

naturejobs

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Scientists often describe themselves as a community. If this description is true, then that community has grown “nastier and nastier” in the past 30 years, according to one participant at a retreat for US National Cancer Institute postdocs last week in Ocean City, Maryland. The remark came during a workshop on scientific publishing that I took part in. The nastiness, she said, manifests itself most often in the form of hostile, disparaging remarks in referee reports during the peer-review process — usually cloaked in anonymity.

The culture of competition for limited resources has probably contributed to this problem, said my co-panellist Feng Chen, senior editor at *Molecular Cell*. But she noted that rejected authors can also fall into this trap — sending angry e-mails or making emotional phone calls just minutes after their manuscripts have been sent back. She recommends that would-be authors take a 24-hour ‘cooling-off’ period before they respond to journal editors if their paper is rejected. Authors can also shield themselves from some hostility by requesting that colleagues who bear them a grudge be excluded from the review process — although requesting that reviewers from an entire continent or discipline be barred may not be entirely reasonable, Chen added.

Perhaps scientists should remember that they are indeed part of a community, and that this comes with an unwritten social contract, to be at the very least cordial and professional towards each other — even when their names are hidden. Editors could encourage reviewers to provide constructive feedback, even when they don’t recommend acceptance of a paper. Telling the would-be author what works in the manuscript and what still needs to be done is more beneficial than making anonymous insults.

Perhaps both reviewers and editors should have a 24-hour ‘cooling off’ period, when they can think about how they would communicate their intended message to a neighbour or a friend. *Nature’s* advice and policies for authors and reviewers on these and other related matters can be found at www.nature.com/authors.

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