McMaster University | Family Medicine
David Braley Primary Care Research Collaborative

Guidance for Authorship on Scholarly Work
Defining the Role of Authors and Contributors

This document offers guidance for research teams for discussions about publication and authorship at the outset of a research project. Below are considerations for authorship roles, contributions, author order and considerations for the potential for conflict of interest.

Who is an Author?

Most journal policies on authorship use the guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) which has established four criteria that each author of a paper should meet (http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html):

1. Significant contributions to the conception or design of the study, or data collection, or data analysis, or data interpretation; AND
2. Involvement in drafting or revising the manuscript; AND
3. Approval of final version of manuscript for publication; AND
4. Accountability for accuracy and integrity of all aspects of the work.

Author Contributions and Order

The ICMJE also suggests:
"In addition to being accountable for the parts of the work they have done, an author should be able to identify which co-authors are responsible for specific other parts of the work. In addition, authors should have confidence in the integrity of the contributions of their co-authors."

Where an author is situated in the order of an author list has meaning related to contributions. Though different fields have different viewpoints, the first, last, and second authors are usually the key positions in health sciences. The first author has the most visibility and will be the only name cited in some referencing styles; the second author also has good visibility; the last author position is often reserved for a more senior author. Generally, the first author is the person who made the most substantial contribution to the work, this is often also the primary investigator (PI), though the PI may also be the last author. Beyond first and last, authors are usually ordered from most to least contribution, as best as possible. It is important to note that the first author should be largely responsible for drafting, editing, and circulating the manuscript.

DFM faculty and staff may act in a variety of roles: as the PI, initiating the project and developing the methodology; as initiator of the project but requiring collaboration with methodologists; as a collaborator recruited to contribute methodological or clinical expertise; as a staff member involved in data collection and analysis. Each role makes important contributions and is essential for success and effective dissemination, and respect for different types of contributions is an important principle.

There are a range of related questions that can be considered by the research team to inform their decisions on who should be authors and in which order, for example:

- Whose contributions were critical to the success of the research or the resulting paper?
- Who defined the problem?
- Who did most of the work?
- Who did the work that was critical to the success of the project?

DFM's Approach

We have made these suggestions to help implement a fair and common sense approach at DFM:

- Follow the broad guidelines above
- Avoid under-attribution – be inclusive
- Have early and regular authorship discussions with your team

It is important to discuss authorship early on with your team to avoid future confusion or conflict. Authorship discussion should be a key topic, preferably at the project kick off meeting, to make sure that all the team members are on the same page. Early on the focus of this discussion should be about what the criteria for authorship will be and to highlight the expectations of PIs and staff regarding who meets the eligibility requirements for authorship. Once an agreement is reached, it should be clearly documented in the meeting notes.

Early conversations about authorship are also a good time to discuss any potential for conflict of interest with the team members. Conflict of interest statements are usually circulated by publishers to individual team members just prior to publication. In the interest of transparency and open communication among the team and at the outset of the study, it is good practice to review and document the potential for conflict of interest with the team. See the Appendix for a template to guide this discussion and to gather information about this from your team.

It is harder to sort out authorship at the end of a project where colleagues have had different expectations from the outset. For some, criteria for authorship may include a reasonable expectation of meeting attendance as a marker of engagement. Adjustments to these criteria can be made as the work moves forward.

Where a partnership exists between two lead collaborators bringing different but equally important skill sets, they would typically take the most important authorship roles (first, last, or second author). This should be part of the initial planning around authorship at the start of the project. The ideal scenario is a plan to produce more than one scholarly paper, switching roles between first and last (or first and second) author on each, as appropriate. In all knowledge translation strategies of the subsequent scholarly work, both lead authors and (where applicable) both home departments or groups should be acknowledged.

Non-Author Contributors

There are other forms of contribution that do not fit authorship criteria but that should be acknowledged. For example, the ICJME gives the following as examples of activities that do not qualify for authorship:

- Acquisition of funding
- General supervision of a research group or general administrative support
- Writing assistance, technical editing, language editing, and proofreading
- Short-term involvement in a phase of a research project that has resulted in publication (e.g. research staff, practicum student or volunteer has assisted with a small piece of data collection or analysis) The individuals making these contributions should be included in the paper's acknowledgements statement. The ICMJE recommends that written permission be obtained from these individuals, as acknowledgement may imply endorsement of the study's results.

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Appendix

This form can be created into a PDF fillable form for use with your research team.

Co-Investigator Information Sheet

Project Title:

Contact Information

1. Name:
2. Preferred e-mail address:
3. Admin contact for scheduling meetings (if applicable)
    a. Name:
    b. Email:
    c. Instructions for when we should cc this person:

4. Any notes re: times when you prefer to meet or are definitely NOT available (e.g. always have clinic on Thursdays):

Affiliation Info for Publications

Name (the way you want it listed on a publication including post-nominals):

Institutional Affiliations (the way you would like them listed on a publication):

E-mail to use

with journals:

ORCID:

Additional Notes (e.g., any funding to report):

Conflict of Interest Disclosure

The Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 (2018) defines conflicts of interest as an activity or situation that places an individual or institution in real, potential, or perceived conflict between the duties and responsibilities related to research and personal, institutional, or other interests. These interests include

but are not limited to business, commercial, or financial interests pertaining to the institution and/or the individual, their family members, friends, or their former current or prospective professional associates.

This research concerns [describe research project].

If you have any real or perceived conflicts of interest, we need to know about them in order to take appropriate steps to minimize or manage the conflict as we design and execute the research. In addition, we will need to compose a declaration of COI when we submit research manuscripts for publication. In the interest of transparency, we ask you to disclose all relationships/activities/interests that are related to the intended topic of this research. Disclosure represents a commitment to transparency and does not necessarily indicate a bias. If you are in doubt about whether to list a relationship/activity/interest, it is preferable that you do so.

You may wish to consider potential COI in the following categories: Grants or contracts, royalties or licenses, consulting fees, payment or honoraria for lectures, presentations, manuscript writing or educational events, payment for expert testimony, support for attending meetings/travel, patents planned, issued, or pending, participating on a Data Safety Monitoring Board or Advisory Board, leadership role in another role, society, committee, or advocacy group, paid or unpaid, stock or stock options, receipt of equipment, materials, drugs, medical writing, gifts or other services, other financial or non-financial interests.

At this time, do you have any real or perceived conflicts of interest to disclose?

Do you agree to notify the PI [PI Name] immediately if conflicts of interest arise over the course of this research or during the publication of this research?

[Yes] ☐