

Authorship Issues in Academic & Research Publishing

A brief note: definition, ICMJE criteria, types of disputes, significance, and a decision flowchart

1. Definition

Authorship refers to the formal attribution of credit to individual(s) who have made identifiable intellectual contributions to a piece of scholarly work (a research paper, review, book, or dataset), thereby entitling them to be named in the byline and to bear responsibility and accountability for its content.

Authorship issues are the ethical, professional, and interpersonal disputes that arise when the assignment of authorship — who is included, excluded, or in what order — does not accurately reflect actual intellectual contribution.

1.1 ICMJE Criteria for Authorship

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) — widely used across disciplines — holds that authorship should be based on satisfying **all four** of the following:

- Substantial contribution to conception/design of the work, or acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data.
- Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content.
- Final approval of the version to be published.
- Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work, ensuring integrity and accuracy.

Anyone who does not meet all four criteria should be moved to the **Acknowledgements** section rather than listed as an author.

2. Types of Authorship Issues

2.1 Ghost Authorship

A person who made a substantial contribution (e.g., writing the manuscript) is **omitted** from the byline — often seen when medical-writing or industry staff draft a paper uncredited.

2.2 Guest / Gift Authorship

A person who made **no meaningful contribution** is included as an author — typically to lend prestige, seniority, or influence to the paper.

2.3 Honorary Authorship

A senior figure (department head, supervisor) is listed **out of courtesy or hierarchy** rather than genuine contribution; closely related to gift authorship.

2.4 Coercive / Forced Authorship

A senior researcher **pressures** a junior colleague or student into adding their name, leveraging institutional power rather than earned credit.

2.5 Orphan / Denied Authorship

A genuine contributor is **deliberately excluded**, often after a dispute, departure from the institution, or deliberate credit-taking by others.

2.6 Authorship-Order Disputes

Disagreement over the **sequence** of names (first author, corresponding author, senior/last author), which affects perceived contribution and career credit.

2.7 Mutual / Duplicate Claim Disputes

Two or more parties independently and legitimately claim primary credit for the same idea, dataset, or finding — common in collaborative or multi-institutional projects.

3. Significance of Addressing Authorship Issues

3.1 Academic & Scientific Integrity

Accurate authorship preserves the credibility of the scholarly record and prevents misrepresentation of who is responsible for the claims made.

3.2 Accountability

Only genuine contributors can be held answerable for errors, data integrity, and ethical conduct — including in cases of retraction or misconduct investigations.

3.3 Career & Professional Impact

Authorship position and count directly affect hiring, promotion, tenure, grant applications, and citation metrics — making disputes high-stakes for individuals.

3.4 Fair Credit Distribution

Proper attribution recognises the real intellectual labour of students, junior researchers, and collaborators, discouraging exploitation.

3.5 Legal & Institutional Consequences

Authorship misconduct can trigger retractions, journal sanctions, institutional disciplinary action, and loss of funding eligibility.

3.6 Trust in Peer Review & Publication Systems

Transparent authorship practices sustain confidence among editors, reviewers, funders, and the wider research community.

4. Flowchart: Determining Authorship (ICMJE-Based)

The decision flow below shows how a contributor's role is typically evaluated against the four ICMJE criteria in sequence — a practical tool for resolving disputes before submission.

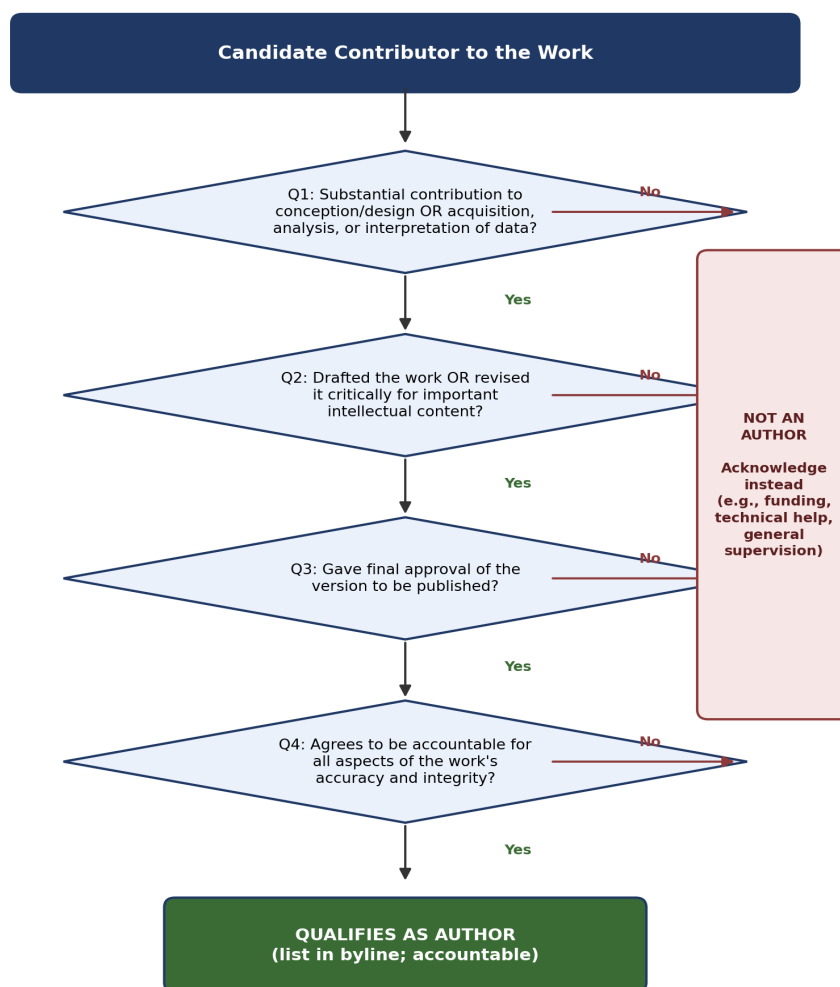


Fig. 1 — Sequential decision flow for qualifying as an author (based on ICMJE criteria).

5. Good Practices to Prevent Disputes

Practice	Purpose
Agree on authorship early	Discuss and document roles/order at the start of the project, not after drafting.
Use a contribution statement	State each author's specific role (e.g., CRediT taxonomy) alongside the byline.
Revisit before submission	Re-confirm the author list and order once the final draft is ready.
Follow journal/institutional policy	Apply ICMJE or equivalent guidelines consistently across all collaborators.
Keep records	Maintain e-mails/notes on who did what, to resolve disputes with evidence if needed.

Reference basis: International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) — Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work.