Dearest Labby,

I am a fourth-year graduate student and have just done the most difficult and exciting experiment of my (admittedly short) career, using a new technique developed by one of my labmates, also a graduate student. The results of this experiment are the crowning touch that should make the paper I have been writing competitive for publication in one of the top biomedical research journals.

Yesterday, while doing an experiment in the hood near my technique-developing labmate’s bench, I overheard him and my PhD advisor discussing my experiment. The gist of the conversation was that the results of my experiment would be Figure X in the paper that my labmate was putting together describing his new technique, and that they would then send my labmate’s paper to Very Prestigious Journal A.

Labby, I was astounded and angry that the publication of my work would be determined without consulting me or considering how my own publication would be affected. Can you guide me on how to constructively communicate my displeasure and resolve this dilemma?

—Playing Second Fiddle

Dear Fiddle,

Labby sympathizes with your frustration. It seems like this might be a good time for a discussion among all the lab members of a larger issue: whose data will be incorporated into the construction of specific manuscripts. (And this naturally leads to the discussion of another very important lab topic, authorship sequence.) You should sit down with your advisor and calmly explain your disappointment that you were not part of the conversation regarding the publication of your data. It is likely that the conversation you overheard was a result of thoughtlessness, not a reflection of disrespect for you or your standing in the lab. You could suggest that outlining the proposed manuscripts would be an excellent topic for the next lab meeting.

If the organization of the papers and proposed figures are laid out in a lab meeting, it may be obvious to the group (including you) where your data should be included and where each person should be in the list of authors. If in fact your results belong best in your labmate’s manuscript, you will have the opportunity to ask for advice on other data that would be appropriate to add to your paper or if there is an experiment that you can readily do to round out your paper, an alternate crowning touch.

It will then be up to your advisor to make the final decision about where to include your data to optimize the strength of the scientific story and reputation of the laboratory. In the end, most of our scientific accomplishments will be part of some type of collaboration, and this is a great opportunity to learn early in your career how to navigate the complications, and reap the rewards, of collaborative research. Good luck!

—Labby

Got Questions?

Labby has answers. ASCB’s popular columnist will select career-related questions for publication and thoughtful response in the ASCB Newsletter. Confidentiality guaranteed if requested. Write us at labby@ascb.org.