



Citation Hacking: A Researcher's Defense Guide

Protecting the integrity of academic discourse
By Lennart Nacke.

! What is citation hacking?

Citation hacking is the deliberate manipulation of academic citations to artificially inflate impact metrics, which often influence career advancement.

Type of Citation Hacking	Description
 Self-citation Inflation	Excessively citing your own work beyond what's relevant. German term: <i>Platzhirsch</i> (dominant stag in territory).
 Citation Cartels	Groups of researchers who agree to cite each other's papers regardless of relevance.
 Coercive Citation	Reviewers or editors demanding their work be cited as a condition for publication.
 Metadata Manipulation	Inserting references in metadata that don't appear in the actual text.

 **Why it happens:** The academic reward system creates perverse incentives. When scientists are evaluated based on simple citation counts rather than quality or impact, some inevitably game the system.

👋 How to handle citation requests

Navigating citation requests during peer review requires a balance that upholds academic integrity while respecting the review process. The following strategies provide actionable guidance for authors confronted with potentially coercive citation requests.

When facing coercive citation requests as an author

-  **Document everything.** Save all communications showing citation demands from the reviewers. Screenshots are best.
-  **Contact the handling editor directly.** Provide a detailed explanation of why the suggested citations aren't relevant to this work, with specific reasons.
-  **Propose alternatives.** (Optional) Suggest more relevant citations from various authors that would strengthen the paper.

 **Pro tip:** Editors often stand with authors who provide well-reasoned explanations against citation coercion. You don't have to give in to such requests.

✓ Maintaining your citation integrity

Academic integrity requires vigilance against citation manipulation, particularly self-citation abuse. The guidelines here offer some **practical strategies for you to maintain ethical citation practices**.

🏠 The “Stranger Test”

Apply this to every citation: “*Would I cite this paper if it was written by someone I didn’t know?*” This simple question cuts through potential bias, especially for self-citations.

% Self-citation guideline: Keep self-citations under **20%** of total references as a general rule of thumb. When exceeding this threshold, reconsider each citation critically.

⚙️ Systemic safeguards for journal editors

Journal editors serve as critical guardians of academic integrity in scholarly publishing. Beyond evaluating research quality, they **must establish robust systems to prevent citation manipulation that can distort impact metrics and undermine scientific credibility**. The following guidelines offer practical approaches for editors to implement transparent policies, establish ethical boundaries, and enforce consequences for citation abuse. Adopt these to better **protect the integrity of academic literature**, so that citations reflect genuine scholarly influence rather than strategic manipulation.

Effective and explicit policies

- 📋 **Define manipulation clearly.** Specify practices aimed at artificially boosting citation numbers for individual benefit.
- ⚖️ **Differentiate legitimate from illegitimate practices.** Establish clear boundaries for necessary self-citation.
- 🚫 **Implement zero-tolerance for coercion.** Blacklist reviewers who demand citation of their papers.

Practical monitoring techniques

- ✓ Add a checkbox for reviewers: “I have requested citation(s) to my own research”
- 🚩 Flag papers receiving more than three citations from a single reviewer
- 🔍 Screen for citation anomalies between submission versions
- 🔄 Cross-check reviewer-suggested citations against the reviewer’s publication history
- 📊 Implement citation analysis tools that detect unusual citation patterns

Verification measures

- ✓ Require justification for suggested citations during review
- ✓ Verify that citations added during revisions actually support the claims they’re attached to

🔄 Breaking the cycle

The overreliance on citation metrics has created a problematic feedback loop in academic evaluation. When career advancement depends heavily on citation counts, researchers often prioritize gaming these metrics over pursuing genuinely innovative research. To break this cycle, we need a fundamental shift in how scholarly impact is assessed and valued. Turn your focus on knowledge advancement rather than numerical indicators. Let's let meaningful contribution takes precedence over citation manipulation.

“The real measure of research impact isn't citation count. It's how your work advances knowledge.”

💡 Best practices

Citation integrity is fundamental to maintaining scientific rigour and fostering trust in academic publishing. The following best practices provide guidance for both researchers and journal editors to combat citation manipulation and promote ethical citation behaviours that serve knowledge advancement rather than metric-driven incentives.

For individual researchers	For journal editors
👤 Stand firm against coercive practices 🗣️ Mentor young researchers about citation integrity 🧠 Focus on genuine knowledge advancement rather than citation metrics	📰 Publish editorials condemning citation manipulation ★ Highlight exemplary papers with focused, relevant citation practices 📊 Implement alternative impact metrics beyond raw citation counts

🎯 When you stop chasing citations, you'll have more headspace to ask the questions that really matter to your field.