

# Ask Athena: Difficult Authors and Sharing Papers

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



*At Ask Athena, we recognize that there are often a variety of opinions and options when faced with sticky situations, especially those that do not have an obvious answer. We do our best to provide sound guidance but appreciate that others may have a different view. In the spirit of open communication, we would love to hear your thoughts and answers on the questions we cover in the column. Email us at [scienceeditor@councilscienceeditors.org](mailto:scienceeditor@councilscienceeditors.org).*

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

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## **Ask Athena: Sharing Papers in Peer Review**

Dear Athena,

I work for a small society publisher. We are getting ready to publish a series of articles on a particular topic that relates

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to something our organization is working on. Recently, someone from a different department within my organization asked to see the manuscripts before they were accepted. I'm not sure how to respond. I know the peer-review process should be confidential, so maybe I should not share these papers? On the other hand, she only wants to see them for reference, so her department knows what is coming. I want to be a good coworker, so maybe I should just share them? What do you think?

—*Not Sure if I Should Share*

Dear Not Sure,

I can see your dilemma. Of course you want to be a team player and share information with your coworkers. On the other hand, you are absolutely correct that papers submitted to a journal are to be considered confidential until the time of publication.

For questions like this, it can often be helpful to turn to the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). In this case, ICMJE recommends, "Editors therefore must not share information about manuscripts, including ... their content and status in the review process, criticism by reviewers, and their ultimate fate, to anyone other than the authors and reviewers."<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, your response to your coworker should be a polite refusal

to share. I understand it can feel awkward to refuse what seems like a reasonable request from a coworker, but if you can point them to policies like this, it shows this is not just your opinion, but accepted practice.

And while it might seem selfish for you not to share the articles, there are good reasons for the ICMJE policy. What if your coworker did not agree with what was written in the article and requested changes before publication? That would definitely introduce a conflict of interest. You would have to refuse, since any requests for changes should come from the corresponding author. What if the coworker shared the article with others, spreading them around before publication? That would violate your embargo, along with the author's reasonable expectation that their submission would be kept confidential until publication.

Hopefully, you can arm yourself with this explanation for your coworker and avoid any hurt feelings.

Always,  
Athena

## References and Links

1. <https://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/responsibilities-in-the-submission-and-peer-review-process.html>