# **Policy and Good Practice Guidelines for Authorship**

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# Introduction and scope

Research inquiries are frequently collaborative efforts among colleagues of different levels of seniority and from different disciplines. Listing the authors on publications and outputs tells readers ‘who did the work and should ensure that the right people get the credit, and take responsibility, for the research’ (ICMJE). The *PSSRU Policy and Good Practice Guidelines on Authorship* aims to encourage a culture of ethical authorship, provide a framework for sound research practice, help staff comply with their ethical and professional obligations to colleagues (as set out by the University of Kent, by journal editors and learned / professional societies within in our fields), protect individual research staff, and help researchers prevent and resolve any problems or misunderstandings. The policy sets out obligations that PSSRU researchers are expected to uphold and summarises principles of good practice.

# Good practice principles for authorship

This guidance provides a summary of good practice principles concerning authorship agreement, an overview of approaches towards authorship order, examples of contributions that should be included in acknowledgements, the significance of the corresponding author, and procedures for handling disputes. When planning journal outputs, it is important to take into account that individual journals often specify their own authorship criteria, possibly in relation to manuscript integrity (in terms of plagiarism and originality), a maximum number of authors, or a particular protocol, such as the Vancouver Protocol. However, there are general PSSRU principles that project leads and the research team should follow when discussing authorship on publications:

* Be as inclusive as possible and recognise that all researchers have a vested interest in authorship for career development at all stages of their careers.
  + It should be noted that these principles also apply to lay/research advisors who are part of the research team. These team members should be involved from the outset in any publication discussions to ensure their contribution is acknowledged.
* Junior researchers should be given opportunities to be authors, and first authors if possible, of work resulting from projects on which they have contributed to substantially.
* All authors should have had sufficient input into the research and the publication to be able to defend some of the content. Researchers who cannot defend the publication should not be included as an author but should be included in the acknowledgements. We advise against the exclusion of authors or what is referred to as ‘ghost authors’ – authors who contributed significantly to the development and writing of the outputs but their names are not listed - and against the inclusion of any ‘guest authors’ – those who did not contribute directly to the development and writing of the output but are included in the authorship list.
* Project leads should ensure that an agreement about their general approach to publications and authorship is discussed at the beginning of the research project. Although matters might change as the project progresses, there should be a general outline of a potential publication plan.
  + Try to anticipate any issues that might arise as a result of working collaboratively.
  + Try to anticipate any issues that might arise as a result of publishing in journals with specific authorship criteria.
* Authorship should always be revisited by the project lead when staff membership or responsibilities change within a research team. These could include the introduction of new members of staff, maternity/paternity leave or other kinds of leave. All subsequent authorship decisions should be discussed with the whole team and effectively communicated to all members of the research team.
  + Recognise that people’s contributions (smaller or larger) should be proportionately acknowledged even in the presence of long absences (e.g. maternity leave, sick leave, compassionate leave).
  + These contributions made by members of the research team who are not included as authors should be outlined in the acknowledgements sections of publications, for example, ‘critically reviewed the study proposal’ or ‘collected data’.
* Include authors on outputs when they are circulated for drafting, revision, review and comment.
* The PSSRU policy is that *“all outputs must be approved by a senior member of staff before they are made publicly available”.* For further information see p18 of the PSSRU document ‘Your guide to working at PSSRU’ <file://files.kent.ac.uk/shared/SSPSSR/PSSRU_Shared/Unit%20Resources/General%20Information/Your%20Guide%20to%20Working%20at%20PSSRU/Your%20guide%20to%20working%20at%20PSSRU.pdf>
* Ensure all authors are given the opportunity to see and comment on an output before it is submitted to a journal or published on a website.
* Consider a variety of outputs to allow all team members authorship opportunities.
* Where a number of authors report on behalf of a larger group the Vancouver Group recommendations are useful:

“When submitting a manuscript authored by a group, the corresponding author should clearly indicate the preferred citation and identify all individual authors as well as the group name. Journals generally list other members of the group in the Acknowledgments. The NLM indexes the group name and the names of individuals the group has identified as being directly responsible for the manuscript; it also lists the names of collaborators if they are listed in Acknowledgments”

# Authorship order

Approaches towards (and the significance of) authorship order vary across disciplines. Some list authors in order of their degree of involvement in the work, with the most active contributors listed first; others list them alphabetically. The BSA guidelines offer a useful approach (and see web link on page 4).

## Establishing first Author

* At the beginning of a project, team members should agree on potential topics/areas where each of the team might take an opportunity to become a lead author. This would form the ‘publication plan’ of the project. Such plan should be discussed regularly, ideally every six months, to ensure everyone had an opportunity to contribute and for the inclusion of emerging ideas and outputs.
* The person who has made the major contribution to the paper and taken the lead in developing the core ideas of the output and writing is entitled to be the first author.
* Those who have made a major contribution to analysis or writing (i.e. more than commenting in detail on successive drafts) are entitled to follow the first author immediately; where there is a clear difference in the size of these contributions, this should be reflected in the order of these authors.
* All others who fulfil the criteria for authorship but the difference in the size of their contribution is not clear, should complete the list in an order all team members are happy with.
* If all the authors feel that they have contributed equally to the paper, this can be indicated in a footnote.

A general rule about establishing who is lead author is that it is: the person who has made the major contribution to carrying out the research and taken the lead in developing the ideas and writing the paper is entitled to be the first author. 2nd Author is usually the person who collaborates extensively and is actively involved in most major parts of the manuscript preparation.

## Corresponding author

Corresponding author is usually the person who has overall responsibility for the particular output. The corresponding author is usually the person who receives the reviewers’ comments, the proofs, etc. and whose contact details are printed on the article so that readers can request reprints or contact the research group with questions or queries about the work. Corresponding author usually is not different from the lead author, unless agreed otherwise.

## Acknowledgement of contributions from others

Examples, drawn from the BSA and ICMJE guidelines, of contributors/contributions to be included in acknowledgements are people who have provided only the following inputs.

* assistance in obtaining funding
* financial and material support
* purely technical help, such as writing assistance, manuscript preparation, data processors, computing staff, clerical staff and statistical advisors
* a department chairperson who provided only general support
* assistance with one aspect of the work such as study design, or data collection (interviewers), data analysis.
* colleagues who are not part of the research team but have reviewed the paper or proof read the paper.
* research participants and people or organisations who facilitated recruitment or data collection, ensuring anonymity is maintained when assured.

The ICMJE also asserts that ‘because readers may infer their (people in acknowledgements) endorsement of the data and conclusions, these persons must give written permission to be acknowledged.’ This is good practice. It should be considered early enough to give people sufficient time to respond. Or use a disclaimer to state that the views presented are those of the author(s) alone.

# Handling disagreements

Where there are difficulties in putting these principles into practice, the team should discuss alternative options (e.g. consider drafting multiple papers instead of just one, consider getting a person more involved in other projects etc.). All researchers are encouraged to raise and discuss any issues on authorship and role allocation with the project lead in the first instance. It is the responsibility of the project lead to ensure authorship is discussed at the outset of the project and that it is revisited as and when project teams change.

Disagreements about authorship can be classified into two types: those that contravene ICMJE guidelines (misconduct) and those that do not (disputes).

1. **Disputes**. If the suggestions to include or omit names came from the project lead, make clear why you do not agree with the decision. Support this with evidence. If the dispute cannot be resolved within the team, consider talking to your line manager or someone in the senior management team and let the project lead know that you are going to do this.
2. **Misconduct.** If you believe that someone is proposing to do something with the authorship list that is unethical, first explain your concerns to the project lead. Make it clear that the suggested author list contravenes the PSSRU policy or other guidelines/recommendations relevant for that document, and that it could be considered scientific misconduct. You will need to be clear about who meets the criteria for authorship and who does not, and why. If the project lead is unable to take a misconduct disagreement forward, or you are unhappy with the outcome, talk to your line manager, or someone in the senior management team.

# References and links to further information

University of Kent Good Practice in Research Guidelines <http://www.kent.ac.uk/researchservices/res-govern-frmewrk/code-of-practice.html>

UK Research Integrity Office (2009) *Promoting Good Practice and Preventing* Misconduct, includes a section on publication <http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research/>

British Medical Journal (BMJ) *Uniform Requirements for Authorship and Contributorship* <http://www.bmj.com/about-bmj/resources-authors/article-submission/authorship-contributorship>

British Sociological Association (BSA; 2019) *Authorship Guidelines for Academic Papers* <https://www.britsoc.co.uk/publications/guidelines-reports/authorship-guidelines/#_attr>

ESRC (2010) *Research Ethics Framework*, updated September 2012 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.5153/sro.2265>

Social Research Association (SRA; 2003) *Ethical Guidelines* <http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ethics03.pdf>

COPE is primarily a resource for Editors and Publishers of Scholarly Journals, but it includes guidance on how to handle authorship disputes.

* + *What to do if you suspect ghost, guest or gift authorship* <http://publicationethics.org/files/u2/04E_Author_Ghost_Guest_Gift.pdf>.
  + *How to handle authorship disputes: a guide for new researchers* [*http://publicationethics.org/files/2003pdf12.pdf*](http://publicationethics.org/files/2003pdf12.pdf)