Bridging the Byline: Authorship Considerations for Publishing in Peer-Reviewed Journals

Matthew Lee Smith, PhD, MPH, FAAHB*
Caroline D. Bergeron, DrPH, MPH
Tyler Prochnow, PhD

Abstract

Team science is essential for publishing in peer-reviewed journals and advancing health behavior research. As such, it is important to demystify considerations for authorship and co-authorship in terms of inclusion, order, expectations, and transparent communication. Authorship disagreements are a common source of conflict within writing teams and, if not addressed appropriately, can threaten trust and future collaborations. This commentary introduces a four-step framework for navigating authorship decisions with forethought, transparency, and fairness. The framework aims to reduce misunderstandings, strengthen teamwork, and foster the development of early-career researchers. Developing competence in authorship negotiation is an essential skill for all researchers. For trainees, this framework offers guidance for approaching authorship within collaborative projects, while for mentors, it serves as a practical tool for modeling and teaching best practices.

Keywords: Authorship; Mentorship; Publishing; Research Integrity; Professional Development

*Corresponding author may be reached at matthew.smith@tamu.edu

Introduction

In the field of health behavior, team-based, co-authored publications have become the norm for addressing complex research questions. Teams engaged in these endeavors typically span distinct academic specialties and often include collaborators from sectors such as government, community, healthcare, and industry. While team science approaches expand the perspectives and expertise available for a given project, they also introduce greater complexity into decisions regarding authorship for manuscripts being written for peer-reviewed scholarly journals. Recognition through authorship materially shapes academic trajectories by affecting promotion, resource acquisition, and scholarly reputation. For individuals outside academia, being named as an author signifies validation and offers an opportunity to inform the direction of policies and programs. Because the allocation of authorship is an important matter for all involved (i.e., individuals, institutions, and the scientific community), collaborators should consider authorship inclusion, order, and expectations from the outset, and be prepared for transparent communication and authorship negotiations throughout the publishing process.

The drive to publish can place stress on writing collaborations, and at times, can result in disputes over author attribution (Lemmens & Srinivasan, 2022; Shamim, 2023). Such conflicts frequently arise, particularly in contexts where academic and applied work intersect and definitions of meaningful contribution diverge (Savchenko & Rosenfeld, 2024). Ambiguity surrounding expectations, as well as weaknesses in communication, are often blamed for these misunderstandings (Cooke et al., 2021). If not addressed early, such issues may negatively affect team cohesion, disrupt research progress, and have a disproportionate impact on collaborators at earlier career stages, who may be reluctant to advocate for themselves (Seeman & House, 2015). A persistent challenge in academic training is the general absence of explicit instruction about the process and/or ethics of

peer-reviewed publishing. The lack of formal instruction about the realities of authorship can force early-career investigators to learn mostly through informal experience (Caldwell, Stuit & Orlando, 2024). The purpose of this article is to offer a roadmap for handling authorship within collaborative projects. This four-step framework aims to provide practical detail and ethical guidance for managing publication roles, preventing conflict, and resolving disputes.

Step 1: Forming the Writing Team

In the earliest stages of planning a manuscript, researchers should evaluate whether the work can reasonably be completed by a single author or requires collaboration. Assessing the fit between available expertise and project requirements helps ensure that every co-author is well-matched to the task and that their contributions align with widely accepted authorship criteria (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors [ICMJE], 2023).

When selecting team members, considerations should extend beyond technical needs to encompass the broader relevance and scholarly impact of the work. Inclusion of diverse disciplines may help enrich framing, analysis, and interpretation. For example, if planning a manuscript for an audience within a specific discipline (e.g., public health, nursing, medicine, social work), purposively engaging a representative of that discipline will help ensure the manuscript is framed and referenced appropriately, and that the study's implications are relevant to the readership. Invitations to join the byline should not be extended for honorary reasons. Authorship should only be granted for *substantial* contributions to study conception or design, data acquisition, analysis, interpretation, writing, or critical manuscript revision (Baskin & Gross, 2011). Understanding the

details surrounding the definitions of these contribution types will frame expectations for co-authors. Contributors who do not meet authorship criteria should be recognized in the acknowledgements section of the manuscript. The lead author should respectfully inform them that their contributions will be acknowledged, and they will not be listed as authors. This should be communicated early in the manuscript writing process, with justification provided for transparency, to prevent possible misunderstandings.

Step 2: Articulating Responsibilities and Intentions

With the writing team assembled, it is critical to clarify everyone's expected contributions before the work commences (Abbott, 2023). The lead author can initiate the process by sending email invitations to potential authors. Emails can be sent individually or to the intended group of co-authors (group emails can be blinded, if preferred). During the invitation process, it is recommended to share the manuscript purpose, abstract (if available), and/or tables of results. When possible, lead authors should provide an anticipated submission deadline and list of appropriate journals to which the manuscript can be submitted. Once confirmed, the lead author can formalize expectations by documenting anticipated roles of each co-author in an early author contribution statement, using structures such as the Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT) framework (Allen, O'Connell & Kiermer, 2019). At this stage, the lead author should explicitly state that authorship order can and will change based on the contributions of each co-author.

Establishing records of tasks to be completed (e.g., manuscript 'bookends' (Sefcik, Glasofer, & Smith, 2024)), anticipated deadlines, and transparency about

intended author order from the beginning sets expectations for adaptability as the project evolves. Highlighting that author order is subject to adjustment based on actual contributions helps promote accountability and reduces conflict (Cooke et al., 2021).

Step 3: Establishing Author Order

As the manuscript develops, co-author contributions naturally become evident, thereby allowing the author sequence to be determined as per established guidelines (ICMJE, 2023). Authorship position is often interpreted as a signal of each contributor's level of investment (The Office of Research Integrity, n.d.), typically based on the time or expertise needed to accomplish assigned tasks. The first author position is most prestigious and commonly reflects primary responsibility for the research and manuscript preparation. Subsequent author positions (e.g., second, third) decrease in prestige and should reflect each co-author's contributions. The senior or last author position is typically reserved for seasoned authors in supervisory, leadership, or principal investigator roles on the project. It should be noted that the authorship positions described here are common to health behavior disciplines; however, other disciplines may rank and determine authorship order differently.

Beyond standard authorship order considerations, a few situations warrant special attention. First, with a long list of authors (e.g., 8 or more) where co-authors have expended comparable effort, the lead author may consider more subjective means of listing these co-authors (e.g., listing in alphabetical order). Second, when two or more authors make equal contributions for lead authorship role, these authors can assume dual first authorship roles, which can be indicated on the title page with a note included during the submission process (Pfirman & Martin, 2021). Third, it is a great

accomplishment when mentees are positioned as lead authors on a particular manuscript. While the mentee-mentor relationship is not directly referenced in the manuscript, mentors can receive academic credit and recognition by listing mentee-led publications on their curriculum vitae (CV).

Step 4: Negotiating Author Order

The lead author is generally responsible for facilitating authorship discussions and addressing issues. Ultimately, authorship order is decided by the lead author. If a co-author does not meet initial expectations, the lead author should email or meet with them separately to discuss their contributions and role on the manuscript. If said co-author is unresponsive or unable to fulfill their initial expected role, an email can be sent to other select co-authors with a request for additional assistance on the manuscript. Accordingly, manuscript responsibilities should be reassigned to other co-authors. As previously indicated, changes in authorship should be communicated to all contributors via email in a timely manner and reflected on the title page of the manuscript and in the author contribution statement.

When authorship disputes arise, referencing written records (i.e., the "paper trail" accrued via email or tracked contributions in the shared manuscript) provides evidence to justify authorship order changes. Therefore, it is important to document correspondence with co-authors and use platforms like OneDrive or Google Docs for simultaneous group editing. Because authorship order changes can be a sensitive (and even embarrassing) topic for co-authors, it is essential that all communication be amicable, respectful, and factual. Correspondence should be absent of accusations, blame, or defaming language. If informal resolution fails, the lead author is encouraged to seek guidance from mentors or

Table 1. Checklist for Authorship Planning

Action Item	Purpose and Key Considerations
1. Assess project needs.	Evaluate the project's scope to determine if a solo or team approach is best. Identify specific expertise gaps (e.g., statistical analysis, theoretical framing, clinical insight).
2. Identify potential co-authors.	Select potential co-authors based on technical skills, disciplinary perspective, and collaborative history. Ensure each role is substantive and aligns with authorship criteria.
3. Draft initial role assignments.	Before sending invitations, map potential contributors to specific tasks (e.g., using the CRediT taxonomy) to ensure a clear rationale for inclusion.
4. Send clear invitations.	Extend invitations that clearly outline the project scope, expected level of contribution, and anticipated timeline to set clear initial expectations.
5. Hold an initial team meeting/email.	Conduct an initial meeting and/or send a detailed email to formally document the division of labor, set deadlines, and establish a shared platform for collaborative work.
6. Establish the principle of dynamic authorship.	Explicitly communicate to all co-authors that the authorship order is provisional and will be adjusted based on actual contributions.
7. Initiate a contribution log.	Begin a shared document (e.g., a spreadsheet or table) to track tasks, progress, and key decisions. This becomes your "paper trail" of all contributions and justifies potential changes in authorship order.

formal mediation through institutional resources such as ombuds offices or research integrity offices (COPE, 2019). Regardless of the outcome from the negotiation process, consensus around authorship must be reached and explicitly confirmed by all co-authors prior to submitting the final manuscript to a peer-reviewed journal.

Implications and Conclusion

Mastering the process of authorship negotiation and assignment is essential for those involved in research collaborations. By following these clear, adaptable steps (i.e., strategically forming the team, carefully articulating the roles, reviewing ongoing contributions, and using structured dispute resolution), researchers are better positioned to reduce misunderstandings, promote equitable recognition, and enhance group productivity. By modeling and reinforcing fairness, transparency, and collaboration, established researchers support the professional growth of emerging scholars and non-academic collaborators. Establishing best practices for authorship strengthens scientific integrity and promotes a culture of trust and collegiality in health behavior research.

As a summary, Table 1 presents a checklist for key steps and considerations for authorship planning.

To support transparent communication with throughout the manuscript writing process, Table 2 provides real-world examples of a co-author invitation email, author contribution statement, and an authorship order change email. The contents of Table 2 are only offered as examples and should be tailored to meet each project's unique details and demands.

References

Abbott, R. K. (2023). Ten strategies for avoiding and overcoming authorship conflicts in academic publishing. *FACETS, 8,* 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2022-0229

Allen, L., O'Connell, A., & Kiermer, V. (2019). How can we ensure visibility and diversity in research contributions? How the Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT) is helping the shift from authorship to contributorship. *Learned Publishing, 32*(1), 71–74. https://doi.org/10.1002/leap.1210

Baskin, P. K., & Gross, R. A. (2011). Honorary and ghost authorship. *BMJ, 343*, d6223. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.d6223

Caldwell, C., Stuit, M., & Orlando, L. (2024). "It is such a hidden curriculum thing": Graduate students' perceptions of publishing. *Journal of Graduate Librarianship, 2*(1), Article 3. https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/jgl/vol2/iss1/3

Committee on Publication Ethics. (2019). *COPE discussion document: Authorship*. https://publicationethics.org/resources/discussion-documents/authorship

Cooke, S. J., Bergman, J. N., Twardek, W. M., Piczak, K. J., Casselberry, G. A., & Lutek, K. E. (2021). Contemporary authorship guidelines fail to recognize diverse contributions in conservation science research. *FACETS, 6,* 449–457. https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2020-0112

International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. (2023). *Recommendations for the conduct, reporting, editing, and publication of scholarly work in medical journals*. ICMJE. https://www.icmje.org/icmje-recommendations.pdf

Lemmens, T., & Srinivasan, S. (2022). Authorship controversies in academic publication: Implications for science and the research environment. *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics, 7*(3), 179–186. https://doi.org/10.20529/IJME.2022.030

Pfirman, S., & Martin, B. (2021). How to acknowledge all authors fairly. *Nature, 591*(7851), 524. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-021-00794-y

Savchenko, E., & Rosenfeld, A. (2024). Authorship conflicts in academia: An international cross-discipline survey. *Scientometrics, 129*(4), 2101–2121. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-024-04979-z

Seeman, J. I., & House, M. C. (2015). Authorship issues in collaborative research. *Accountability in Research, 22*(5), 266–291. https://doi.org/10.1080/08989621.2014.963593

Sefcik, J. S., Glasofer, A., & Smith, M. L. (2024). Writing Manuscript" Bookends": Strategies to Effectively Frame Science. *Health Behavior Research*, *7*(4),

12.   https://doi.org/10.4148/2572-1836.1258

Shamim, T. (2023). Authorship disputes and amicable solutions in scholarly publication: The road ahead. *Novelty in Clinical Medicine, 2*(3), 138–139. https://doi.org/10.22089/ncm.2023.13986.1138

The Office of Research Integrity. (n.d.). *Chapter 9: Authorship and publication*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved September 30, 2025, from https://ori.hhs.gov/content/Chapter-9-Authorship-and-Publication-Authorship

Table 2. Real-World Examples

Co-Author Invitation Email
Dear Colleagues, This message invites you to join a writing team for a new manuscript about **[PURPOSE]**. The data for this manuscript comes from **[DATA SOURCE]**. I have attached a brief overview to this email outlining the study purpose, methodology, and preliminary findings. If you are interested in being a co-author, it is expected that you will earn authorship in accordance with the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) authorship criteria. Please see this website for your reference: https://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html **[OPTIONAL TEXT IF ADDITIONAL EFFORT IS NEEDED]** I am hoping that one or two of you would like to earn the *second* or *third* authorship position by contributing more to the Introduction and Discussion sections. Please email me if you are interested in assuming these additional responsibilities. After I receive confirmation from those interested in co-authoring, I will share a preliminary author contribution statement (i.e., using the Contributor Role Taxonomy [CRediT]), which will outline the expected roles of each co-author. Please note that authorship order may change based on each co-author's contributions to the manuscript. My plan is to submit the manuscript by **[DATE]**. I would like to submit the manuscript to **[LIST 2 or 3 RELEVANT JOURNALS]**, but additional recommendations are welcomed. Please email me to let me know if you would like to co-author this manuscript. It is completely acceptable if you are not interested or do not have time to contribute to this paper at this time. I will keep you in mind for future manuscripts and collaborations. Thank you,

CRediT Author Contribution Statement (author initials for 5 co-authors are represented by repeated capital letters)
Conceptualization: AA, BB; Data Curation: AA; Formal Analysis: AA, CC; Funding Acquisition: AA; Investigation: AA, BB; Methodology: AA, CC; Results - Interpretation: AA, BB, CC, DD, EE; Supervision: AA; Writing - Original Draft: AA, BB, DD; Writing - Review & Editing: AA, BB, CC, DD, EE.

Follow-Up Email about Authorship Order Changes

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your contributions to our manuscript on **[PURPOSE]**.

As anticipated, the authorship order has been revised based on each person's contributions per our initial CRediT statement and ICMJE criteria. Below is a revised author order that reflects each co-authors contributions to date:

1. AA (lead: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, original draft)
2. DD (elevated: primary original draft, review/editing, results interpretation)
3. BB (investigation, results interpretation, original draft support)
4. CC (methodology, formal analysis, review/editing)
5. EE (results interpretation, review/editing)

Based on these contributions, the full updated CRediT statement can be found below:

Conceptualization: AA, BB; Data Curation: AA; Formal Analysis: AA, CC; Funding Acquisition: AA; Investigation: AA, BB; Methodology: AA, CC; Results - Interpretation: AA, BB, CC, DD, EE; Supervision: AA; Writing - Original Draft: AA, DD, BB; Writing - Review & Editing: AA, BB, CC, DD, EE.

Please email me directly if you have questions about these changes to the authorship order. Alternatively, feel free to "reply all," if desired.

We are on schedule to submit our manuscript by **[DATE]** to **[TARGETED JOURNAL]**. Please review the final manuscript and confirm your agreement by **[DEADLINE]**.

Thank you for your collaboration.