



Description

Authorship defines the role of a creator, whose intention is to circulate original ideas and intellectual works. In scholarly publishing, in particular, [the role of the author](#) carries significant responsibility, legal rights, and privileges. The career of academics is often based on the authorship of the papers published by them, however, driven by the pressure to “publish or perish”(Editorial 2010). Based on the final dissemination of works created, we discuss the differences among the ghost, guest and gift authorship in academia.

The Ghost

The ghost-writer is a professional writer, whose contribution to produce a paper will be excluded in the final publication. These writers often work for medical communication agencies commissioned by pharmaceutical companies and ensure timely publication of large clinical trials. These named authors may have conducted the research as scientists/clinicians to produce the data, but have not written the article themselves. Ghost authorship is common to journals reporting large-scale clinical trials, regulatory documentation, and literature summaries for healthcare professionals. [In this situation](#), however, it is particularly rewarding when a qualified writer has a direct impact on improving medical literacy.

The [National Association of Science Writers](#) and the [American Medical Writers Association](#) thereby update guidance to medical writers regularly. The [European Medical Writers Association](#) has similarly developed guidelines for ghost authorship in peer-reviewed publications (Jacobs and Wager 2005). These guidelines require the lead author to generate the content and to acknowledge the involvement of professional writers. While opinions on ghost authorship vary; the approach of introducing transparency by acknowledging professional writers alongside the funding statement (Wislar et al. 2011) can be helpful.

The Guest and the Gift

According to the guidelines by the [International Committee of Medical Journal Editors](#) (ICMJE), guest [authors](#) indirectly affiliate to a study article. However, it is common in academia. Often, researchers use guest authorship in lieu of acquiring grants, funds or providing supervision. Lead authors often face conflicting pressure to include their supervisor in a publication, despite the lack of direct

contribution. While “passive academic contributions” may deserve this at some institutions, for journals, it is the exception, not the rule (Bavdekar 2012). Conventionally, guest authorship is an unethical concept, thus most journal editors have a clear policy to prevent this situation.

For instance, many journals require authors to clarify their individual contribution in the final article. Consequently, presenting authorship to individuals who have not done the actual work – as ‘gifts’ may become obsolete in journals due to these [author guidelines](#).

Recap

The [committee on publication ethics](#) (COPE) and the council of scientific editors have updated academic authorship guidelines over the years. As discussed, authorship issues do exist in the scholarly publishing. To limit such conflict, editors expect researchers to:

- Identify the co-authors and contributors of a study, prior to its publication.
- Subsequently, read the guidelines in medical journals that clearly articulate individuals who qualify for being an author/co-author or acknowledgment for verification.
- Finally, identify the individual contributions made to establish accountability for the reported works.

In publication ethics, authorship prompts thought-provoking [discussions](#). In addition to editorial guidelines, academic organizations in different fields have their own criteria to define and consider suitability for authorship. For example, in biomedicine, the authorship is defined according to the [ICMJE guidelines](#). However, N.I.H’s (National Institute of Health) definition slightly varies from this concept (Resnik et al. 2016). COPE, on the other hand, admits absence of a universally agreed definition.

Have you ever faced any issues related to authorship when working with your team or making submissions to a journal? Leave us a comment to share your thoughts on these ethical considerations.

Category

1. Publishing Research
2. Understanding Ethics

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