



OPEN SCIENCE RESOURCES

TRANSFORMATIVE AGREEMENTS

A transformative agreement (TA) is a negotiation or contract between institutions and publishers designed to shift subscription-based, paywalled scholarly publishing toward full Open Access (OA). Instead of paying purely for reading, institutions support both access and open publishing, enabling authors to make their work freely available. These agreements can be negotiated by individual libraries, research institutions, consortia, or library systems.

HOW TRANSFORMATIVE AGREEMENTS WORK

Each transformative agreement is tailored to the needs of the institution, but they usually include some key components. The rationale behind this model is to contain rising subscription costs, avoid paying twice for the same content (“double dipping”), and redirect limited budgets toward open publishing.



Hybrid model

Publishers gradually shift hybrid journals (those combining paywalled and OA content) toward fully OA models. Institutions pay to ensure their authors can publish OA while maintaining access to existing subscription content during the transition period.



Fund reallocation

Institutions redirect budget previously used for “reading fees” (subscription payments) toward supporting OA publishing. This allows them to maintain access to content while simultaneously funding Open Access publication for affiliated authors.



Combined cost structure

Instead of paying separately for subscriptions and APCs (article processing charges), institutions negotiate a single combined fee that covers both reading rights and OA publishing for their researchers, creating a more predictable and transparent cost model.

TYPES OF TRANSFORMATIVE AGREEMENTS

There are two main forms of transformative agreements:

1 Read and Publish

Institutions continue to pay for access to subscription content (“read”) while also covering OA publishing for their authors (“publish”) under one contract. This model supports a gradual shift towards libraries prioritising publication of content rather than access to content. It should be noted that there is no fixed fee rate or publication volume, although typically fixed volumes are more likely to be allocated by the larger publishing conglomerates while university presses and scholarly associations are more likely to have unlimited publication volumes.

2 Publish and Read

Institutions pay primarily for the ability of their authors to publish OA (“publish”), and access to subscription content (“read”) is included at no additional cost. This model places stronger emphasis on the publishing side and accelerates the transition toward fully OA output.

However, as TAs have limitations and may not be applicable for some institutions, most publishers develop alternative publishing agreement models that align with the TA goal.

PROS AND CONS OF TRANSFORMATIVE AGREEMENTS

Although transformative agreements are widely adopted, they remain controversial. Below is a breakdown of their perceived benefits as well as their significant risks, many of which are not always visible to libraries or researchers.

Potential benefits



Administrative convenience

A single contract simplifies workflows and allows libraries and finance to plan annual budgets more easily.



Predictability

Costs become more stable, which can be helpful for institutions facing tight financial planning cycles.



Incremental openness

They can provide a temporary bridge for institutions that want to support OA but lack the capacity to overhaul their systems immediately.

Major concerns and risks



Enormous cost and inefficient spending

Large publishers charge millions for these agreements, often far exceeding the cost of supporting authors directly or negotiating targeted, journal-specific arrangements.



Coverage gaps

TAs typically include only a narrow list of journals, often the publisher's most expensive or most commercially strategic titles, leaving large portions of scholarship outside the agreement. This varies between publishers as big ones usually offer their hybrid journals as opposed to Gold ones, while smaller publishers include all OA journals.



Does not reflect actual publishing behaviour

No researcher publishers in the same journal repeatedly, and many journals limit repeat publications anyway. Many authors end up unable to use the OA allocations that institutions pay for.



Opaque contracts and potential for misuse

Publishers may insert restrictive clauses, exploit CC BY rights, or use published content to train AI models. Libraries must be extremely cautious about what rights they sign away.



Slow and often stalled progress towards OA

Publishers retain hybrid journals for years, maintaining paywalls and slowing the shift to full openness. In reality, TAs can impede OA rather than accelerate it.



Budget inequality and exclusion

TAs rely on having a large existing subscription budget. Smaller, underfunded, or Global South institutions cannot participate, widening inequality in scholarly publishing.



Data-driven but not needs-driven

Institutions sometimes rely on publisher-provided usage data rather than consulting their own researchers. In practice, it is often cheaper and more effective to negotiate one-on-one agreements or support authors directly based on actual local needs.



Restrictive and unrealistic for researcher needs

Researchers publish across multiple journals, disciplines, and languages, not just within the titles covered by a single agreement. Humanities and social sciences are especially disadvantaged because their preferred journals are often excluded.

ARE TRANSFORMATIVE AGREEMENTS FOR YOU?

TAs may suit some institutions, but they are not universally beneficial. Before signing, consider the following:

A transformative agreement might be suitable if:

- 👤 You need predictable annual costs and prefer a single, bundled contract.
- 👤 Your researchers frequently publish in the specific journals included in the agreement.
- 👤 You have a substantial existing subscription budget that can be repurposed without reducing other services.
- 👤 Your institution is in an early stage of OA adoption and needs a transitional, low-disruption model. In this case, a specific TA with a relevant university press or scholarly society might be recommended, as this typically comes with an unlimited number of publications in all OA journals (Hybrid and Gold).

A transformative agreement is likely not suitable if:

- 👤 Your researchers publish across a wide range of journals, fields, and languages, not just those covered by the agreement.
- 👤 You want strong cost-effectiveness across all disciplines: it is often cheaper to fund APCs individually (depending on the publishing history of the institution), support diamond OA, or negotiate targeted agreements instead.
- 👤 You have limited budgets or cannot absorb annual increases buried within bundled publisher contracts.
- 👤 You value flexibility: TAs lock institutions into rigid, multi-year commitments that may not match evolving research needs, although this can be negotiated to reflect institutional goals.
- 👤 You want to avoid reinforcing publisher monopolies or sending large amounts of public money to a small number of dominant commercial actors.
- 👤 You are concerned about rights issues, CC BY exploitation, AI-training clauses, or opaque contract terms. This can also be negotiated to ensure favourable clauses are included.

GUIDING ADVICE

Talk to your researchers first. Analyse where they actually publish and what they need to read, not just what publisher data suggest. Use real internal evidence to assess whether a TA aligns with your community's scholarly practices. If entering into a transformative agreement, make sure that clear institutional goals are reflected in the contract. In many cases, however, more targeted, transparent, and locally informed institutional goals and objectives can be incorporated into the TA to ensure better value and greater long-term benefit.

RESOURCES

For resources on Transformative Agreements, please check out the following:



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