

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.

Ask Athena: How Do We Handle Difficult Authors?

Dear Athena,

We have a reputable author who does good work and is well known in the field. This author used to be an Associate Editor for our journal. The author has been very vocal about their dislike of the Science Editor process at our journal and constantly pushes back against standard journal policies. Recently, the author has flat-out refused to address technical check items (e.g., formatting the supplemental files properly) because they feel they should not have to.

My general question is this: Would Athena recommend bending the rules and/or doing the work on behalf of this author, or standing firm with the requirements and telling the author to make the changes or withdraw the paper? The paper is at the second revision and is very close to acceptance. On the one hand, doing the work for the author will appease them, the paper will be accepted, and we will all go our merry way—but the author will likely continue to bully our journal and others in the way they have been. On the other hand, if we dig in, the author will most certainly take to X to put down the journal, and an R2 paper on which we spent many hours editing and processing will be rejected.

—*Bending the Rules*

Dear Bending the Rules,

While I can appreciate how difficult it would be to lose the paper after so much work has already been invested, I

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.

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



keep going back to your use of the word “bully.” No matter how well-known or regarded an author may be, I believe protecting your staff from this behavior is more important. Therefore, I would not recommend bending the rules for this author and would instead stick firmly to the journal guidelines and policies. You might also remind the author of these rules and stress why they are important to follow (such as added time to publication and/or the likely opportunity for introduced errors if staff are to fix unaddressed technical matters).

If you have a marketing or PR person/staff, I would alert them to the potential of this author taking to social media to criticize the journal and ask that they monitor the situation and have a plan in place should the dispute go viral. Similarly, it’s also important to ensure that any communication sent from the staff to the author is clear and polite, in case these communications are posted online. It will be your best defense!

Always,
Athena