Why Is Double-Blind Peer Review Bad for Publishing?

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In experimental science double-blind testing is the standard procedure. To avoid bias it is important that neither the subject nor the evaluator knows which pills are the potential drug and which is the placebo. Some journals try to apply the same principle to peer review with a double-blind peer review procedure in which the authors' and reviewers' identities are kept secret from each other. Advocates believe this double anonymity makes for more candid and unbiased reviews: the reviewer will only consider the merit of the paper itself and not the authors. However, I think a double-blind review is practically impossible and the attempt to carry it out causes more problems than it solves.

Can Authors be Anonymous?

A reviewer is supposed to be an expert in the subject matter of the paper being reviewed. Given the highly specific nature of most scientific research, it is likely that a reviewer will be able to identify a well-known author from the nature of the work, the techniques used, and even the style of writing. Even if the author's names and university affiliations are erased, the clues will be there. When I was in graduate school my group had one of the western world's only tank of hexafluoroacetone, obtained just before the manufacturing company stopped selling it on the open market. Over two decades, my professor cranked out a host of papers in which the molecule was incorporated into a bidentate ligand. Any reviewer during this time had only to glance at the ligand to have a pretty good idea of the author.

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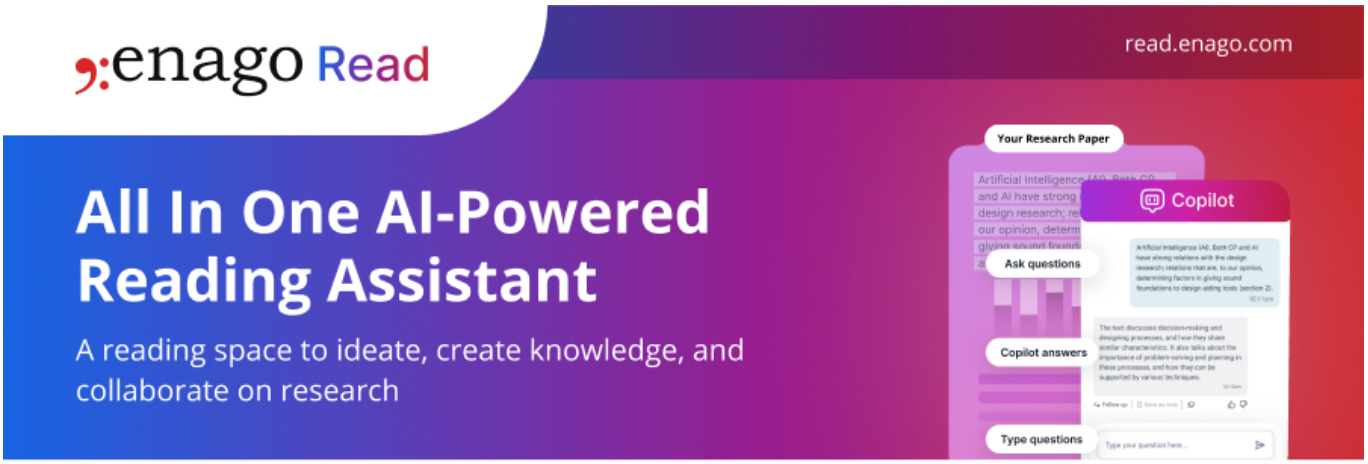

On the other hand, if the author is not well known, why conceal his name? If a reviewer "doesn't know him from Adam" the author may as well be anonymous. In the former case a double-blind peer review is impossible; in the latter case it is useless.

The Trap of False Security

The double-blind process is intended to prevent bias. But a better way to accomplish this goal is to identify the authors and require the reviewer to state if there are any possible conflicts of interest, pro or con. Granted this requires the reviewer to be honest, but most reviewers will recuse themselves in such a situation, much as judges routinely do so in trials. However, in the double-blind review process there is no requirement to identify possible bias, since the authors are supposedly unknown. When the authors are deduced from the paper's contents, the double-blind procedure turns into a single-blind review but without the safeguard of reporting possible bias. The false security of the double-blind process is a trap which encourages the very bias it is supposed to prevent.

The goal of a double-blind review is admirable—we all want impartial peer reviews. But in practice, double-blind reviews are not possible, not necessary, and potentially more biased than the single-blind procedure they replace. The single-blind peer review is not perfect, but it's preferable.

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