

## The Nature, Effects, and Ethics of Ghostwriting

*Chair:*

**Leslie Neistadt**

*Journal of Athletic Training*  
Columbus, Georgia

*Panelists:*

**Miriam Bloom**

SciWrite Biomedical Editing Services  
Jackson, Mississippi

**Belinda Puetz**

*Journal for Nurses in Staff Development*  
Pensacola, Florida

**Barbara Gastel**

*CBE Views*  
Texas A&M University  
College Station, Texas

*Reporter:*

**Ann Morcos**

MorcosMedia  
Metairie, Louisiana

Do you believe in ghosts—ghostwriters, that is? It all depends on . . .

Attitudes toward ghostwriting vary, Barbara Gastel said. Cultures that emphasize the group rather than the individual (for example, some cultures in Asia) might be relatively accepting of ghostwriting. But in Western academe, ghostwriting is considered unacceptable. However, busy university presidents might have staff members draft their speeches. Likewise, CEOs don't have time to write every article that appears in corporate publications with their byline, so public relations departments fill in. In government, documents written by various people may appear under the byline of an official (not the actual writer) or bear only

the name of the institution. Various issues, Gastel said, exist with regard to ghostwriting. For example, is heavy editing essentially light ghostwriting, and can ghostwriting be a valuable educational tool for someone who "shadows" a great leader? Although ghostwriting sometimes is reprehensible, Gastel said, at other times it can be a reasonable practice. In general, she said, the contributions of ghostwriters should be publicly acknowledged.

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### Ghostwriters get paid even if an article is never published.

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Belinda Puetz focused on ghostwriting and the nursing profession. Persons who write in nursing are academics who must write for promotion and tenure. They are therefore concerned about writing and would not use ghostwriters: Ghostwriting in nursing doesn't exist. Puetz believes that institutional writing (of speeches, press releases, surveys, annual reports, and so on) is acceptable but that in academic writing all contributors to an article, including the writer, should be identified.

Miriam Bloom—a card-carrying ghostwriter—said ghostwriting is just writing; it is an honorable profession. From a practical standpoint, Bloom said, ghostwriters get paid even if an article is never published; ghostwriters don't get the blame if an article is useless or trivial; and ghostwriters have to satisfy only the author, not the publisher (unless the publisher is the client, in which case both the publisher and the named author might have to be satisfied).

Some benefits of working directly with the author are that the author needs and trusts you, deadlines are loose, you can negotiate your own contract, and you have close contact with the author if you have questions. In working with publishers, however, there are always deadlines and high pressure, and publishers usually don't pay well. In working with sponsors, there are staff members to help you obtain reprints and graphics, but there are many guidelines to follow; and sponsors have an agenda, which is usually to sell a product.

Bloom said that ghostwriters need to have a contract; need to know exactly what the author wants and who the audience is; need a realistic due date, including an author review date; and, most important, need lots of information (such as tables, references, figures, reprints, transcripts, background information, author's notes, and prior publications) to complete a project. Once the project is under way, ghostwriters should secure a science expert as backup, prepare an outline for the author to review, and try to complete the job before the due date (this will impress the client and get repeat business and referrals); and it is wise to get a reprint of the published article to compare with the original submission to see what changes the publisher made.

It became clear from this workshop, which also included a discussion of several scenarios and how to handle them, that ghostwriting is both honorable and reprehensible, pays well and pays poorly, is stressful and nonstressful, and is ethical and unethical. In short, whether you believe in ghostwriting all depends on . . . 