so those who could not join the live session could watch later.

When choosing a platform, consider what most of your members use. Having to download an additional app and learning its interface can be a barrier to some.

Organisation and coordination

Make sure you invest time and effort into the invitation and preparation stages of your journal club and sessions. This will help to prepare participants for active participation in the virtual journal sessions.

Schedule some structured activities (but not too many) in advance so that members can look forward to them across several months also giving members the opportunity to exchange their ideas. This can help people to get a sense of doing /gaining something together.

How long should the online journal club sessions last?

Behind the premise of 'active participation' is the intent for everyone to engage and contribute as much as possible so that it is a productive use of time for all. This approach is built on the knowledge that there is a limit to the time people can remain engaged, focused, and contributing during a virtual session. While there is little consensus on what is reasonable and possible, we recommend 120 minutes as the maximum time for a productive session. We find scheduling a short break half-way through gives participants time to step away from the screen, rest their eyes, physically move around, and refresh. Of course, as with all events and meetings make sure that the sessions start and end on time.

When and how frequently will you hold journal club sessions?

Try to schedule the journal club at a recurring date and time, so that it becomes a regular part of everyone's schedule.

Choose a time that will be the least disruptive to members' work and study hours and factor in people's time zones if the club is a truly international group.

How will the review of journal papers be organised?

The leader or co-organiser will be responsible for scheduling each meeting and disseminating any articles beforehand. But who will present at the meeting?

Options include:

- the leader presents the article and initiates discussion on the article;
- the leader asks other members to present, but still initiates discussion on the article (the leader may assist the presenter with their preparation);
- the leader asks other members to present and initiates discussion on the article
- an external author presents and initiates discussion on the article

To ensure an effective session, we would suggest that the leader(s) present and facilitate discussions, at least at first. This could evolve over time by members starting to suggest possible articles for review and then maybe presenting articles themselves.

If you are planning on a regular journal club, invite members to take it in turns to propose an article.

How AuthorAID can support your journal club

If you would like to start a journal club or have already started one, AuthorAID can support you in a few different ways:

- AuthorAID runs a Whatsapp group for journal club leads and co-leads to update each other and to share learning. This group also meets on a quarterly basis.
- Your journal club can be featured on the AuthorAID website with a short description and a link to join for anyone who might be interested in being part of your club.

To coordinate this, please email us at authoraid@inasp.info

Last but not least, a note on values and principles

AuthorAID is a global community that is based on trust, respect, and collaboration. While anyone can start a journal club, we do ask everyone to respect and act guided by our values and principles. They are:

In it together

- We recognise that we are all on the same research journey; some of us are just further ahead.
- We encourage diversity, equity, and inclusion in research, aiming to make a positive impact on society.

Making change last

- We aim for lasting change that starts and ends with the global community of researchers.
- We empower the community to own their learning and pass on their knowledge.

Every voice counts

- We embrace new ideas without prejudice.
- We welcome all voices, no matter your gender, background, or where you are on your career path.

Doing things right

- We respect each other and the work we all do.
- We recognise the fast-paced change in the world and strive to contribute to and align with global best practice.