

Ghost Unwriting

A ghostwriter is a writer who gives the credit of authorship to someone else. Why? Because he gets paid well. Who pays? Either the author or a third party who has a message to get across to a wide audience. Why doesn't the author write it himself? Because he is not a good writer or he does not know the subject or he does not have the time. Sometimes the author is illiterate! Why, then, is he the author? Because he is famous (or infamous) and his name sells. Or he is famous and he wants to stay famous so he hires a ghostwriter to keep his name in the public domain.

Celebrities use ghostwriters to write their biographies. Politicians use them to write speeches. College students use them to write term papers. Ghost writing of scientific articles is, I think, of recent origin and appears to be mostly an outgrowth of the intense competition between companies in the health care industry. It goes something like this. A company sponsors research designed to find differences between its product and the competition. Once the study is completed, it hires a professional writer to write the article and asks one or more thought leaders, usually members of the investigative team, to be the lead author.

Is this a bad thing? As a general rule, professional writers are much better writers than men of science, so the final product is well written. Further, the men of science generally vet the article carefully, so the final product is of high scientific quality. For the scientific community, these are good things.

As a general rule, the company that sponsors the research also vets the article to be sure that its products come out looking good. Further, they have become incredibly adept at devising innuendos that make their product look better than the competition. For example, a recent ghost written six-page

article depicted the theoretic differences between serious side effects of different drugs in a full page graph showing a difference of 10%. Never mind that it was theoretic and that the difference had no clinical relevance, the visual impact was enormous and all but the most sophisticated reader would come away with the impression that the one drug is much safer than the others. These are bad things for the scientific communities.

They are also bad for the author. The author never actually learns to write. He may learn to edit and to vet, but he also learns something else. He learns to accept a certain amount of duplicitousness in himself. He gets credit for something he did not do.

So much for ghost writing. In the spring of 2004, it was disclosed that a major pharmaceutical company purged the name of one of its employees (a statistician) as an author of a study that she helped design and write. Why? Because the conclusions of the paper were unflattering to their drug. When the paper was presented at a major scientific meeting, the employee was listed as an author. In the published version, her name was deleted. That is ghost unwriting. There is something bad about that too.

The solution? There is no good one. Each must obey his own conscience at the least, editors and publishers should insist that, everyone that materially contributes to a paper be listed as an author, and that each author signs an affidavit to that effect.

Winston Churchill did not use ghostwriters!

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