

Should I use a pseudonym?



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Authors may use a pseudonym

Academic publication is enriched by contributions from patients and members of the public who bring their lived experience to the task of authoring or co-authoring. These authors are sometimes called *consumers*, *expert patients* or *experts by experience*. In this guide, they will be called *public co-authors*.

The case for securing anonymity for research participants has been set out by Flanagan, Bauchner & Fontanarosa¹ and challenged by Svalastog & Eriksson², but less has been said about authors. As long as such authors can be contacted via the corresponding author, it should be acceptable for them to use an incomplete name, initials or a pen name to protect their privacy. In this way, the scientific publication meets expectations of integrity and transparency, while the author retains the degree of privacy they want. In the exceptional situation where no-one on the writing team is willing to disclose their identity by taking on the role of corresponding author, a journal editor may be willing to act as mediator.

The issues set out here apply to all authors of academic papers, but may be more salient for public co-authors, as such experts by experience have joined the writing team precisely because of their personal experience. As more and more research is co-produced, editors will receive a corresponding increase in the number of manuscripts from writing teams which include authors who wish to conceal their identity.

Some examples of author anonymity are found below and as part of the companion guide *How to involve the public as co-authors*³. This lithograph by MC Escher might represent the relationship between Public and Academic Authors.

Why choose a pen name?

Some public co-authors do wish to remain anonymous, as their story is sensitive, blows the whistle on corrupt or illegal activity or carries stigma. Others may be planning to move into a new phase of life and want their old life to be forgotten. A third group of authors may wish to protect their family's privacy. In some jurisdictions, authors may endanger their own lives by reporting findings that are deeply unpopular with research participants, politicians or the public. Yet more live within traditional cultures where their background, gender or ethnicity would lead to their material being discounted, as was the case for French mathematician Marie-Sophie Germain (1776–1831) who was self-taught, became a pioneer of elasticity theory and worked on Fermat's Last Theorem. She corresponded with Gauss and other famous scientists under the pseudonym Monsieur LeBlanc, as women were discriminated against in education.

In some cultural settings, one's complete given name represents a major disclosure that is reserved for family and close friends. For these, and perhaps other reasons too, authors may wish to conceal their identity.

Many famous people choose a pseudonym, stage name or pen name, including Woody Allen, Alexander Graham Bell (who wrote for the National Geographic Society as HA Largelamb), John le Carre, John Denver, Whoopi Goldberg, Ben Kingsley, Spike Lee, Demi Moore, George Orwell, Meg Ryan, Dr Seuss, Patience Strong, Ice T and Mark Twain. Some authors, having achieved fame with their own name, go on to write more under a pseudonym, not to dodge the critical gaze of the publisher (as with anonymised peer review in academia), but for a more substantial motive. Agatha Christie, Benjamin Franklin, J.K Rowling, C.S. Lewis and many others ask for their work to be judged by the public on its merit, rather than by reference to their reputation. As Vainio writes⁴, *'anonymity should help all parties to focus on what has been said instead of who has said it.'*

The issues that arise for research respondents may also apply to the authors themselves when they are employing autoethnographic and other reflective approaches in which the author's own experience is included and acknowledged. One might also ponder why conventional research ethics asserts that those who provide research evidence should usually be anonymised while those who process and report it may not.

Researchers that adopt a pseudonym would do well to heed the warning by Scheper-Hughes⁵ that the mask of anonymity can permit the author to become lazy and self-interested, rather than disciplined, moderate and accountable. This stance is challenged by Vainio⁶ who argues for explicit and careful anonymisation as a mechanism for gaining vital distance between the lives of respondents and the data that they dispassionately analyse.

There is some academic discussion of anonymisation for research respondents, such as in the work by Barratt & Lenton⁷, Lahman et al⁸, Berkhout⁹ and Petrova et al¹⁰. A poignant example is the work by Grinyer¹¹ that describes bereaved parents using real names to honour the memory of the child they had lost, while other parents with a child who had survived cancer chose a pseudonym to protect their family's privacy. Moreover, the impact of concealing or disclosing one's own name may change over time, as personal, professional and political circumstances change, and there is no effective way to retrieve information after it has entered the public domain.

In Mukungu's work¹² with Namibian women who campaign for the ending of violence against women and girls, the risks of harm that were associated with research publication paled into insignificance in contrast with the personal cost of standing up for justice in their own community. Some of her respondents had spent a lifetime bravely identifying with their message and so would not hide behind a pseudonym but instead insisted on their own names being used. Disclosure can empower, just as confidentiality can injure, a point reinforced by young authors in Wilkinson & Wilkinson¹³.

However, the use of one's own name cannot be equated with a desire for a better world. Blee¹⁴ illustrated this in her study of racist groups where some members wished to forego anonymity and use their real names to promote their racist agenda. So it is clear that the decision to use one's given name or a pseudonym is complex, individual and unpredictable.

Hidden in plain sight

Haarmans and colleagues¹⁵ worked with a group of eight serving prisoners who provided quotes for the published report in a peer-reviewed journal. Some chose a pseudonym while others decided to use their first name, and this was honoured in the paper, although only the authors knew which were pseudonyms and which were not. In contrast, two authors on Martin's team were named in their paper¹⁶ as prisoner co-researchers.

Consult guidance documents

Here's what the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors said in response to an inquiry dated 2019:

In rare circumstances, editors allow for anonymous publication, for example when identification of the author(s) might lead to a breach in patient confidentiality or other harm to a patient. Authors must nonetheless meet the criteria we have established for authorship. The specific situation would need to be discussed with the editor of the journal who would need to decide if the present circumstances warrant author anonymity in light of the challenges it poses to accountability.

International Committee of Medical Journal Editors

More recent advice is available in the form of Good Publishing Practice guidelines (most recently GPP 2022) from the International Society for Medical Publication Professionals¹⁷.

Academic editors may consider if they take a different position to their sister journalists who *do* offer the option of anonymity under specific circumstances¹⁸ and support its uptake:

Identify sources clearly. The public is entitled to as much information as possible to judge the reliability and motivations of sources. Consider sources' motives before promising anonymity. Reserve anonymity for sources who may face danger, retribution, or other harm, and have information that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Explain why anonymity was granted.

Society for Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, 2014

In one research funding application the team wanted to include a forensic patient as a co-applicant. For reasons of personal safety, the person was unwilling to have their full name published by the funding body on the application. Guidance from NIHR INVOLVE¹⁹ on engaging public co-applicants acknowledges the possibility of anonymisation.

"Care should be taken when reporting research on sensitive topics, which may inadvertently link public co-applicants to a condition. Publishing guidelines for journals usually do not allow submissions that include anonymous contributors or pseudonyms, but in rare circumstances editors can allow for anonymous publication (for example, when identification of an author might lead to a breach in patient confidentiality or other harm to a patient). Authors must nonetheless meet the established criteria for authorship. The specific situation would need to be discussed with the journal editor, who would need to decide if the circumstances warrant author anonymity while considering the challenges it poses to accountability."

Combat fraud

Published guidelines for academic journals may assist editors to refine their thinking, justify their stance and track their practice, but there is a potential downside to placing such a document in the public domain. Like with algorithms that detect banking fraud or spamming, the threshold for triggering an alert needs to be kept secret in order to foil malicious attempts to design a workaround. However, in our field, volume will be low, cases diverse and the kudos attached to including public co-authors may outweigh abstract fears

of fraud. Indeed, the evidence for fraud by academics is far stronger than for public co-authors, as seen by Retraction Watch²⁰ who list over 37,000 retractions of academic papers since 2000. It might therefore be argued that excessive vigilance applied to public co-authors would be disproportionate and unjustified. There remains a need to avoid any vestige of 'forged authorship' through which the identity of someone else, such as a high status academic, is stolen and used for gain.

Others have explored the topic of anonymity too, including Bohannon²¹, Prakash²² and Wendl²³, and noted, amongst many other things, that the selection of a pseudonym conceals some aspects of the author while expressing others. Commentators such as Rao & Rohatgi²⁴ and Guenther²⁵ have shown how any attempt to achieve anonymity is doomed in the age of the internet, while Dobreski & Kwaśnik²⁶ show how library cataloguing systems are changing to reveal more about authors. Meanwhile, Finn²⁷ observed that pen names can be misused to make false claims, so using a pseudonym must not be a vehicle for presenting hoax data, as Bohannon (op cit), and Lindsay, Boghossian & Pluckrose²⁸ have graphically illustrated.

Use initials

It may be possible to spot authors using initials only, such as Anthony X²⁹, but not those who add fictitious initials, such as the K adopted by the author Joanne Rowling. Incomplete names will be more difficult to detect, as some forenames are also used as surnames, and cultural and language differences mean that recognising incomplete names outside one's own culture is hard.

Anonymous student

Pseudonyms will be impossible to detect unless people use the direct 'Anonymous' or PubMed and similar places may be searched, perhaps with the help of a guide. For example, Taboada et al³⁰ guide us through the zbMATH database and note that the creator of Student's t test used a pseudonym in publishing this widely-used statistical tool. 'Student' was the pen name of William Sealy Gosset, adopted because his employer, the Guinness brewery, had banned staff from publishing.

A brief look at PubMed suggests that authors calling themselves 'Patient' may be using their real surname. Meanwhile, cataloguing systems used to be unreliable, so author data were sometimes corrupted and, in this context, 'anonymous' means that the archivists no longer have the information.

Comic name

A flamboyantly humorous name will perhaps signal that this is a pseudonym, such as Sally Popkorn³¹. But who would know that FDC Willard³², the co-author working with physicist

and mathematician Jack H. Hetherington, was his cat? Such examples bring the use of pseudonyms into disrepute and may in the end deny publication to legitimate authors.

Publish under a group name

Sometimes a group of academics or public co-authors choose to submerge their individual identities into a group name which appears as a single author. Good search terms might be 'Group', 'Forum' or 'Collective'. Whilst this is not the central goal of this project, it may (i) show that there are indeed examples of this practice; and (ii) create the opportunity to email the corresponding author and ask if individual group members have co-authored papers in their own right. Such individuals might then be willing to reveal their papers which have been published using initials, incomplete names or pseudonyms.

Some academic collectives publish under a name that appears to be that of an individual, such as Nicolas Bourbaki³³ and Arthur Lancelot Besse³⁴. The principle is the same – that authors must be contactable and accountable.

Ways to find out more

Get up to date

Public authors should have the choice of using their own name or initials, an incomplete name or pseudonym as long as the paper has a corresponding author. The case for this is strengthened if one is able to point to a range of articles that have already been published in prestigious peer-reviewed journals. Then, armed with these examples, it is possible to seek:

- support from individual editors
- amendment where necessary of the guidelines for authors published by specific journals
- support from editors' groups, such as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors³⁵.
- Review the Good Publishing Practice guidelines (GPP 2022) which replaced GPP3³⁶.

Ask people who research journalism practices

A search within the academic disciplines that investigate librarianship, publishing, journalism and bibliometrics using terms such as 'pseudonyms' 'anonymisation', 'noms de plume' or 'consumer authors' may locate people interested in our question. These experts in trends in academic publishing may have additional ideas. For example, Hays³⁷ has studied small circulation journals, known as zines, to uncover attitudes about the use of pseudonyms, and the findings may point to views that might also be found amongst authors of academic papers.

Look for book chapters

Whilst our ideal target is papers in high impact academic journals, examples from edited academic textbooks may also be of interest. For example, Denning T (ed) *Oxford Textbook of Old Age Psychiatry*, 2nd edition (2013). Oxford: Oxford University Press. This book includes:

- chapter 30 about living with about dementia which was written by a couple using their own name
- chapter 41 about the experience of depression written by an author using a pseudonym
- chapter 47 which is about long-term illness co-authored by a named academic and an expert by experience who chooses to remain anonymous.

Inquire on social media

One might circulate an inquiry on social media and see what comes back.

Learn from other settings

Anonymisation is used to protect some people brought before the courts and family members in significant case reviews³⁸.

¹ Flanagan A, Bauchner H, Fontanarosa PB (2020) Patient and Study Participant Rights to Privacy in Journal Publication. *JAMA*. 323(21):2147–2150. doi:10.1001/jama.2020.3590

² Svalastog A-L & Eriksson S (2010) You can use my name; you don't have to steal my story – a critique of anonymity in indigenous studies. *Developing World Bioethics*, 10: 104-110. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-8847.2010.00276.x>

³ Bates P [How-to-involve-the-public-as-co-authors.pdf](#)

⁴ Vainio A (2012) Beyond research ethics: anonymity as 'ontology', 'analysis' and 'independence'. *Qualitative Research*, 13(6), 685-698. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112459669>

⁵ Scheper-Hughes, N. (2000). Ire in Ireland. *Ethnography*, 1(1), 117-140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138002230660>.

⁶ Vainio, A. (2012). Beyond research ethics: anonymity as 'ontology', 'analysis' and 'independence'. *Qualitative Research*, 13(6), 685-698. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112459669>

⁷ Barratt MJ, Lenton S (2010) Beyond recruitment? Participatory online research with people who use drugs. *International Journal of Internet Research Ethics*. 3(1):69-86.

⁸ Lahman MKE, Rodriguez KL, Moses L, Griffin KM, Mendoza BM & Yacoub W (2015) A Rose By Any Other Name Is Still a Rose? Problematising Pseudonyms in Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(5), 445-453. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800415572391>

⁹ Berkhout SG (2013) Private talk: Testimony, evidence, and the practice of anonymization in research. *IJFAB: International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics*. Mar;6(1):19-45.

¹⁰ Petrova E, Dewing J, Camilleri M. Confidentiality in participatory research: Challenges from one study. *Nursing Ethics*. 2015;23(4):442-454. doi:[10.1177/0969733014564909](https://doi.org/10.1177/0969733014564909)

¹¹ Grinyer A (2002) The anonymity of research participants: assumptions, ethics and practicalities. *Social research update*. Jan;36(1):4.

¹² Mukungu, K. (2017). "How Can You Write About a Person Who Does Not Exist?": Rethinking Pseudonymity and Informed Consent in Life History Research. *Social Sciences*, 6(3), 86. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci6030086>.

¹³ Wilkinson C & Wilkinson S (2017) Doing it write: Representation and responsibility in writing up participatory research involving young people. *Social Inclusion*. Sep 26;5(3):219-27.

¹⁴ Blee KM (1999) The Perils of Privilege. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 24: 993-997. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-4469.1999.tb00414.x>

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- ¹⁷ [Contact Us](#)
- ¹⁸ [Academics anonymous | The Guardian](#)
- ¹⁹ NHS R&D Forum, the Health Research Authority and INVOLVE (2019) *Public Co-Applicants in Research – guidance on roles and responsibilities* <https://arc-nwc.nihr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Co-AppsGuidance2019-4.pdf>.
- ²⁰ [Retraction Watch – Tracking retractions as a window into the scientific process](#)
- ²¹ Bohannon J (2016) Fight over author pseudonyms could flare again. *Science* **351**,902-902. DOI:[10.1126/science.351.6276.902](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.351.6276.902)
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- ³² [F. D. C. Willard - Wikipedia](#)
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- ³⁴ [Arthur Besse - Wikipedia](#)
- ³⁵ [ICMJE | Home](#)
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- ³⁸ For example, see [Significant case review.pdf](#)