



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# Authorship (RCR Role Plays)

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## Description

One of nine role play scenarios developed by Michael Loui and C. K. Gunsalus. This page, on authorship issues, includes the summary, resources, and handouts to be given to various participants. *The full role play instructions with discussion guidelines are included in pdf format.*

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## Role-Play Summary

This role-play deals with issues concerning authorship credit. Concerns about authorship raise the ethical principle of fairness because people should receive credit for their contributions. Authors of a scientific work must have made substantial or significant contributions to the project because they are taking public responsibility for its content. Authors must also be willing and able to respond to questions about the work. The hard part of authorship is deciding what kind of intellectual contribution counts as substantial or significant and therefore warrants authorship. Despite the availability of guidelines, there are differences of opinions within and between scientific disciplines. Broad guidelines state that an author should participate meaningfully in the design, data collection, or interpretation of the research, and be involved in drafting or revising the article, and give final approval to the published version.

This role-play was not focused on making a judgment about authorship on this paper. It focused on the process for determining authorship on a paper. The selection of authors for a paper or the method and metrics that will be used to assess authorship after the work is completed should be jointly agreed by all of the collaborators as soon as the group has decided on the assignment of responsibilities and workload for the group members. This discussion of the division of labor leads to decisions of who will be the primary or lead author. All changes in responsibilities over time should include discussion of changes in authorship if warranted. These discussions can help preempt later conflict over authorship. These discussions are especially important in work within an adviser-advisee or mentorship relationship. Part of the adviser's role is to help the student with the publication process. This help may warrant authorship depending on the contribution and the standards within the field. Having these discussions early helps avoid possible misunderstandings and promote fairness.

## **Resources on Authorship**

American Chemical Society guidelines <http://pubs.acs.org/instruct/ethic.html>

Rennie, D. (1994). Authorship! Authorship! Guests ghosts, grafters and the two-sided coin. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 271, 469.

Rennie, D., Flanagi, A., Yank, V. (2000). The contributions of authors. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 284, 89.

## Graduate Program Director Role

*What follows is an outline of your role. You will need to improvise to some extent – be creative but try to stay within the bounds of what seems realistic.*

A graduate student has made an appointment to see you to talk confidentially about a problem with the student's adviser.

Before the student comes in, you pulled the graduate records file and review it. You note that the student is on academic probation, an extremely unusual situation in your department. You also see notes in the file indicating that the student had been to see the department chair and your predecessor as graduate program director with concerns about several different faculty members. In every case, the student declined to file a formal complaint even when it might have been warranted, and seemed just to want to vent and talk to someone. You see in the file that the student's adviser is Randall Plottner.

Plottner is quite prominent in your discipline, publishes prolifically and is also frequently quoted as an expert in the popular press like the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Because he's a nationally recognized expert, you know that Plottner was the subject of a major retention effort by the university last year, when he was offered a prestigious chair by an Ivy League university. This was the subject of at least one news story and you're guessing that he got a pretty big raise to stay. (Plus, you know that his elderly mother lives about 30 minutes away, and he was reluctant to move away from here.)

You also know that Plottner is extremely disorganized, usually late with whatever he does, and that things fall through the cracks with some regularity. Plottner has a reputation of not being a nice man and most people in the department (in fact, anyone who's worked closely with him) dislike him intensely.

You want to help the student make the best possible decision taking into account possible outcomes based on both the student's history and Plottner's reputation.

*(Note: assume that anything the student says is in writing and has brought along to show you is real and authentic.)*

## **Graduate Program Director Role-Playing Notes**

- Your goal is to give the student the best advice on how to proceed.
- Prof. Plottner is important to the University.
- The student may or may not have a legitimate case.
- This student has had other issues in the past.
- The student's career could be at stake.

## **Plan for your meeting**

- Write questions that you will ask the student
- Follow-up questions that you might ask
- Questions that the student might ask you, and your answers

## **Graduate Student Role**

What follows is an outline of your role. You will need to improvise to some extent – be creative but try to stay within the bounds of what seems realistic.

After several sleepless nights, you have made an appointment to talk to the graduate program director in your department. The adviser is known for supporting students; easy to talk to and a very nice person. You really hope that talking to the graduate program director is the right thing to do, and you don't have any other ideas about how to handle the situation. You have had some struggles in your graduate program. You are on academic probation and have complained about faculty members in the past. However, you have never filed a formal complaint.

You have been working on a chapter with your adviser, Randall Plottner. He was invited to write the chapter for a forthcoming book. You started working on this project after Professor Plottner handed you the letter inviting him to write the chapter and suggested that this would be a good project for you. You have a copy of the letter with a note from Professor Plottner scrawled across the bottom is a note saying "Take a stab at this. --RP"

You have also gathered together almost all of your drafts; there have been so many, you're not really sure you have them all, but you have at least five or six different versions. Each one is dated and has handwritten marginal comments by Professor Plottner (matching the handwriting on the letter) making suggestions for revisions and additions. These drafts show the evolution of the chapter, as each of Professor Plottner's suggestions were successively incorporated in a new version of the draft. The last version has a note at the end saying "This is fine. No more work will be necessary. -- RP" (*Note: The other role-player will take your word that these documents are authentic; you can "offer" them in your conversation.*)

Your friend, who works in the main office of the department, has told you that last week that Professor Plottner submitted the chapter to the editor of the book. Your friend said the chapter had the same title as the one you've been working on for months, but the only author's name listed on the chapter was Professor Plottner's.

At first, you couldn't decide what to do. Yesterday, you finally went to see Professor Plottner. You thought you handled the meeting correctly. You asked about the chapter (he told you not to worry about it). Finally, you built up enough courage and asked him when it would be published, as you'd like to list it on your resume as a co-author. His answer stunned you: Professor Plottner told you (this is an exact quote) "Oh, don't worry about that. This was a learning exercise. You'll get to co-author things later."

You don't want any trouble with Professor Plottner, but you also feel that you have been unfairly deprived of credit for work that you have done. You know Professor Plottner can really cause a lot of trouble for you, but this just isn't right. You are going to see the graduate program director to figure out what to do.

### **Student Role-Playing Notes**

- You need Professor Plottner for your future career
- You are upset and unsure of what to do
- You worked hard on this project and deserve credit
- You are looking for good advice from the faculty adviser
- You should try to convince the adviser that you did in fact write the chapter

### **Plan for your meeting**

- Write questions that you will ask your adviser

- Follow-up questions that you might ask
- Questions that your adviser might ask you, and your answers

## Starting the Authorship Role-Play

**Program Director:** How are you today?

**Grad Student:** Not so good ... The anxiety from this issue has been keeping me awake at night ... It is distracting me from my work, too ...

**Program Director:** Well that sounds pretty serious. What exactly is the nature this problem that you are facing?

**Grad Student:** I really don't know if there is anything that can be done about it ... I'm working with Professor Plottner. He asked me to write a chapter for a new book ...but I think that he removed my name as an author from a chapter that I wrote with him ...

**Program Director:** Authorship questions can be tough to deal with sometimes ... Are you sure that you should be listed as an author on this chapter? ... Did you talk about authorship when you started the project? ...Explain your version of the situation to me ...

**Grad Student:** I thought that you might have questions ...so I brought drafts of everything I worked on including the note that Professor Plottner gave me to start working on the chapter... See, he commented on each draft and I did all this work ...

**Program Director:** It does look like you did a lot ... How do you know that you are not an author on the chapter? ... Did Professor Plottner tell you?

**Grad Student:** My friend saw a final draft of the chapter in the department office and my name was not on it ... I talked to Professor Plottner and he was dismissive saying it was just a good learning experience for me...

## Observer Role

- Read both roles.

- Watch the interview and take notes.
- If the conversation appears to be stopping early, encourage discussion on topics that still haven't been addressed.

What is the student trying to convey?

What is the professor trying to achieve in this meeting?

Did the student "read" the signals from the adviser well? What cues did you see?

Did the professor "hear" the student well? What signals of this were there?

What questions do you think could/should have been asked that were not? What do you think could have been said that was not?

### **Contributor(s)**

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### **Rights**

Use of Materials on the OEC

### **Resource Type**

Case Study / Scenario

### **Parent Collection**

Role-Play Scenarios for Teaching Responsible Conduct of Research

### **Topics**

Authorship

Collaboration

Mentors and Trainees

Publication Ethics

### **Discipline(s)**

Research Ethics

### **Publisher**

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