

Peer Review – Mysteriously Similar Articles

<p>This role play involves a peer reviewer who receives two papers from different journals to review. The papers are remarkably similar: they have the same preliminary data and nearly identical references listed. Is this a case of duplicative publishing or of co-authors in a dispute over who has the right to publish the article? The journal editor will have to probe the lead author to find out more. The peer reviewer decides to consult with a trusted colleague about how best to handle this. The peer reviewer also has the option to decide to phone the editor for whom he regularly reviews.</p> <p>Roles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Peer Reviewer• Lead Author• Journal Editor (Trusted Other) <p>Scenarios</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Peer Reviewer discussion with Journal Editor (Trusted Other)• Journal Editor discussion with Lead Author	<p>Role Play Tips</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Detailed role descriptions and prompts are provided to guide the role play. This is not a strict script. Encourage role players to familiarize themselves with their characters and get creative!• Encourage role players to use their actual names in place of character names.• Experiment with changing the prompts to inject some variability in role play dynamics (e.g., have a character offer a conciliatory opening line or a belligerent opening line to see how that changes the course of the role play).• Run a role play more than once, changing role players.
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Role Play: Peer Reviewer Role Guide

Character Description: Peer Reviewer

You are well known in your research field and provide manuscript reviews for various journals in your discipline. You have received an article to review. As you begin reading, you realize that its nearly identical to an article you just reviewed for another journal—it was a good article that you recommended accepting with minor revisions.

Although the titles and formatting are slightly different the references of each are nearly identical and the data presented are very similar. Because these are blind reviews you do not know who the authors are. Still, you ask yourself: OK, are these by the same author and s/he is it blatantly trying to get away with publishing duplicative material in two different journals? Or are there two different authors who are racing to be the first to write up the paper and perhaps to claim sole or first authorship? Or is it just a misunderstanding about who was to submit the article for publication and where?

You decide this really is a problem for the journal editor to solve, and give him/her a call.

Role Play: Lead Author Role Guide

Character Description: Lead Author

You are a researcher at a large institution. You recently submitted an article with the findings from your latest grant. The article has 6 co-authors—a co-investigator from another institution and several junior colleagues. It was recently conditionally accepted with minor changes required. You are pleased and plan on completing the revisions this week.

Out of the blue, you get a call from the journal editor, stating that he was informed that a reviewer has read a paper just like yours, submitted to another leading journal. You know nothing of this and are very upset. When the editor suggests that your article be put “on hold” while things are clarified, you become distressed: You want to cite this paper in your next grant submission.

Role Play: Journal Editor Role Guide

Character Description: Journal Editor

You are the editor of a prestigious science journal. You recently accepted an article for publication with just minor revisions required. You would like to include the article in the next issue, and have requested the author to expedite revisions.

Then, out of the blue, you get a phone call from one of the reviewers describing a troubling situation.

Scenario One

The Peer Reviewer calls the Journal Editor.

Prompt One

Peer Reviewer: “OK, this is a little unsettling, but ... I recently finished a review for your journal and recommended publishing the article. But today, I agreed to review a paper from another journal, and it was nearly identical. I cannot imagine someone would plagiarize themselves. I’m not sure what’s going on, but I thought I should let you know.”

Journal Editor: How do you respond?

Questions to Consider

1. The peer reviewer offers to contact the author of the first article that was submitted. As the journal editor, how do you respond?
2. The peer reviewer has told you all they could and now it is time to act. As the journal editor, what do you do?

Scenario Two

The Journal Editor decides to phone the Lead Author of the article he recently accepted.

Prompt Two

Journal Editor: “Hey, how are you? You won’t believe this. But I just received a call from someone who reviewed your article that we accepted. He says that earlier today he agreed to review an article for a different journal. It’s nearly identical to the paper we just accepted—the data and even references differ very, very little. He’s not sent me a copy of the other paper, but read me excerpts, and there’s no mistaking it—it describes your study. I think we need to put your article on hold while we figure out what’s going on.”

Lead Author: How do you respond?

Questions to Consider

1. The lead author suddenly becomes exasperated. They exclaim that they would rather publish their article elsewhere than have their “earth-shattering research called into question.” The author insists that you retract the article. As the journal editor, what should you do?
2. As the journal editor, do you have a responsibility to make sure that the lead author does not publish the same article elsewhere prior to resolving the duplicate submission issue?

Take Away Points

- One of the primary functions of peer review is to provide quality assurance by acting as a mechanism for rejecting proposals and articles that do not meet quality standards.
- As long as you exercise your due diligence in observing journal submission guidelines, working openly with the individual(s) investigating the issue is in your best interest.

References

DuBois, J., Sieber, J., Bante, H., & Partin, K. (n.d.). RCR Casebook: Stories about Researchers Worth Discussing. Retrieved November 7, 2019, from <https://ori.hhs.gov/rcr-casebook-stories-about-researchers-worth-discussing>.