

A Simple Guide to Ethical Co-Authorship

*Historically the single authored paper has been a mainstay of social scientific and humanistic research writing. However, co-authorship is now for many social science disciplines the [default mode](#) of academic authorship. Reflecting on this, **Helen Kara** provides some key insights and advice for authors looking to co-write and co-publish in an ethical way.*

This blog post was [originally published](#) on [LSE Impact blog](#).

Ethical co-authorship is rarely discussed by authors and publishers, and even more rarely by research ethics committees. Yet co-authorship is a notorious site for unethical practices, such as plagiarism, citation manipulation and [ghost](#), [guest](#) and [gift](#) authors. For authors setting out on a collaborative writing project, two key aspects to ethical co-authorship need consideration: ethical co-writing, and ethical co-publishing.

Ethical co-writing

Being invited to write with one or more others can feel flattering and exciting. Hold on, though, because before you co-write a single sentence, it is sensible to figure out whether you can work well together and to ask yourself some simple questions. Do you share enough priorities and values? If so, do you have similar working practices, such as attitudes to timescales and deadlines? While diversity of authorship will bring richness to your co-authored work, you need enough similarity to ensure that you can work well together. There is no shame in finding you can't collaborate with someone; it doesn't devalue your scholarship or theirs. But, it is worth ensuring you make that discovery early, rather than after you have already invested considerable time and effort.

Agree on the format for the work, and who will take the lead on each section or chapter. Different people can have very different ideas about format and structure, and again it is worth establishing this at the outset, rather than ending up with sections or chapters of wildly varying lengths and structures. This won't impress reviewers and will create an unnecessarily large amount of work at the editing stage.

If you want to have everything your own way – write alone

When you decide on deadlines, always build in contingency time. Things go wrong in people's lives, particularly during a pandemic, and those affected need time to deal with their difficulties. Be willing to compromise or, in a group collaboration, to be outvoted. If you want to have everything your own way, write alone – though you will still have to deal with others, reviewers and editors; to adapt a famous saying, the sole-authored paper is dead.

Encourage your co-authors to adopt ethical citation practices. This means avoiding [citation manipulation](#), that is excessive self-citation, excessive citation of another's work or excessive citation of work from the journal or publisher where you want to place your own work. It also means ensuring a good level of diversity within your citations. Who are the marginalised scholars working in your field: the people of colour, the women, the Indigenous scholars, the scholars from the Global South, the LGBT+ scholars, and so on? Make sure you read and cite their work: engaging in co-writing can be an opportunity to reassess what literatures have become central to your research.

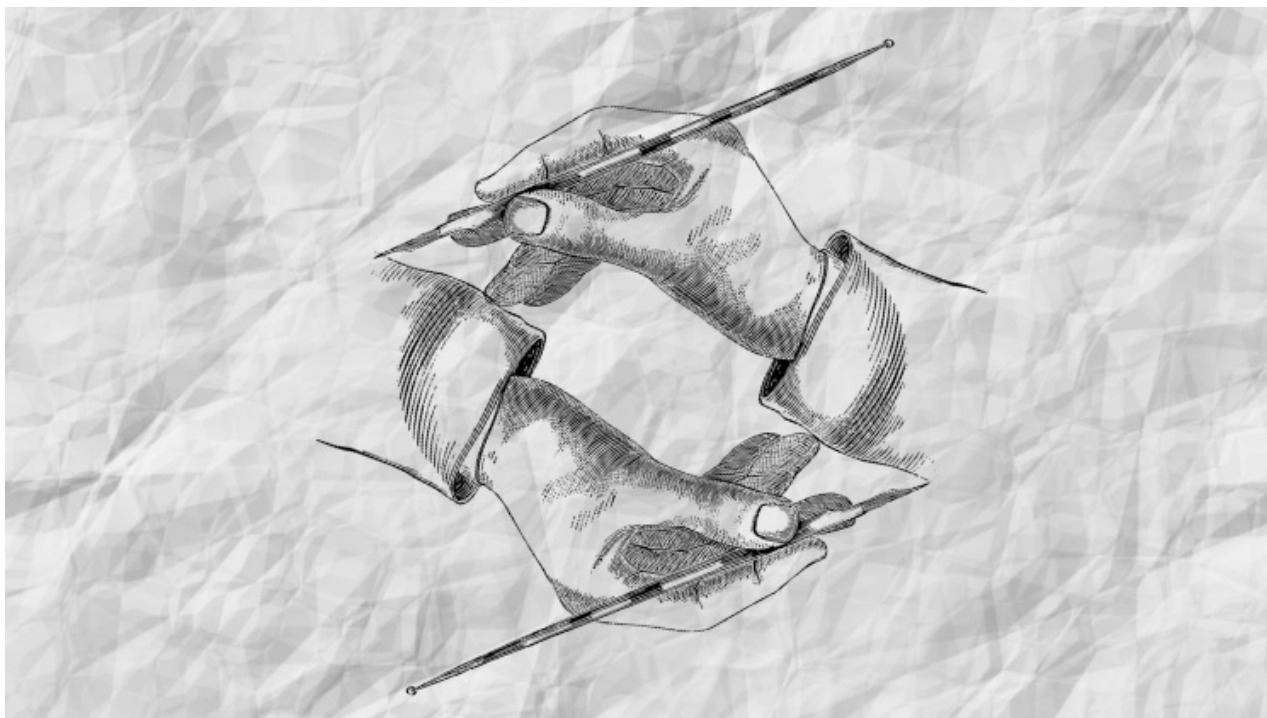


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When you give feedback to your co-authors, make it constructive: tell them what they are doing well, what needs improvement and how they can make that improvement. When co-authors give you feedback on your writing, accept it gracefully, even if you don't feel very graceful. Respond positively, or at least politely, or at worst diplomatically. Maintaining relationships with your co-authors can be more important and may even take precedence over being right.

Do what you say you're going to do, when you say you're going to do it. If you have a problem that is going to get in the way of your co-authoring, let your co-author(s) know as soon as possible.

Ethical co-publishing

Academic publishing is troubled by ghost, guest and gift authors. If you are in doubt, COPE provides a useful [flowchart](#) detailing these practices. Ghost authors are those who have contributed to a publication but are not named as a co-author, perhaps because they are a doctoral student or early career academic and a senior academic has decided to take the credit for their work. This is a form of plagiarism. Guest authors are those who have not contributed to the writing of a publication, though they may have lent equipment or run the organisation where the research took place. Gift authors are those who have made no contribution at all, but are offered co-author status as a favour. None of these practices are ethical. It doesn't matter if some co-authors do more work than others, as long as everyone involved is happy with that, but [you should be clear about each co-author's contribution to the work](#), and outline that in a statement in the final draft.

Another ethical issue in co-publication is the order in which authors are named. This varies between disciplines. In economics, co-authors of journal articles are named in alphabetical order, while in sociology the co-author who has made the largest contribution is named first. [Heather Sarsons studied this](#) and found that the system used in economics has an adverse effect on academic women's career prospects, while the sociological system does not.

Acting ethically while co-writing is easier than acting ethically to co-publish, because authors have more autonomy while writing

However, this does not mean the sociology system is perfect. What if two or three authors have contributed equally? An alternative option could be to write enough articles or chapters for each co-author to have first authorship on one of them, but this isn't always possible or desirable. Some scholars use pseudonyms to ensure that equal contributions are recognised. Economic geographers Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson published several books and journal articles under the joint name [J.K. Gibson-Graham](#), some of which were 'sole' authored and some with other co-authors. Geographers Caitlin Cahill, Sara Kindon, Rachel Pain and Mike Kesby have published together under the name [Mrs C. Kinpaisby-Hill](#), and Kindon, Pain and Kesby have collectively used the name Mrs Kinpaisby. Professors EJ Renold and Jessica Ringrose work together as EJ Ringold.

This isn't always an option, though, as publishers are not always happy to take an unconventional route. Book publishers for instance, will usually want as first author the person whose name they consider most likely to help sell copies. And, [journal editors are sometimes reluctant to name participants who have co-authored journal articles, even when they evidently want to be named.](#)

Acting ethically while co-writing is easier than acting ethically to co-publish, because authors have more autonomy while writing. Self-publishing may present opportunities for more creative representations of co-authorship practices, but self-published work is not generally valued by academia. Bumping up against the structures and priorities of big business, whether a publisher or a university, can make it more difficult for people to maintain an ethical course. Perhaps the most ethical option is to place work with a journal or publisher that is not for profit, so you are not contributing to shareholders' dividends but to organisations that invest any surplus back into research dissemination.

To some extent, co-authorship is an academic virtue in itself. Co-authors learn from each other and help each other develop as researchers and scholars. Co-authored work is often stronger than it would have been if sole-authored. If we can also co-author ethically, that will further improve the quality of our collaborations and our outputs.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.
