

When the Authors Can't Write English

I recall an uncomfortable period in a lab where I worked a few years ago. The lab was productive, and the personnel worked reasonably well together. We had a number of very intelligent and hard-working investigators who were trained in foreign countries—some of them with MDs—but their English writing skills were poor. Nevertheless, these individuals conceived the experimental designs of their projects and collected and interpreted the data. Somehow, though, they managed to get the project's PI to write their papers *entirely*, but with them as first, second, etc., authors and with the PI as last.

The PI was comfortable with this arrangement. The problem arose when a postdoc was asked to write these investigators' papers. She didn't like the arrangement one bit. As far as she was concerned, she hadn't participated in the investigators' research and so shouldn't be writing their papers. And even if she had participated to some extent, she felt that writing their papers entirely by herself was unreasonably time-consuming. Furthermore, she argued that if she would write such a paper entirely by herself, then she deserved first authorship, regardless of the amount of work she devoted to the project itself.

A sort of truce was reached when the postdoc let everyone know that if she became more involved in the investigators' research from the beginning, she would be willing to do the writing if they did most of the data gathering. She still objected, though, to the investigators being listed as first authors without their writing or editing anything. But she compromised on a number of occasions to maintain peace and productivity.

Sometime later, both she and I left the lab. I've often wondered whether this situation continued. Please comment.

© 2010 Emory University

Expert Opinion

This scenario raises the interesting problem of the putative difference between "writing" a paper—where one effortfully translates his or her thoughts into some form of symbolic notation like words or images—versus "authoring" a paper where the "ideas" might be the author's but the words that ultimately appear in print could be those of someone else, like a ghostwriter. Obviously, most authors are also writers: They fashion words of their own choosing into sentences, paragraphs, articles, books, etc. But is it necessarily the case that all writers are also authors? Setting words to paper doesn't necessarily constitute "authorship" as in the case of those saintly medieval monks laboring for years in their monasteries' scriptoria copying manuscripts. Alternatively, what should we say about a pharmaceutical company's ghostwriter, who interviews a researcher, learns the researcher's methods and findings, and then writes a paper which the researcher reads, approves, and claims authorship of? Is this unethical if, in fact, the researcher did all the work but had the ghostwriter write the paper? If it is unethical, then what are we to say about a sizeable portion of many law review articles as well as appellate and (virtually all) Supreme Court decisions that are mostly written by law students and clerks, who are never cited as authors? (Nor, for that matter, are Presidential speechwriters.)

To gain further appreciation of this problem, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors guidelines are maddeningly vague as to whether or not an author of a scientific article must actually “write” any of it. The (notorious) section of the guidelines states that: Authorship credit should be based on 1) substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; 2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content, and 3) final approval of the version to be published. Authors should meet conditions 1, 2 and 3.¹

Note that these stipulations do not explicitly state that authors must actually, i.e., physically, write the paper’s sentences as they appear in final manuscript form. While the first author might have conceived and refined the research idea and methodology, collected and interpreted the data, and finally contemplated its meaning, the articulation of these activities into symbolic language that takes the ultimate form of a manuscript might be some other, anonymous person’s doing. Indeed, one suspects that this has happened often in the history of scientific publication.

Something like this is going on in the above scenario. The investigators have been spoiled by their remarkably benevolent PI’s writing their papers. The new postdoc, however, objects to writing their papers because “She hadn’t participated in the investigators’ research.” Certainly, the postdoc’s objection is on strong grounds. It seems a very poor use of her time to ask her to write another group’s papers, whose research she hadn’t participated in. Indeed, one might argue that *even if she did write the papers* she could not ethically claim any kind of *authorship* credit because, by her own admission, she did none of the research. The postdoc’s contention that “if she wrote a paper entirely, she deserved first authorship” is entirely incorrect according to the ICMJE guidelines if she did none of the research. On that basis, she is simply *recording* someone else’s ideas, activities, and findings.

But does this analysis do an injustice to the postdoc’s actual activity in writing the investigators’ papers? Is she simply “recording” that group’s work? Or is she instead having to exercise a great deal of creative and intellectual work in drafting the paper, performing the literature review, producing a finely tuned description of the research methodology, deciding how to present the data in the most compelling fashion, and imaginatively considering what the findings imply? If this latter description better captures the postdoc’s efforts—indeed, anyone’s efforts who is put in her position—it is no wonder that she was upset at being placed well down the authorship list, as she clearly was making a “significant intellectual contribution.”

The solution that was finally adopted by way of the postdoc’s becoming involved in the group’s research from the start isn’t bad, but it leaves unanswered the perhaps unanswerable question of precisely discerning and measuring one’s “intellectual contribution” to a paper so as to allocate authorship status fairly. Even as the postdoc is now “more involved in the investigators’ research from the beginning,” and even though she continues to write the papers, her claim to first or even second authorship isn’t a foregone conclusion. First authorship should still be a function of how the variables of “significant intellectual contribution” as they are listed above play out.

As we have noted in previous case scenarios—see, for example, the cases “A Mess of Authors,” “Deciding First Authorship,” and “The Tyrannical Principal Investigator” at <http://www.actsi.org/areas/erks/ethics/authorship.html>.—an early negotiation that decides the authorship order cannot be overemphasized. But in cases like the one above, we

recommend the following prophylactic strategy: ***Insist that the investigators compose the first draft of the manuscript.*** Surely, this would count as an unassailable intellectual contribution, no matter how imperfect their language or syntax. Once composed, their rough draft can then be handed over to someone else. If that person is the postdoc who is already involved in the research and who has therefore already made an intellectual contribution, one would think her additional effort in bringing the manuscript to a final form would argue strongly for her as first author. But what if the paper were handed over to a ghostwriter?

If the ghostwriter plays only an editorial role, then he or she doesn't deserve an authorship credit. (Incidentally, neither does the PI who originally wrote the papers if he played *no substantive role* in the research activity.) What can be done, however, is to cite the ghostwriter's editorial contribution as an acknowledgement, perhaps at the end of the paper.

For its part, research universities that have significant numbers of personnel doing intellectual work but whose English composition skills are substandard might consider having those employees enroll in English language proficiency programs from the very start. Nevertheless, we shall end with the moral reminder that authors are authors because they make "intellectual" contributions to the work. The ambiguity of that term, however, will doubtlessly account for dilemmas like the one above surfacing occasionally and requiring careful consideration.

1. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals: Writing and editing for biomedical publication. 2009. Available at <http://www.icmje.org/>