

Authorship Guidance for MGH Researchers

Authorship of research publications is the ‘coin of the realm’ in science but determining authorship inclusion and order can be complicated, and sometimes causes disputes within and between laboratories. The Office for Research Career Development has created this document to provide guidance on issues related to authorship of publications based on research at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH).

Authorship guidelines and criteria

Harvard Medical School (HMS) endorses guidelines for authorship, which are followed by MGH: <https://hms.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/assets/Sites/Ombuds/files/AUTHORSHIP%20GUIDELINES.pdf>

In addition, MGH researchers follow the definitions of authorship developed by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE): <http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html>

Steps to take in an authorship dispute

If members of a research group are not in agreement on the inclusion or order of authors for a paper, the following options are available to help reach an agreement, in addition to the careful review of the guidelines and definitions linked above.

- A. Seek advice: Advice may be sought from the MGH Office for Research Career Development, the MGH Senior Vice President (SVP) for Research, or the HMS Ombud’s Office. This advice is confidential and can help to determine if a next step is necessary.
- B. Seek remediation: If a dispute resolution cannot be reached, the following procedure should be initiated, *after carefully reviewing the HMS guidelines and the ICMJE definitions*:
 - 1) Contact the chief/chair of the department/division/center in which the research is based. This contact and discussion may be facilitated by ORCD staff or the MGH SVP for Research, if the author requests.
 - 2) If the department chief/chair is directly involved in the research project in question, the MGH SVP for Research should be notified, and will facilitate the discussion and resolution.
 - 3) If no resolution is reached among the group of authors, the chief/chair (or the SVP for Research if the chief/chair is directly involved in the research) is the final arbiter of the authorship decision.
 - 4) For disputes that go beyond a single department, or extend to authors outside MGH, the SVP for Research should be asked to facilitate the discussion.
 - 5) If *scientific integrity (plagiarism and/or fabrication or falsification of data)* is at issue, the MGH research integrity officer must be informed.
 - 6) If retaliation, or fear of retaliation is involved, MGH human resources and/or Partners employee relations should be contacted.

Tips to avoid authorship disputes

Communicate early about authorship. The links on page 1 provide guidelines for authorship determination. In addition, *at the outset of a research project*, it is vital for research teams/collaborators to discuss the scope of the project, the roles of different individual team members, and the *initial* plan for authorship (who is included as well as the order).

Communicate often about authorship. As a research project progresses, and especially when new team members are added or trainees who are key team members leave, it is essential to re-evaluate the determination of authorship and ensure that all individuals/authors understand their roles. Flexibility is key in this communication, as is the understanding that roles (and authorship) may change when complex projects evolve over time.

Resources. The following resources may be useful for research teams as they discuss how the work on a research project will be shared and the role of different authors.

- 1) The Office for Research Career Development offers annual training on the responsible conduct of research, including responsibilities of authors. Below are links to slides from recent ORCD authorship seminars:
 - a. [October 2017: Responsible Authorship – Guidelines and Expectations](#)
 - b. [February 2018: Responsible Authorship – Case Studies](#)
 - c. [October 2018: Managing Problems with Co-authors](#)
- 2) The Office for Research Career Development offers individual career advice meetings to all professional staff involved in research. These meetings may be used to discuss ways to avoid or address an authorship dispute. Email orcd@partners.org to request a meeting.
- 3) The [American Psychological Association](#) has developed the following resources to help in authorship determination.
 - a. This research responsibilities [checklist](#) breaks down different tasks that go into a research project and manuscript preparation.
 - b. This authorship determination [worksheet](#) may be useful for some research groups.