

# Vanishing down the black hole of reviewing delays

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A frustrating, irritating, but all too common obstacle faced by many accounting (and other) academic researchers is the experience of having to wait up to and in some cases in excess of 12 months for feedback and/or a final decision to be provided on manuscripts submitted to academic journals. Motivated by reflections with colleagues who have in recent times experienced this frustration, I have increasingly discovered many colleagues who have encountered the same “challenge”.

It occurred to me as though the interminable length of time that papers can be in the review process has much in common with the characteristics of black holes. The parallels may seem somewhat remote at first, but I can think of at least ten similarities.

(1) A black hole or a black box?

Black holes can be thought of as regions in spacetime in which gravity is so strong that very little can escape from them. This is why the existence of black holes cannot be directly observed. They can only be inferred through its interaction with other matter and visible light. Ascertaining the exact reason for delays in the review process, notifications and decisions is typically beyond the capacity of the authors. You are totally in the hands of the editor handling your submission for any information about how your manuscript is progressing. Excessive delays do raise the question of whether the review process is a black hole or a black box.

(2) What happens in a black hole stays in a black hole

Further to point 1, there is (literally) a lack of transparency associated with black holes. Because of the double-blind practice of most journals, you will most likely never know the identity of the reviewer who is damaging your career. On reflection, this lack of transparency may not necessarily be a bad thing.

(3) A distortion of spacetime.

Black holes are caused by a sufficiently compact mass that distorts spacetime. A similar distortion – not of spacetime but in what one thinks is “normal”/professional/acceptable – is achieved at around the 4-month mark. This is when you start to ask questions like, “Have they lost our paper?”, “Is this delay usual for this journal?”, “Would I be waiting this long if I was a big name in the academy?”

(4) Out of sight is out of mind.

The closest black hole (named, Sagittarius A\*) to Earth is situated approximately 1,500 light-years away. It might be that some reviewers are situated near the vicinity of this black hole. Being 1,500 light years away may be a possible explanation for the delay in receiving notification on submitted papers.

(5) Sometimes, some things take time.

A picture has been taken of Sagittarius A\* to indirectly observe it. The data were collected by eight radio observatories at six geographical sites. The image took five years to process. When one becomes frustrated at a delay in receiving a decision or even feedback on a



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manuscript, it is reassuring to know that some things take time, and of course, that someday this pain will be useful to you.

(6) A fate worse than death.

If you fell into a black hole, it is hypothesised that gravity would stretch you out like spaghetti. A remarkably similar outcome (of being stretched out) can be obtained when encountering reviewers who are not ready, willing or able to complete and submit their reviews on a timely basis. However, the process of being stretched out whilst waiting for notification on your paper is probably much slower than what happens if you were to fall into a black hole.

(7) Don't get sucked in.

Black holes are safe to observe from a (considerable) distance, but not if you get too close. Reviewers for whom time clearly has a different meaning to submitting authors are difficult to identify. If you are able to recognise such individuals, it is probably a good idea to keep your distance.

(8) Do some reviewers live near black holes?

According to the theory of general relativity, time slows down as one approaches a black hole due to the extremely strong gravitational field of the black hole curving spacetime. Another example of the usefulness of theory: if editors were to stop sending manuscripts for review to reviewers who are located near black holes, might the entire review process become quicker?

(9) You are not the first; you are unlikely to be the last.

Black holes exist in the centres of most galaxies. The experience of excessive response times and waiting for decisions occurs with many journals. Do not allow it to derail you. Keep calm and follow your contingency plan.

(10) This too will pass.

A black hole will eventually dissolve as it emits small amounts of thermal (Hawking) radiation and therefore mass. As frustrating as the experience may be, remember, you have the option of formally withdrawing your paper and resubmitting to another journal. This is relatively easy to do. After all, it only affects your next performance evaluation, tenure or promotion plans.

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