

ONE TIP

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“It’s out!” shouted my fellow graduate student, Paula Stern, as she came running into our lab, clutching the article she had just copied in the library: Weiner, Graham, Stern, & Lawson, *Developmental Psychology*, 1982. We were both thrilled to see our names in print. Bernie Weiner, our mentor, had invited us to collaborate on research examining the development of children’s abilities to infer emotions from particular causal attributions. Although we had helped design the studies

and collected all the data, I don’t recall discussing authorship with Bernie. For me, it was all about the opportunity to work with a great mentor, not the outcome or any expected rewards

This was my first published article and I will always remember it fondly as such. But in retrospect, I think I was probably too naïve in 1982 about the importance of having that authorship conversation. This is a conversation that every scholar should have when there is a collaboration no matter what stage in their career. Let me share three principles that guide my authorship decisions.

First, determine authorship early on, preferably before the research gets underway. If you are a student, don’t be afraid to ask. Good mentors will respect you for raising the authorship question and should be prepared to give you an honest answer. Once a project is over, we all have a natural tendency to overestimate our individual contribution, which is all the more reason why decisions need to be made sooner rather than later. Authorship should only be

granted when there is a significant contribution to the research. Determining the threshold for significant is, of course, subjective. For some mentors, designing the research materials or collecting the data or doing the analyses may be enough; for others, none of these activities by itself is sufficient for authorship. The important thing is that you know your mentor’s standards if you are a junior collaborator and that you communicate these standards if you are the mentor.

For mentors, establish clear guidelines for order of authorship. This can be complex when there are multiple authors because you must make judgments about level of contribution. Acknowledging that every study is different, one principle I firmly adhere to is that the first author has to take the lead in writing the introduction. No matter how hard I may want to promote my students’ or other junior collaborators’ careers, first authorship can only be achieved by the person who has at least made the first attempt to frame the study and make clear its theoretical and empirical contribution. I also tend to follow the model from the medical sciences where last author symbolizes special status such as being PI on the grant that funded the research.

Finally, authorship decisions must be fluid and flexible. Authors may be added as the contributions of more collaborators come to light; occasionally an author may be dropped if their role significantly dwindled. Authorship order is most likely to change as the final product unfolds. I’ve had mentees who hate to write, despite opportunities and best intentions. For me, this precludes first authorship. Whatever your principles, make them clear and be willing to negotiate. At the end of the day, we want happy collaborators who relish seeing their name in print, wherever it lands.

One Tip is published bi-monthly by the Membership Committee of APA Division 15 (Educational Psychology). In *One Tip*, senior scholars tell their stories and share insights for junior scholars. If you would like to contribute a piece, please contact Division 15 Membership Committee Chair, Serena Shim at sshim@bsu.edu.