

Considering co-submissions

Discovering that a different lab has reached similar findings to yours before publishing can be frustrating. But it does not have to be. Communication between labs might be the best way forward.

The scientific environment is often seen as competitive, with scientists racing to be the first to make a certain discovery since novelty attracts the attention of journal editors and funding bodies. So, what would you do if you heard someone presenting findings similar to your own at a conference? Indeed, it is not uncommon that multiple labs reach similar conclusions independently at the same time. Understandably, realising that a competitor is threatening to publish first must be worrying to researchers and can turn a project on its head, all for the sake of rushing a paper out and earning the recognition associated with being the first.

However, having two different labs submitting overlapping work simultaneously to the same journal can benefit the authors, the journal and the scientific community. Quite likely, novel findings will have more impact in the field if they have already been confirmed independently. In this Editorial, we explain how we approach co-submissions or topically related submissions.

Once authors agree on co-submitting their papers to *Nature Metabolism*, we will assess both manuscripts simultaneously. If we decide to review them, we would typically recruit at least one, if not two, overlapping reviewers to evaluate them both. These referees are not only in a position to evaluate, and compare, the individual strengths and weaknesses of each study, but they can also comment on the degree to which the studies complement or overlap each other.

If we invite both groups to revise their manuscripts, we pay particular attention to the editorial guidance we provide authors. Ideally, we try to develop the strengths of each paper further so that both studies, in revised form, complement each other better while at the same time being able to stand alone. For example, while one study might have a well-developed mechanism, the co-submitted paper might employ more elegant *in vivo* models, or perhaps provide a more compelling demonstration of therapeutic value. Rather than asking authors to repeat experiments that are already in the co-submitted paper, ideally, we would like to strengthen each of these points independently, so that together, the two revised manuscripts support a more robust and reproducible finding.

What if we feel that one study is much more developed than the other? In most cases, we would send both papers out to review. If the reviewers confirm our initial concerns, we will try to find another home for the submission that we cannot take forward, and we could still coordinate publication if it is published in one of our sister journals, so that the two manuscripts reinforce each other. Another possibility is to combine the two papers into a single, stronger manuscript, as is sometimes suggested by reviewers.

The situation is more complicated if authors are unaware of each other's work or are racing to publish first. As editors, we are bound by the principle of confidentiality: unless the corresponding authors inform us about their wish to co-submit (typically in the cover letter), we cannot inform

another group about a related manuscript, particularly if it has not been accepted for publication yet. Sometimes, even if two manuscripts are co-submitted, one manuscript advances faster than the other during the review or revision process. Unfortunately, if the difference in timeframe between both manuscripts grows too large, we might no longer be able to publish the lagging one. Similarly, even if authors initially agree on co-submitting, a delay in the revision of the co-submitted paper can result in authors changing their mind and resubmitting individually. Thus, we strongly recommend that authors communicate with each other throughout the entire submission and revision process.

In the end, publishing two related manuscripts simultaneously benefits everyone: for authors, it can translate into a smoother revision, less competition and greater visibility, given that results are supported by an accompanying manuscript. The scientific community, conversely, has added reassurance about the robustness and reproducibility of a novel finding if it has been reported independently by several groups. We as editors can facilitate this process through back-to-back publication for the benefit of the field. While we acknowledge that being first is important in science, we are convinced that the scientific community will benefit from sharing that privilege with fellow researchers, rather than competing for it. □

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