Manuscript Author Order
Should I Be Listed First, Last, or Somewhere in Between?

Questions regarding authorship and order of authorship continue to come up. So, let’s revisit the topic, and I’ll try to provide some guidance on author order. Criteria for who should be designated as an author are straightforward in scientific journals, following the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) guidelines. Criteria for authorship include contribution to conception and design, data collection, or analysis and interpretation. In addition, authors must have contributed to the actual writing of the manuscript or critical revision of the manuscript. Authors are accountable for their contributions to the manuscript and should also have confidence in the integrity of other portions of the submitted document. The issue of order of authorship, however, is hazier, reflecting differing cultural mores within certain disciplines.

A quick review of articles published in Research in Gerontological Nursing (RGN) over the past 2 years revealed an average of four authors per article (SD = 1.84, range = 1 to 10). Research briefs tended to have fewer authors (mean = 2, SD = 1.15, range = 1 to 3), but research studies, methods papers, and state of the science reviews all averaged four authors. The increased tendency to write multi-authored articles makes the issue of author order important in terms of how it represents actual contributions and in the various ways publications are used by evaluative groups. Authorship of publications is reviewed for promotion, tenure, grant applications, fellowships and other awards, and financial benefits.

The first author is most coveted because this name is the most visible in citations, and it should be reserved for the person who makes the most major contribution to the manuscript. This is often the person who conceived the study and led the team in writing the manuscript. If there is a senior person on the team who contributed substantial expertise and supervision, it is common in many disciplines to list that person as the last author. Other authors should be listed after the first author relative to their contribution to the manuscript.

Alphabetical authorship is used in some disciplines, but its use in economics, where alphabetical authorship is the norm, provides, in my view, a strong argument against it. A study of faculty in all top 35 U.S. economics departments found that those who simply had earlier surname initials were significantly more likely to receive tenure and become fellows of the Econometric Society (Einav & Yariv, 2006). When the authors conducted the same analysis for faculty in the top 35 U.S. psychology departments, for which coauthorship does not tend to be ordered alphabetically, there was no relationship between alphabetical placement of the surname and tenure status (Einav & Yariv, 2006).

It is exceedingly important that researchers discuss and agree on the issue of authorship and ordering of authors at the start of a project. The principal investigator is responsible for these discussions and should put agreements regarding explicit roles and responsibilities in writing. Written agreements should include a clear caveat that any contributors who fail to fulfill their obligation to write the agreed upon portion of the manuscript will not be included as a coauthor. This is an easy caveat to make, as it is a requirement of the ICMJE and most scientific publications.

Another issue is who should not be listed as a coauthor. The term “honorary author” has been used to describe authors who do not meet the criteria for authorship. One survey of authors from prestigious medical journals found that 52% of authors had been listed with an honorary coauthor at some point in their career, and 18% suggested there was some pressure to include the honorary author (O’Brien, Baerlocher, Newton, Gautam, & Noble, 2009).

The prevalence of nursing journals with honorary authors was 42% in one study (Kennedy, Barnsteiner, & Daly,
Heads of departments who did not contribute to the manuscript preparation should not be listed. Data collectors or other project staff who had a role on the project but did not make a substantial contribution to the preparation of the manuscript, as defined by the ICMJE, should not be listed as a coauthor. Individuals with a role on the project who do not meet the criteria for authorship can be acknowledged for their specific service, such as that of scientific advisor, recruiter, data manager, or data collector.

A ghost author is one who made substantial enough contributions to the manuscript that would qualify that person for authorship but is not listed as an author. The percentage of authors who reported experience with ghost authorship in medical journals ranged from 7.9% to 29% (Mirzazadeh, Navadeh, Rokni, & Farhangniya, 2011; Vinther & Rosenberg, 2012; Wislar, Flanagin, Fontanarosa, & DeAngelis, 2011) and was 27.6% in nursing publications (Kennedy et al., 2014). Doctoral and postdoctoral students may be rightly or wrongly excluded as an author while working on research studies led by senior investigators and should have discussions at the outset regarding publication opportunities and responsibilities. Working on a large research study and publication preparation with senior investigators is a critically important part of developing a young investigator’s career and expertise. Establishing a written agreement regarding the opportunity to participate in publishing some portion of one or more manuscripts is a savvy career move.

All authors are responsible for protecting the value and meaning of authorship of scientific papers. Young investigators should be taught ethical authorship practices and have the opportunity to work within a culture that values authorship standards. The growth of interdisciplinary and collaborative research studies necessitates multiple authorship. The different practices and mores across disciplines raises the potential for confusion and conflict. Problems can be avoided with forethought, as well as a priori discussions and agreements regarding authorship. Journals, such as RGN, do their part by specifying author guidelines and requiring each author to stipulate his or her contribution(s) to the publication.

REFERENCES


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Editor

The author has disclosed no potential conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise.

doi:10.3928/19404921-20190410-01