

# Current Comments<sup>®</sup>

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## Ghostwriting—The Spectrum from Ghostwriter to Reviewer to Editor to Coauthor

Number 48

December 2, 1985

A few years ago, I decided to tackle the task of publishing an essay about ghostwriting. My preliminary draft and notes, both written and oral, were turned over to Marianne Zajdel, then manager of editorial materials at ISI<sup>®</sup>. She in turn asked Joan L. Cochran, one of ISI's staff writers, to prepare a more detailed draft, incorporating the many points stipulated in the outline we had prepared. Joan had been an ISI staff writer for about five years and had helped me prepare dozens of articles. She subsequently submitted yet another draft to me, which I read and edited extensively. This revised draft was then submitted to a group of reviewers I had chosen.

Not surprisingly, reactions were quite mixed. Suggested changes ranged from correcting a few words or lines to a major rethinking and rewriting. I chose the latter because the recommendation was supported by massive contextual corrections I simply could not ignore. One editor extraordinaire<sup>1</sup> made me realize that the subject of ghostwriting was far more complex than I had imagined. Indeed, the potential range of the subject is vast. It touches upon the domains of writing, editing, and reviewing, as well as the ethics of authorship.

What follows is an interim essay on this large subject. These ongoing reflections are bound to be provisional. Neither time, space, nor temperament allows me the luxury of indulging in a

Mertonian/Shandean exercise in self- and domain-exegesis.<sup>2</sup> In order to pay proper homage to those who have participated in the creation of this essay, however, I have incorporated their remarks verbatim wherever possible. This helps illustrate how difficult it is to identify what is truly one's own original writing, rewriting, or editing, as well as one's own ideas when research aides, reviewers, and editors are involved in a truly social and interactive process. By focusing attention on the full range of editorial functions, I hope that the ethical problems involved in scholarly and other writing will be clarified.

In this essay, I examine various types of ghostwriting and, I hope, separate them from the many shades of editing and writing (or speaking) that are not, strictly speaking, original. By "original," I refer to what the author wrote before the piece was submitted to others for whatever type of help was needed. I also discuss some issues that arise in deciding how to give credit for those ideas incorporated in the text that are not originally the author's.

An essay I wrote several years ago happily acknowledged the help I receive from ISI's large staff of information scientists, librarians, writers, and other professional colleagues.<sup>3</sup> In a sense, these people separately and collectively perform the function of research associates and editors. Still, it is tempting to describe these activities as bordering on

ghostwriting, since it is sometimes difficult to determine where detailed editing leaves off and ghostwriting begins.

What, indeed, is a ghostwriter? As evidenced by the selective bibliography appended to this essay, many people have addressed the question. Michiko Kakutani, of the *New York Times* staff, describes a ghostwriter as a "kind of courtier, a gifted scribe whose job it is to make his employer look his best—or at least honest and believable—without seeming to do so." She notes that ghostwriters "routinely execute books for Hollywood folks, politicians and their families, media people, even those who merely knew a Famous One."<sup>4</sup> A ghostwriter's contribution to the published piece can vary significantly. Lois J. Einhorn, Department of English, General Literature, and Rhetoric, State University of New York, Binghamton, notes that "all ghosts function as stylists and policy makers since words give meaning to ideas." But, she adds, "which role dominates depends on the degree of responsibility and potential influence given them by the principal."<sup>5</sup>

The literate public knows of course that political leaders and entertainers have speech-, article-, and book-writers. So, too, executives of large corporations, especially those who must speak at numerous fund-raising dinners and other public functions, routinely rely and are widely known to rely on public relations departments for their speeches. They also use ghostwriters when they publish articles that promote their corporate images in newspapers and magazines.

Of course the degree of help offered by ghostwriters will vary from book to book and from speech to speech. At one extreme, according to Robert K. Merton, Columbia University, New York, is the text written by an "invisible ghostwriter." He explains that a ghostwriter is "invisible" when "the person who claims to be the author is, for all anyone knows, the sole and exclusive author.... It's a se-

cret pact where the author pays someone to write something and then publicly purveys this as his own." Less "invisible" is what Merton terms "institutionalized ghostwriting." With this type of ghostwriting, "it is widely understood that many of the pieces were presumably written by others since the public author, someone in high office such as the President, could not possibly find the time to write all his own material from scratch."<sup>6</sup>

Further along the continuum are the "acknowledged pieces," written in collaboration with a professional who might otherwise serve as a ghostwriter. These are pieces in which the principal author acknowledges the "ghostwriter" by stating on the cover of the book that it was written "with" the ghost's help, or the author will include the phrase "as told to." A recent effective example of this genre is the autobiography of Lee A. Iacocca, president of Chrysler Corp.<sup>7</sup> Merton notes that in such collaborative ventures "the author's own ideas and words have been converted into more or less acceptable prose by the professional writer. The prose is then rewritten, redone, or edited in varying degrees by the public author."<sup>6</sup>

Further along in the spectrum are the various forms of editing. Though too numerous to describe in detail here, the diverse types of editing that go on at publishing houses, newspapers, businesses, universities, and other institutions can involve as little as correcting minor typographical errors to as much as complete rewrites of book chapters. Copyediting, for example, involves reviewing a finished text to make sure it is in accord with the rules and format of the publisher and to straighten out occasional syntactic clumsiness. At the other extreme of editing is that done by such a famed editor as Maxwell Perkins, who edited the work of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Thomas Wolfe, among others. Perkins is said to have turned Wolfe's massive manuscript of *Look*

*Homeward, Angel*<sup>8</sup> into a publishable book.<sup>9</sup>

Some talented individuals are blessed with the ability to express their thoughts effectively off the cuff. I know several people who can ad-lib 50-minute talks or lectures as though they were working from an invisible prompter in the back of the room. They waste little time expressing their ideas, and yet their thoughts are clearly expressed and tightly organized.

Some of the finest authors and scholars, however, must read from a prepared manuscript, or at least use a written outline so that they don't stray from important points or miss them altogether. Some orators, like President Ronald Reagan, appear to be speaking without a prepared manuscript while skillfully using a teleprompter.

As one moves from the public arena into the world of scholarship and science, there is ambivalence about ghostwriting—that is, the use of surrogates to prepare speeches or articles. Yet is it reasonable to expect presidents of large universities, or other large institutions, to find time to prepare all the speeches and articles expected of them? Perhaps it was in the past, when the world and universities were smaller and slower paced, but it is not a realistic expectation today.

On occasion, particularly when the event dictates that the speech fully express personal reflections and convictions, university presidents or directors of large laboratories will write and edit their own addresses. Even though ghostwriters often take great pride in capturing the client's personality, there are limits to the possibility of fully reproducing the prose style or flair peculiar to another. But, except for such infrequent occasions, busy executives and others who either lack the ability or just don't have the time to write speeches must rely on ghostwriters.

It is tempting to discuss the use of "ghosts" by comedians. They are called gag-writers, as I've discussed earlier.<sup>10</sup>

But this is a farfetched analogy to the discussion of true ghostwriting.

Ghostwriting has been identified by many as an honorable profession and a well-received practice. In many contexts, there is no shame in acknowledging that one either is or uses a ghostwriter. Scholars believe that Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay wrote much of George Washington's farewell speech.<sup>5</sup> Harry C. Bauer, professor emeritus of librarianship, University of Washington, Seattle, notes that in 1787 King George III of England "unwittingly became ghostwriter extraordinary."<sup>11</sup> He elected to publish two letters in *Annals of Agriculture* under the name of Ralph Robinson, one of his shepherds.

At times the practice of using a ghostwritten speech seems acceptable. However, when a ghostwritten speech is published without further indication of true authorship, there is the implication that the work is the speaker's original intellectual property.<sup>12</sup> Ethical issues often arise from the verbatim publication of such a speech.

The use of ghostwriters varies according to the norms or accepted practice in each walk of life. While it would be outrageous for poets to hire someone to ghostwrite their poems, Geoffrey Hartman, professor of English and comparative literature, Yale University, notes that having a ghostwriter has become an accepted status symbol for those in government and business. Hartman, however, warns against "executive thinking," the separation of thinking and writing that may result when decision makers delegate their writing to others.<sup>13</sup> Even the "publication" of a musical sound recording merits appropriate acknowledgment of the musicians and arrangers, as well as the composers and lyricists involved. All too often, musical soloists are not acknowledged in films.

A recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* describes author James A. Michener's use of a staff in the re-

searching and editing of his novels. Research assistants and editors review his drafts and provide suggestions on style and character development. The juncture where the writing becomes a team effort "may be fuzzy and perhaps irrelevant for Michener's readers." While stating that every word is his, Michener concedes that "I don't think the way I write books is best or even second-best. The really great writers are people... who write out of their limited experience and unlimited imagination." Michener regards as his strength the ability to create a narrative flow and a point of view that compel "a person to read to the end."<sup>14</sup>

Speaking specifically about published research reports, Robert A. Day, vice president, ISI, and director, ISI Press<sup>®</sup>, and Edward J. Huth, editor, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, address the question of authorship in their books on technical writing and publishing.<sup>15,16</sup> Day claims that "an author of a paper should be defined as one who takes intellectual responsibility for the research results being reported." (p. 16) Huth defines authors as the "persons who take public responsibility for its content." (p. 38) Public "responsibility" for a text was a major issue addressed by the reviewers who read an earlier draft of this essay. Huth, for example, maintains that in order to take public responsibility, the author must have been "intimately enough involved in gathering the scientific evidence in that paper to vouch for its soundness and the extent to which the evidence is correct." On the other hand, he adds, "if the person who writes the paper isn't capable of defending it in public, he might be regarded as a technical assistant."<sup>17</sup>

Donald Kennedy, president, Stanford University, California, recently asked the school's Committee on Research to examine the issue of academic authorship.<sup>18</sup> He stated that "matters of authorship, attribution, and acknowledgment have become more complex," while the incentives for claiming author-

ship have increased. Kennedy discussed the "forces that, in many disciplines, are pushing us toward a level of complexity in the conduct of research at which it becomes difficult to determine responsibility of authorship." As noted in *Science*, Kennedy also addressed his statement on academic authorship to the presidents of the 56 universities belonging to the American Association of Universities.<sup>19</sup>

Kennedy's statement was prompted in part by the increase in disputes between students and faculty members over credit for work to which they each have contributed. Noting that the patterns of research in many fields are changing, Kennedy emphasized that the ground rules for assigning authorship need to be reexamined. He is alarmed by the pressures in some research areas to produce an immense number of publications and noted that "the exaggerated growth of publications in some fields has become pathological."<sup>18</sup> Although the customs for listing authorship vary from one discipline to another, all authors of a research publication are responsible for its authenticity and quality. And according to the Statement of Ethical and Professional Standards of the American College Personnel Association, significant intellectual contributions should be acknowledged by coauthorship; ancillary help, whether of a technical or professional nature, is acknowledged in footnotes or introductory statements.<sup>20</sup>

Another area that sparked some debate between reviewers of this essay was the question whether editors ever function as ghostwriters. Peter Gwynne, managing editor, *Technology Review*, noted that "with magazines like *Scientific American* and *Technology Review*, editors play a major role in putting scientists' and engineers' prose into readable English, to the extent that I think they certainly become ghostwriters."<sup>21</sup> I think this pushes the definition of editing too far. It implies that some authors

have not adequately acknowledged the editor's role. From a legal standpoint, the Copyright Law<sup>22</sup> provides that the employer of a ghostwriter is the owner of the writing produced, but this begs the issue of intellectual and ethical recognition.

Milton Viorst, a writer who ghosted an autobiography of former Senator Clinton P. Anderson of New Mexico,<sup>23</sup> compares the use of a ghostwriter with the use of an attorney. He is quoted in a *Commonweal* article as explaining, "Just as a man may have a case to present in court, yet lack the knowledge of the law he needs to do it, he may also have a case to present to the public, or a contribution to make to the public record. He needs...the writer's skills—the vivid use of anecdote and so on—to plead his case before the public."<sup>24</sup> The difference here, of course, is that trial lawyers operate before a judge and jury, and we do not assign their performance to the clients.

Most pharmaceutical firms, and many physicians, recognize the value of editors and writers. They regularly employ writers to draft the results of research done by both in-house and contracted investigators. In fact, many of the monographs published and the journals sponsored by these organizations are almost entirely prepared by staff writers. However, this is not, strictly speaking, ghostwriting. Edith Schwager, editor of *Medical Communications*, the journal of the American Medical Writers Association, notes that her organization includes members who regularly help physicians write books. She adds, however, that a number of advertising and public relations agencies specialize in medical and scientific writing. Their employees write everything from advertisements to books for engineering and pharmaceutical companies, among other types of clients. If this is true, then Schwager rationalizes in saying that they should not be called ghostwriters. This is quite different from the role of editors at scientific publishing houses.

They are often called upon to rewrite extensive portions of books or journal articles because writing and scientific skill "seldom reside in the same person."<sup>25</sup>

Many research institutions, university publication offices, and government agencies employ "author's editors" to edit manuscripts. According to Sheryl R. Bryson, senior editor, East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, these individuals are responsible for editing the author's words to maximize their clarity for the reader and the publisher. Bryson notes that interest in the role of editors has increased in recent years. Indeed, two sessions were devoted to the role of author's editors at an international meeting of the Council of Biology Editors.<sup>26</sup>

The use of ghostwriters seems roughly analogous to the use of apprentices, or helpers, in the studios of Renaissance painters and sculptors. According to the late Martin Wackernagel, former chairman, Art History Department, Münster University, Federal Republic of Germany, Leonardo da Vinci is credited with painting sections of Verrocchio's *Baptism of Christ* and, possibly, with producing some of Verrocchio's sculptural works.<sup>27</sup> But this seems farfetched indeed in comparison to the situation that exists in thousands of modern research laboratories. Large-scale experiments are performed with the help of laboratory technicians and other personnel. But even in smaller institutions, "help" is often needed and rendered in one form or another. The ethical issue is to define when, and if, that help needs to be explicitly acknowledged. What kind of help was rendered and how much? More specifically, were the ideas those of the indicated author or of the helpers? It is extremely difficult to believe that Leonardo simply executed an idea expressed by Verrocchio, as one might paint by numbers.

When editors, writers, and reviewers contribute to a piece, how should they be acknowledged? Should explicit ac-

knowledge be done on a line-by-line or word-by-word basis? In some cases I've sent an essay to 30 different reviewers for comment. This is done to ensure a high degree of accuracy in *Current Contents*<sup>®</sup> (*CC*<sup>®</sup>). But if one of them happens to coin a choice phrase that is used in the essay, is it necessary to credit that person publicly and explicitly? Sometimes, the public becomes aware that a choice phrase has been "misattributed." For example, it is widely known that the term "military-industrial complex," attributed to Dwight D. Eisenhower, was created by speech writer Malcolm Moos when he helped Eisenhower draft his farewell address.<sup>28</sup>

Alternatively, when a colleague points out an error, and we decide to omit an entire paragraph from a manuscript, should we refer to that colleague at the point of the omitted paragraph? Acknowledgments could be carried to absurd lengths. However, if someone has contributed significantly to an article, then we ought to acknowledge this help. Harriet Zuckerman, Columbia University, and Merton have described the unwritten rule of scholarship—that we review and referee manuscripts to help advance knowledge through such communal exchange.<sup>29</sup> This is of course part of the pervasive ethos of science that Merton described over 40 years ago.<sup>30</sup>

In this vein, Lewis M. Branscomb, vice president and chief scientist, IBM, Armonk, New York, also discusses the responsibility of the scientist "to participate in both the peer review of primary literature and the authorship of reviews in areas in which he is competent."<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, I have often discussed the role of scientific and scholarly editors as gatekeepers of science.<sup>32</sup> Although journal editors and referees are the "stewards of scientific quality," Branscomb emphasizes that authors of scientific works are ultimately responsible for ensuring that their works meet the highest standards.<sup>31</sup>

The failure to carefully distinguish the legitimate roles of authors, editors, and ghostwriters often leads to confusion among administrators. Sensing an ethical dilemma, some may go as far as to refuse the help even of professional editors. Their hesitation to do so denies legitimate work opportunities to editors with special literary talents.

I suspect that if these matters were discussed openly, scientists and editors would feel less anxious about their collaborative roles. How sad a ghostwriter must feel when the only contributions made by a client are some vaguely sketched ideas and the payment of a fee.

In *CC* we regularly publish essays of a kind that can be described as "boilerplate"—for example, our series on most-cited papers or our journal analyses. I take pride in the fact that several members of my staff can assist me in composing such pieces. By now, Amy Stone, manager of bibliographic research, and others know the intricacies involved in identifying unambiguously the papers or books that have been cited in a particular time period or in a given field. There is a standard list of characteristics we examine in each group of papers. And yet there are invariably observations I make which are unique to my experience or to that of a group of reviewers I may choose.

On occasion I have considered expanding the editorial pages of *CC* to include a feature that would only report the data for a potential essay, without my personal or other editorial observations. We might simply compile and present tables of most-cited journals in different specialties each week. However, even this "bare-bones" approach would still require preparation and screening of the data by some qualified person.

For now, I read and approve every word—indeed, every character—in all the essays published under my name, with due acknowledgment of the assistance I have received. I might add, however, that there is a tendency to trivialize

the task of compiling bibliographic or other data, or of supervising production of the essays. It is remarkable how often the trained eye is necessary to prevent absurd errors in judgment or in details.

We realize this when we make mistakes, for example, involving the confusion of homographs—persons with the same surname and initials or journals with identical abbreviations. In a moment of pressure I recently did not follow up on my instinct to check an ambiguous reference. As a result, we reported that a classic paper by P. Job<sup>33</sup> was published in *Annali di Chimica*, instead of *Annales de Chimie*.<sup>34</sup> Both journals are frequently abbreviated as *Ann. Chim.* but should be qualified by adding either Rome or Paris to distinguish them. One of our readers pointed out the error.<sup>35</sup> Job was, in fact, a Frenchman associated with the Laboratory of General Chemistry at the University of Lyon.

The lesson of all this is clear enough: it is important to work closely with a ghostwriter or editor and to recognize the difference between the two. Both should have the literary and technical knowledge to clarify your ideas and to make them readable. But unless you are willing to recognize that the situation requires that you use a ghostwriter, and you have the audacity to make that public, you should accept the help of an editor. Whether you use an editor or ghostwriter, it is important to develop and clarify your ideas and convey them fully to the person(s) helping you.

If you decide to use editors and don't want them to become de facto ghostwriters, you should keep an eye on each successive draft to make sure that your developing ideas have been incorporated and to correct errors and misunderstandings. Only in this way can you honestly "assume responsibility" for the published piece. And when you do, you should indicate the nature and extent of the major assistance you have received. The preface to a book is, of course, the

place where one acknowledges the exact role of the ghostwriter, editor, and colleagues. In articles, such acknowledgments are included in footnotes or endnotes.

On a number of occasions I have described our plans for an *Atlas/Encyclopedia of Science*.<sup>36,37</sup> In the traditional encyclopedia, scholars are asked to write "essays" that vary in length from a few hundred to several thousand words. Although editors may play their usual role, it is the scholars who develop the material. In the ISI approach to encyclopedias, we first systematically map the entire world of scientific knowledge. For each of thousands of topics, we identify the core literature. To better demonstrate their interconnections, we create maps of these topics. Our editors then turn the maps and core bibliographies over to experts they select. These experts are also provided with an up-to-date bibliography of papers citing into that core. They are asked to condense all this information into a prospective review containing approximately a thousand words.

In some cases science journalists prepare drafts that are sent to one or more experts on that topic who are asked to referee, edit, or add to the content as appropriate. While we expect such preliminary drafts to be altered by experts, who are encouraged to add their own distinctly personal parenthetical remarks, it would not be wholly unexpected for a first draft to be accepted verbatim. This is collaborative writing and editing at its best because it combines the knowledge and the authority of the expert with the skills of the editor-writer and the systematic screening of the literature by the artificially intelligent machine. Experts can accept public responsibility for the content, but that is quite distinct from the writing and the proper acknowledgment of authorship.

In the event that the expert simply endorses the content, no ethical dilemma is

involved if that is made clear. Let me reiterate, however, that most *Atlas* chapters will be initiated by experts following prescribed editorial guidelines.

Science and scholarship are the thinking person's domain, and though we may later change our thoughts, we should know when they are ours. The source of particular words or phrases may become obliterated. However, if we adhere to

ethical behavior of the kind described above, each of us can use the full spectrum of editorial assistance in clear conscience.

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*My thanks to Joan Lipinsky Cochran, Jane Cohen, and C.J. Fiscus for their help in the preparation of this essay.*

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