

Ask Athena: Duplicate Publication, Accused Board Member, and Peer Review for Editorials

Ask Athena is *Science Editor's* advice column for your most challenging publishing and editing questions. Submit your questions to scienceeditor@councilscienceeditors.org

Ask Athena: What Constitutes Duplicate Publication?

Dear Athena,
Our journal received a letter to the editor regarding a recently published paper. The editor in chief felt the letter contained some valid points and invited the authors of the original publication to submit a reply. In the course of preparing their reply, the authors discovered that this same letter had already been published in another journal. What should the editor do now?

— *Seeing Double*

Dear Seeing Double,
How lucky for you that the authors found this other letter before the duplicate was published in your journal, because that is precisely what this is, duplicate publication.

If the duplicate had already been published, that would be a clear violation of publication ethics, and I would advise you to contact the editor in chief of the other journal, as well as the authors' institution. Because you had not yet published the letter, you may be able to handle this differently.

First, work with your editor in chief to draft a letter to the authors explaining what you discovered. Avoid accusations, and simply state the facts that the letter the authors submitted to your journal appears to have been previously published in another journal. Explain that it is against your journal policies and ask the authors to explain to you what happened. Give them a short deadline by which to respond, about a week.

Your next step will depend on the authors' response. Sometimes mistakes like these are simply the result of



ignorance on the part of the authors; they may not realize that what they did is not right. If the authors respond that they now understand their mistake and apologize, I would not recommend any further action. On the other hand, if they defend themselves and try to argue they are not at fault, it is time to contact their institution. In that case, contact their department head, or someone in the research integrity office or similar. Again, refrain from accusations, but explain the situation to the institution, and forward any correspondence between you and the authors. At that point, any further action is up to the authors' institution.

Finally, now is the time to put safeguards in place to try to prevent this from happening again. Many journals ask authors during the submission process to confirm their paper has not been previously published and is not under consideration elsewhere. If your journal does not ask such a question, you would be wise to add it somewhere in the submission process. While this does not necessarily prevent authors from submitting a duplicate, it does put them on notice that the journal will not accept such a submission.

Answers to Ask Athena questions are a group effort by members of the CSE Education Committee.

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This information should also appear on the journal website, and if your journal follows the recommendations of COPE or the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, include a link to those policies as well.

Always,
Athena

Ask Athena: What To Do When a Board Member Stands Accused

Dear Athena,
Our journal has a large editorial board, and one of our members has just been charged with a crime. A trial will be forthcoming, but there has not yet been a decision of guilt. The crime does not involve research misconduct, but is loosely related to our profession. What should the journal do now?

— *Accused*

Dear Accused,
How unfortunate. Because you don't have a lot of information, and nothing has been decided in a court of law, it is best at this point to remain cautious and remember that this person is innocent until proven guilty. You should not do anything that would punish the board member before you have more information.

If your journal is published by a society, you should consult with the legal team, either in-house or external. They can advise you as to how to proceed. The society may have a policy for such situations, and there may be ramifications to this person's volunteer activities if they go beyond peer review. For example, the person may not be allowed to serve on committees until the outcome of the trial is determined, or their name may need to be removed from the Editorial Board listing. If you are with a large publisher, they will likely have legal counsel that can provide input.

Your next steps as a journal depend somewhat on your level of comfort because, again, the person has not been declared guilty. If the person is a peer reviewer on a paper currently under review, you could notify them that their review is not needed. Or, if the editor is comfortable, allow the person to submit the review, and the editor can determine whether that review is useful and unbiased. If the accused is a co-author on a paper under review, that review should proceed as normal. If they are a corresponding author on a paper under review, allow the review to proceed as normal, but use this time to decide what you will do if the paper is later revised and resubmitted. It may be reasonable

to decline to review the paper until the trial is completed. As mentioned above, your publisher or professional society may have policies in place that can guide those decisions.

If it is later determined that the person is innocent, then all can return to normal. On the other hand, if the verdict is guilty, any sanctions that went into effect when the person was accused should remain permanent. Reputation is important, and even the appearance of conflict of interest can be a problem. This may sound harsh, but especially if the case is widely known, the journal may not want it to be seen as a mark against them that one of their editorial board members is not an esteemed member of the professional community.

Always,
Athena

Ask Athena: Editorials and Peer Review

Dear Athena,
Should editorials (e.g., opinion columns) undergo peer view? I believe our editor-in-chief's editorials do not need this step as they are essentially a discussion about the issue's theme and contents. But we feature a regular editorial by medical residents and occasionally a guest editorial, as well. They are short opinion pieces (500 words or less) about various timely topics in the field and usually include references (fewer than 10). Is there an industry standard/recommendation?

Thanks so much for your time, wisdom, and guidance!

—*Perplexed about Peer Review*

Dear Perplexed,
Thank you for asking about the necessity of peer review for editorials.

As with original research articles and reviews, editorials can only gain from peer review. Reviewers bring added perspective to the content and can identify errors, raise questions, and/or provide feedback that improves the overall quality of the editorial. Depending upon the timing of publication for editorials, reviewer timeliness might be a concern. If the publication timing is especially tight and external peer review isn't feasible, consider sending the editorial to a couple of your editors who are familiar with this topic and request an expedited review from them.

Most articles, including editorials, benefit from peer review, and your authors and readers will thank you for taking this extra step.

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