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# Case Study: Co-authorship

Or how to publish without losing  
friends or colleagues

## Janet Goodall

Janet is a lecturer in Educational Leadership and Management, in the Department of Education at the University of Bath. Her main research interests are school leadership, parental engagement and school policy.



A widely published researcher, Janet has written papers (as both a single and co-author) on parental engagement in children's learning, as well as other issues in school leadership and management.

While at the University of Warwick, Janet co-delivered a presentation for the Research Student Skills Programme on her experience as a co-author. She has valuable advice to share on the topic in the case study that follows.

“ I have published with other researchers a number of times. The largest number of authors involved was six. Scientific colleagues seemed to think nothing of 30 – 40 authors and more power to them. ”

## What routes are there into co-authoring?

If you are an academic, the chances are high that sooner or later, you will be in a position to publish – a report, an article, a book chapter – with someone else who is in more or less the same line of work. If you're in the sciences, this has probably been a part of your working life since you were a postgraduate student. But if you're in the humanities, the experience might be a novel one, even to an experienced researcher; we tend to work much more on our own than our scientific colleagues, apparently.

Getting into co-authoring can be as simple as having a mutual interest crop up during a conversation over a cup of tea (or in this case bacon sandwiches). It can come about through joint research interest or, probably most commonly, through a joint research project.

## How do you find co-authors?

Some of this will depend on culture – the culture of your discipline, your department, and even of your research subgroup. I've published with people I'm professionally related to in a wide variety of ways - those senior to me, colleagues at more or less the same level as I am, in the same field and in different fields, my postgraduate students and even my daughter.

If you supervise postgraduate students, and do not publish with them, you might want to consider why that is – it's a reasonably supportive way to introduce them to the sometimes chaotic process that is peer review.

## Why would you want a co-author?

I've had people suggest that too many co-authored papers are bad for the CV. Certainly I think it's important to have single authored papers to wave around if necessary but co-authorship is also important, I think. When I see a CV with no co-authored papers, in a field where co-authorship is common, I begin to wonder if perhaps the CV owner does not play well with others.

Obviously, if you do a research project with someone else, you should at least consider publishing with them. There are other reasons as well, such as finding a co-author whose expertise can support, or indeed supplement yours. I'm a qualitative type, and have valued publishing with a mainly quantitative researcher. It's a neat division of labour – I stay away from the stats, and he doesn't do thematic analysis of our open interview questions.

You might also find that simple discussion of an idea leads to a joint paper, because someone else can help to flesh out your ideas. I have just such a paper under review at the moment.

## How do you manage the relationship and responsibilities between co-authors?

The first thing to realise in joint writing is that there is no real possibility of equality – the idea that two people will do exactly the same amount of work on any given piece of writing is fairly ludicrous. It's not going to happen – and trying to make it happen ("I spent two hours on this last night, and it looks like he spent 20 minutes on it") is a sure road to losing friends and fraught working relationships.

However, equity does exist. You may not put in the same number of hours (or days or weeks), but the chances are high that no two academics will have the same amount of time to devote to a given project, anyway.

It's important to ensure some sense of equity – that you are both authors – that you are both (or all) contributing substantially to the right written work. Otherwise, what you have is not a co-author but someone to acknowledge and thank as having been helpful. Again this may vary from discipline to discipline.

## **What advice would you give on how to be a good co-author?**

The main answer to this is simple – treat co-authorship as yet another professional duty. And be honest with your colleagues – don't take on a project if you know you won't have time to devote to it. No one needs that kind of reputation, believe me. If you want to be involved but won't have time for another month or so, say so – maybe your colleagues can write the first draft to be ready for your comments when you can come up for air.

Be clear about the whole process. Set (and keep!) deadlines about initial drafts, comments, rewrites – even submission dates.

As a practical suggestion, be sure you are good at two things:

- version control
- backing up data

Save each iteration of a paper with a new name. In one joint authored paper, I changed from version names to dates after typing "version 46" made me lose the will to live. Put the new name in the footer and never, ever save over an older version with the same name. That just guarantees a request to put back that table you took out earlier, somewhere down the line.

And back everything up. Use the cloud, use your institution's servers, use an external hard drive – anything to ensure you never have to tell colleagues that you've mislaid the final version.

## How do you decide who is the first/corresponding author?

It may be helpful, particularly if this is the first time you've written with a particular colleague, to agree these things at the outset. It could save an acrimony-laden delay to submission down the line.

Disciplines and people differ on this issue – some opt for alphabetical order, which seems very hard on the Williams and Xenophons of academia, but is jam for Aaron and Abrams. Sometimes it's quite clear that one person has done the lion's share of the work and their name probably comes first.

## Final thoughts

Co-authored work is a staple part of modern academic work, and long may it remain so. After all, many of us went into academia – the college of scholars – precisely because we hoped to find like-minded people with whom to work and with whom to discuss that work. Two (or three, or 40) heads may not always be better than one, but often that second (or 40th) mind provides insight and skills that would be missing from a single authored paper.

Being a joint author can be a difficult thing, requiring tact and diplomacy, but it's part of the academic skill set and well worth developing.

## A word from jobs.ac.uk

We would like to thank Janet Goodall for sharing her experience and advice with us. We hope that you have found this case study useful. You can find more about co-authorship on [our blogs](#).

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