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Who Is Writing What? A Proposed Taxonomy of Roles and Responsibilities When Collaboratively Writing a Research Proposal

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Think back to when you were last listed as an author on a publication—what level of involvement did you have? Did you write a specific section that was asked of you by the lead author? Go through the manuscript with a fine toothcomb making changes that improved the clarity of the arguments? If you were lead author, did you write the initial draft? Receive contributions back from your collaborators that may not have entirely met your expectations?

All researchers who have written with others for publication in a peer-reviewed journal will have experience of, and probably some stories to tell about, the process of determining who should be listed as an author on a manuscript and in what order. As authorship is academic currency, disagreements can often happen with colleagues who may feel their level of contribution or amount of effort has not been given adequate recognition. Indeed, much has been written about what authorship of an article entails and how to handle coauthorship disputes (e.g., see Albert & Wager, 2003; Smith & Williams-Jones, 2012). Recognizing this, most journals provide specific instructions on authorship in their submission guidance. Like *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, many subscribe to the guidance from the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors—the so-called Vancouver Recommendations—which states that authorship be based on the following four criteria:

- substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work, or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; and
- drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and
- final approval of the version to be published; and
- agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Authorship negotiation checklists, agreement forms, and work sheets that can be used to determine a numeric value for each author's contributions (Gaffey, 2015; Winston, 1985) have also been developed to inform and guide negotiations. Most contemporary guidance of this kind is underpinned by a common principle that those who are listed as authors should have actually contributed to the work being published. Importantly, possession of an institutional position, such as mentor, supervisor, or departmental chair, is not considered sufficient to justify authorship credit—so-called gift, ghost, or honorary authorship. Although there is evidence to show that this stipulation is not always followed (one study found evidence of honorary and ghost authorship in 21% of articles published in major medical journals in 2008, e.g., Wislar, Flanagin, Fontanarosa, & Deangelis, 2011), such guidance can nevertheless be invaluable in helping both new and seasoned researchers to navigate the oftentimes choppy waters of fairly and ethically allocating authorship credit.

Yet the rules of authorship can be a little murkier when it comes collaboratively writing a research proposal. Being named as a coapplicant on a competitive research funding bid affords credit for an individual's contributions, conveys professional benefit, and carries accountability for the accuracy of the submission. However, on large team projects, it may not be possible (or even desirable) for all team members to participate in the proposal writing process. Unlike many peer-reviewed journal articles, it is commonplace for the vast majority of

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writing on a research proposal to be undertaken by the lead investigator or project research fellow. Some team members may make invaluable contributions in terms of depth and quality of ideas that have helped conceptualize a research idea but have little to no input in writing the application. While this is common practice in many disciplines, problems can arise when there is a misunderstanding or lack of consensus on the level of contribution expected of coapplicants in writing a research proposal.

Although there is an extensive literature on ‘‘grantsmanship’’ (the art of acquiring peer-reviewed research funding), few explicit guidelines exist on how to negotiate and reach consensus on the level of writing expected of coapplicants when developing a research proposal collaboratively. Frequently, a ‘‘construct as you go’’ approach is taken, with few concrete agreements on tasks and responsibilities made at the outset. Here, I propose a taxonomy in a (light-hearted) attempt to facilitate openness, transparency, and fairness in the allocation of roles and responsibilities when taking a team approach to writing a research proposal.

“The Partner”

Perhaps a coprincipal investigator, or a trusted research fellow working closely with the lead applicant, ‘‘The Partner’’ takes on an equal share of the proposal writing. A common ally in some disciplines, particularly for those who are in senior academic positions, the partner is invaluable in helping to progress the proposal writing process in a timely fashion and for shouldering the burden of difficulties that inevitably crop up during the crafting of the work. Like all good partnerships, the proposal writing partner is most likely to thrive when there is mutual trust, respect, and open and honest communication and when both parties have an equal personal stake in the outcome of the funding bid.

“The Sage”

A role typically reserved for esteemed, senior coapplicants, ‘‘The Sage’’ contributes little to the actual writing of a research proposal but is likely to play a key role in the shaping and refining of the research idea. At a minimum, The Sage will act as a ‘‘rubber stamp’’ on a funding application that, by virtue of their reputation and track record, appreciably adds to the credibility of a research proposal and the perceived strength of the investigative team. More common are Sages who will offer wisdom and guidance at key intellectually challenging junctures of the writing process, and they are likely to play a similar role in the team should the research be funded.

“The Peer Reviewer”

Armed with the ‘‘add new comment’’ function as their principal weapon, the peer reviewer is unlikely to make substantive contributions to the writing but will be hawkish in identifying areas of the work that require further development. Like The Sage, the peer reviewer will often have a track record in the field of study and is therefore well placed to make valuable assessments of the strengths and limitations of the proposed work as it develops. Although receiving the peer reviewer’s comments and suggestions may initially frustrate and appear to set back the writing process, like a good journal article referee, careful consideration of their recommendations will almost invariably result in a superior final product.

“The Track Changer”

Similar to the peer reviewer, the track changer wields the review functions on word processing packages with reckless abandon. Often a skilled writer with an eye for detail, the track changer is an invaluable member of the writing team who can help the lead author overcome those awkward paragraphs or tricky sections that have been the cause of several nights’ restless sleep. They may be involved throughout the proposal writing process to help draft and revise the proposal narrative or make a big-bang contribution close to the date of submission, with a sea of red and strikethrough text accompanying their returned version. When working harmoniously with the peer reviewer, the track changer can be an especially potent force in advancing the readiness of a proposal for submission.

“The Section Specialist”

In a role that is probably the most commonplace for individuals involved in collaborative research proposal writing, the section specialist is charged with making a specific contribution on a particular section of a proposal that reflects their specialist knowledge or skill. Maybe a methodologist, analyst, or topic expert, section specialists will offer up individual building blocks, but it is usually left to the lead author to provide the blueprints for the work and determine how things should be pieced together. Building work can cease or be thrown off schedule when blocks that are fundamental to the construction process are delayed. Clear expectations and specific deadlines may therefore need to be deployed in order to get the best outcome when numerous section specialists are involved within a writing team.

Being Clear About Expectations

In summary, like the process of determining authorship when writing for publication, an open and candid discussion on the writing responsibilities and expectations of individuals involved in the collaborative development of a research proposal is necessary to mitigate the risk of delays and disagreements during the writing process. Using the proposed taxonomy to help reach consensus on the expectations of each team member at the outset of a project can enable potential coapplicants make an informed decision about whether they have the capacity to be involved in a project, and ultimately help to ensure that the lead applicant has assembled the skills required to develop a competitive research funding application.

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