Authorship

Writers often ask advice on authorship of research outputs – papers, books and other products. Below are some some simple guidelines that should be useful in most situations.

Authorship matters
Being named as the author of a book, paper or other product has some advantages:
- It means you are recognized for your work.
- You can list it on your CV.
- It is a tangible output that may be important in your next performance evaluation or job application.

However it also has some responsibilities:
- You are responsible for errors of fact or interpretation.
- You have to be able to defend it when it is criticized.

For many people, including journal editors, there is also an ethical issue. Claiming authorship when you are not actually an author is simply lying: it is dishonest.

So the question arises: who is an author? When scientists worked and wrote on their own or perhaps with a colleague this was obvious. But today many scientists work in teams with a range of partners, assistants and collaborators and it is not always clear who should be listed as an author for a particular publication. Nevertheless, the benefits and responsibilities of authorship are still important, so guidelines are needed. Being listed as an author when you are not one is dangerous (you may be liable for something you did not actually do) and wrong. Omitting someone who should be there from the list of authors denies them the recognition they deserve. Either error leads to bad feelings among colleagues.

Articles, books and book chapters
You can claim authorship if you participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for the content.

This means you are an author only if you made substantial contributions to:
- a) conception and design, or analysis and interpretation of data; and to
- b) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and on
- c) final approval of the version to be published.

Conditions a), b) and c) must all be met. You are not an author if your role was only one of these, nor if you were only involved in some other aspect of the work, such as data collection, fund raising or project management.
When working with partners on joint projects discuss authorship early in the process, long before any possible problems or misunderstandings arise.

The same rules apply to student work. A student thesis should be written by the student, with support from supervisors. The student will therefore be sole author. Papers arising from thesis work may be jointly authored by the student and supervisor, but each author has to meet the above conditions. Student supervision itself does not give the right to claim authorship.

Large, complex products
Sometimes the work published is more encompassing than a paper or book chapter. It may be a comprehensive report that many people contributed to, a multimedia production or a database with accompanying documentation. For such products, there is an opportunity to list and describe the contribution of each member of the team – rather like the credits at the end of a film. Each person gets recognition for what they actually did. The overall product can appear with the team name (the project or institution, for example) as the ‘author’.

Some journals are experimenting with allowing listing of individual contributions to a paper, but it is still not common.

Edited volumes
To be listed as an editor of a volume of papers each with its own named authors, you have to be an editor. That means you take responsibility for the quality of the content. You must have read, commented on, corrected and approved the whole content. You are not an editor of a volume if your role was administrative, making corrections marked by others, or layout and presentation.

Using this guide
All staff should be familiar with this guide, and make sure those they supervise, including students, also understand it. When working with partners on joint projects discuss authorship early in the process, long before any possible problems or misunderstandings arise. This guide should be part of the operating principles agreed by all parties at the start of a project.

Lastly, honorary authorship is not honourable.