

# LETTERS

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## **Authorship: Readers Come First**

Martha Tacker (CBE Views 1998;21(4):110) and the CBE retreat on authorship (CBE Views 1998;21(4):131-2) have given us a strong and balanced impetus to re-examine the concept of authorship. I write to add to what they said about the most important use of authorship credit—to inform readers.

First, the underbrush. I recognize that well-defined authorship credit is important to authors, their institutions, granting agencies, indexing services, and others. Still, the whole scientific publishing enterprise exists to serve readers first. Editors are likely to hear from authors whenever the latter think they might exploit some chink in editorial policies and decisions. But most readers are not that obliging; they simply make do with less than they need, or they desert us and go elsewhere. Despite the imperative to serve readers, we do not get a balanced story. Yes, we must treat authors with respect and encouragement if we are to keep up a flow of publishable manuscripts (“publish or perish” applies to journals, too), and we must make our journals attractive or even essential for purchasers and affiliates, such as libraries and professional societies. We must attend to the needs of grantors, non-author principal investigators, tenure committees, and others. But we must remember

that the reader—the one who needs to know—is at the bottom of all our editorial concerns and that readers create the market for all the other uses. Without readers, we are toast.

Many other aspects of editorial policy already respond to readers’ needs: brevity of papers, the Ingelfinger Rule, constraints on redundant publication. This list should include policies on authorship.

Now, what are the concerns and needs of readers with respect to authorship? First is perhaps accountability, which is closely linked to perceived credibility. Readers off-load some of this to journal policies and processes (especially peer review), but much remains with readers. Not only do they need to know the names of authors, but also they need to know the authors’ affiliations, grant or contract support, and sometimes other matters, because names are often recognized only by reputation or not at all. Many readers will, and should, pay more attention to a report of a marvelous new cancer cure if it comes from a known expert at a strong research institution than if the same manuscript in the same journal comes from a wealthy playboy whose hobby is “doing science” in his basement lab. If readers are first, their needs must have first priority, and their need to know must drive

editorial policy. I have little patience with cries about fairness to authors, and if they complain about bias, so be it. (See Bailar JC. Reliability, fairness, objectivity and other inappropriate goals in peer review. *Behav and Brain Sci* 1991;14:137-8.) We do, after all, give them a lot of free service anyway.

Readers have other needs, too. They may have to look at a collection of reports to tell which may overlap because they came from the same investigators or institutions; and when readers are retrieving published material, they need ways to identify specific contributions. (Journal name, volume, and page number alone are not the standard in any style manual I have seen.) Readers will sometimes need to establish direct contact with authors, for example, to inquire about some point not in the published paper or to request a unique reagent.

The needs of readers, authors, and others regarding authorship will often overlap, but when they are in conflict, I urge that readers be served first.

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