

Publication Ethics: Giving Credit where Credit Is Due

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One basic element of publication ethics requires that an author give credit where credit is due, especially to those who contributed to the research. There are two ways to violate this guideline: not giving enough credit and giving too much credit.



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Too Little Credit

Researchers are often accused of claiming more credit than they deserve for a notable [research result](#). Claiming a breakthrough without acknowledging previous work leading up to it is quite common in the history of science and has led to some famous controversies over priority. In fact, Antoine Lavoisier may not have been the “Father of Chemistry” so much as the gifted pupil of several other researchers. He definitely built on earlier work in his field but had a way of writing his results that implied, without quite saying so, that he had come up with all the ideas on his own. If deliberate, this was unethical. Furthermore, if no due credit is given, it may reflect on the [plagiarism checker](#) as a plagiarized content.

Isaac Newton, though he modestly spoke of standing on the shoulders of giants, was not always so generous to living rivals. If he didn't like a certain researcher, he wouldn't cite him in an article any more than was absolutely necessary. This is unethical but is fairly common practice among researchers even today.

Too Much Credit

[Giving credit](#) that is unjustified is just as unethical as denying credit although it rarely provokes the affected party in the same way. Giving copious but unnecessary citations to a colleague (“courtesy citations”) is one example. Including a colleague as a coauthor when he had contributed nothing to the content of the paper is more egregious, especially if the colleague happens to be a superior. This sort of author padding was said to be common practice in the Soviet Union. “Their equivalent of the chairman of the department gets his name on every paper in the department,” a friend informed me. Different customs and cultural factors make this a grey area.

How much autonomy do the individual researchers have and how does the chairman actually involve himself in the work? When does an acknowledgement of “helpful discussions” transition to a co-authorship? A flagrant example of unjustified credit occurred in 1948 when grad student Ralph Alpher and his adviser George Gamow prepared a paper on “The Origin of Chemical Elements,” arguing that the Big Bang would have created all the elements found in the early universe. Before sending it off to Physical Review, Gamow added the name of his friend Hans Bethe as coauthor. His justification for doing this was nothing more than “It seemed unfair to the Greek alphabet to have the article signed by Alpher and Gamow only.” Get it? Alpha, beta, gamma—A, B, C. Bethe was amused. Not Alpher. He thought that having two well known physicists listed as coauthors on the paper would minimize his contribution. As much as I like a good joke in science, I have to agree.

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