**What is Plagiarism?**

Many people think of plagiarism as copying another's work or borrowing someone else's original ideas. But terms like "copying" and "borrowing" can disguise the seriousness of the offense:

**According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, to "plagiarize" means:**

* to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own
* to use (another's production) without crediting the source
* to commit literary theft
* to present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source

In other words, plagiarism is an act of fraud. It involves both stealing someone else's work and lying about it afterward.

**But can words and ideas really be stolen?**

According to U.S. law, the answer is yes. The expression of original ideas is considered intellectual property and is protected by copyright laws, just like original inventions. Almost all forms of expression fall under copyright protection as long as they are recorded in some way (such as a book or a computer file).

**All of the following are considered plagiarism:**

* turning in someone else's work as your own
* copying words or ideas from someone else without giving credit
* failing to put a quotation in quotation marks
* giving incorrect information about the source of a quotation
* changing words but copying the sentence structure of a source without giving credit
* copying so many words or ideas from a source that it makes up the majority of your work, whether you give credit or not (see our section on "fair use" rules)

Most cases of plagiarism can be avoided, however, by citing sources. Simply acknowledging that certain material has been borrowed and providing your audience with the information necessary to find that source is usually enough to prevent plagiarism. See our section on [citation](https://www.plagiarism.org/article/what-is-citation) for more information on how to cite sources properly.

**What about images, videos, and music?**

Using an image, video or piece of music in a work you have produced without receiving proper permission or providing appropriate citation is plagiarism. The following activities are very common in today’s society. Despite their popularity, they still count as plagiarism.

* Copying media (especially images) from other websites to paste them into your own papers or websites.
* Making a video using footage from others’ videos or using copyrighted music as part of the soundtrack.
* Performing another person’s copyrighted music (i.e., playing a cover).
* Composing a piece of music that borrows heavily from another composition.

Certainly, these media pose situations in which it can be challenging to determine whether or not the copyrights of a work are being violated. For example:

* A photograph or scan of a copyrighted image (for example: using a photograph of a book cover to represent that book on one’s website)
* Recording audio or video in which copyrighted music or video is playing in the background.
* Re-creating a visual work in the same medium. (for example: shooting a photograph that uses the same composition and subject matter as someone else’s photograph)
* Re-creating a visual work in a different medium (for example: making a painting that closely resembles another person’s photograph).
* Re-mixing or altering copyrighted images, video or audio, even if done so in an original way.

The legality of these situations, and others, would be dependent upon the intent and context within which they are produced. The two safest approaches to take in regards to these situations is: 1) Avoid them altogether or 2) Confirm the works’ usage permissions and cite them properly.

**What is a Ghostwriter?**

Ghostwriters are writers for hire who are paid but receive none of the credit for the work produced.

There are generally two parties involve in this professional relationship:

The “author,” who hires the freelance writer to produce content for an agreed upon fee, takes the credit for all the original work produced.

The “ghost,” the freelance writer who is generally paid in advance of completing the job, gets the money as a “work for hire” job and assumes none of the credit for their ghostwriting work.

Reasons to Hire a Ghostwriter

This may sound odd, but it’s a common practice. When someone wants to create new copy for a website, a ghostwriter may be hired to rewrite existing copy. There are many similar jobs such as writing ad or business copy, or supplying new or rewritten material for personal or professional use. The ghost is hired primarily as a professional freelance writer, in order to produce high-quality writing copy that reads professionally.

A paid professional freelance writer is often the only source to turn to get sparkling, well-written website copy or other quality content. A ghost is hired to bring this about, either as an on staff writer or as a freelance writer who is paid specifically for the job at hand.

Ghostwriters are also hired to write books for people. In such cases, the author of the book is the person who hires the ghostwriter, unless the book author wants to share some of the credit with the ghost. In this case, the ghost may be listed as a coauthor or as the “editor” of the book; generally, this is listed somewhere in the acknowledgments page.

Sometimes the well known, “as told to” line with the name of the ghostwriter is included on the cover of a ghostwritten book. This is often the case when well-known ghostwriters are used by the books’ actual authors.

# Defining the Role of Authors and Contributors

## ***1. Why Authorship Matters***

Authorship confers credit and has important academic, social, and financial implications. Authorship also implies responsibility and accountability for published work. The following recommendations are intended to ensure that contributors who have made substantive intellectual contributions to a paper are given credit as authors, but also that contributors credited as authors understand their role in taking responsibility and being accountable for what is published.

Because authorship does not communicate what contributions qualified an individual to be an author, some journals now request and publish information about the contributions of each person named as having participated in a submitted study, at least for original research. Editors are strongly encouraged to develop and implement a contributorship policy. Such policies remove much of the ambiguity surrounding contributions, but leave unresolved the question of the quantity and quality of contribution that qualify an individual for authorship. The ICMJE has thus developed criteria for authorship that can be used by all journals, including those that distinguish authors from other contributors.

## ***2. Who Is an Author?***

The ICMJE recommends that authorship be based on the following 4 criteria:

* Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND
* Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND
* Final approval of the version to be published; AND
* Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

In addition to being accountable for the parts of the work he or she has 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.

All those designated as authors should meet all four criteria for authorship, and all who meet the four criteria should be identified as authors. Those who do not meet all four criteria should be acknowledged—see Section II.A.3 below. These authorship criteria are intended to reserve the status of authorship for those who deserve credit and can take responsibility for the work. The criteria are not intended for use as a means to disqualify colleagues from authorship who otherwise meet authorship criteria by denying them the opportunity to meet criterion #s 2 or 3. Therefore, all individuals who meet the first criterion should have the opportunity to participate in the review, drafting, and final approval of the manuscript.

The individuals who conduct the work are responsible for identifying who meets these criteria and ideally should do so when planning the work, making modifications as appropriate as the work progresses. We encourage collaboration and co-authorship with colleagues in the locations where the research is conducted. It is the collective responsibility of the authors, not the journal to which the work is submitted, to determine that all people named as authors meet all four criteria; it is not the role of journal editors to determine who qualifies or does not qualify for authorship or to arbitrate authorship conflicts. If agreement cannot be reached about who qualifies for authorship, the institution(s) where the work was performed, not the journal editor, should be asked to investigate. The criteria used to determine the order in which authors are listed on the byline may vary, and are to be decided collectively by the author group and not by editors. If authors request removal or addition of an author after manuscript submission or publication, journal editors should seek an explanation and signed statement of agreement for the requested change from all listed authors and from the author to be removed or added.

The corresponding author is the one individual who takes primary responsibility for communication with the journal during the manuscript submission, peer review, and publication process. The corresponding author typically ensures that all the journal’s administrative requirements, such as providing details of authorship, ethics committee approval, clinical trial registration documentation, and disclosures of relationships and activities are properly completed and reported, although these duties may be delegated to one or more coauthors. The corresponding author should be available throughout the submission and peer review process to respond to editorial queries in a timely way, and should be available after publication to respond to critiques of the work and cooperate with any requests from the journal for data or additional information should questions about the paper arise after publication. Although the corresponding author has primary responsibility for correspondence with the journal, the ICMJE recommends that editors send copies of all correspondence to all listed authors.

When a large multi-author group has conducted the work, the group ideally should decide who will be an author before the work is started and confirm who is an author before submitting the manuscript for publication. All members of the group named as authors should meet all four criteria for authorship, including approval of the final manuscript, and they should be able to take public responsibility for the work and should have full confidence in the accuracy and integrity of the work of other group authors. They will also be expected as individuals to complete disclosure forms.

Some large multi-author groups designate authorship by a group name, with or without the names of individuals. When submitting a manuscript authored by a group, the corresponding author should specify the group name if one exists, and clearly identify the group members who can take credit and responsibility for the work as authors. The byline of the article identifies who is directly responsible for the manuscript, and MEDLINE lists as authors whichever names appear on the byline. If the byline includes a group name, MEDLINE will list the names of individual group members who are authors or who are collaborators, sometimes called non-author contributors, if there is a note associated with the byline clearly stating that the individual names are elsewhere in the paper and whether those names are authors or collaborators.

## ***3. Non-Author Contributors***

Contributors who meet fewer than all 4 of the above criteria for authorship should not be listed as authors, but they should be acknowledged. Examples of activities that alone (without other contributions) do not qualify a contributor for authorship are acquisition of funding; general supervision of a research group or general administrative support; and writing assistance, technical editing, language editing, and proofreading. Those whose contributions do not justify authorship may be acknowledged individually or together as a group under a single heading (e.g. "Clinical Investigators" or "Participating Investigators"), and their contributions should be specified (e.g., "served as scientific advisors," "critically reviewed the study proposal," "collected data," "provided and cared for study patients", "participated in writing or technical editing of the manuscript").

Because acknowledgment may imply endorsement by acknowledged individuals of a study’s data and conclusions, editors are advised to require that the corresponding author obtain written permission to be acknowledged from all acknowledged individuals.