Editorial

Good, bad and misguided authors

We are concerned that a proportion of authors submitting manuscripts for publication in Soil Biology & Biochemistry fail to understand their responsibilities as authors as well as their interrelationships with those who referee and edit their manuscripts. We consider we should make our views public in the hope that authors will rectify the causes of our concern. If authors respond positively to our remarks then we believe we would be able to make more rapid decisions on the status of submitted manuscripts and that the process from submission to publication will be further reduced.

Most of the papers published in Soil Biology & Biochemistry have more than one author. In Volume 31 only 14 (6%) of the 233 papers published had single authorship: the 219 multi-authored papers had an average of 3.1 authors. We have the impression that in some cases not all of the authors named were fully involved in the process of preparing the manuscript for publication. Often we find that well known authors (supervisors?) or the designated corresponding author will blame junior authors (doctoral students?) for errors, omissions and other calamities. There is also the lamentable attitude described by R. Webster and M. A. Oliver (Journal of Soil Science, 44, 189, 1993) where “authors submit their papers, unfinished, inadequately researched, and carelessly assembled and typed, in the full expectation that the referees and editors together will make them respectable”. Occasionally we discover manuscripts have been compiled and submitted or revised without the knowledge of the named co-authors. Senior scientists encouraging by example the development of such bad habits and irresponsible attitudes may hamper the advancement of young scientists working under their direction. We are not impressed by such examples of gross lack of professional concern.

With regard to authorship, we believe it is the duty of all individuals to satisfy certain criteria if they are to be named and share the credit for a multi-author manuscript. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors has published a Special Report on Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals. We quote part of the section of the 4th edition of their report on Authorship. It states the requirements that need to be met if one wishes to be named as a co-author.

“All persons designated as authors should qualify for authorship. Each author of a paper should have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for the content”.

“Authorship credit should be based only on substantial contributions to (a) conception and design, or analysis and interpretation of data; and to (b) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and on (c) final approval of the version to be published. Conditions (a), (b) and (c) must all be met”. (Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals. The New England Journal of Medicine, January 23 1997, Vol. 336, No 4, available on http://www.nejm.org/general/text/requirements).

We propose to insert the following statement in the Guide for Authors:

“The corresponding author of a manuscript for Soil Biology & Biochemistry has the duty to ensure that all the named authors have seen and approved the original and any revised version of the paper and are in agreement with its content before it is submitted to the Editorial Office. Each author should have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for the content. The corresponding author should also ensure that all those who have contributed to the research are acknowledged appropriately either as a co-author or in the Acknowledgements. In addition, the corresponding author has the prime responsibility for ensuring the paper is correctly prepared according to the Guide for Authors. Submitted manuscripts not complying with the Guide for Authors may be returned to the authors for possible revision and resubmission”.

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We appreciate that some authors are disadvantaged in having to publish in English when it is not their native language. Referees, Subject Editors and Chief Editors routinely make minor corrections to language and presentation but can not be relied upon to do so. Occasionally we receive manuscripts written in language which is almost incomprehensible and it is unfortunate if this is the basis for rejection rather than scientific content. Authors who are uncertain of their ability to write clear scientific English are reminded that it is essential that they consult a native English speaker (who may be a co-author of their manuscript) before submission. Whilst the reviewers and editorial group will make every effort to improve the presentation of good science, papers that are difficult to comprehend because of serious shortcomings in the use of the English language will not be put through the refereeing process and will be returned to the authors for revision.

It is our hope that authors will take note of and follow these requirements. Each author of a manuscript also has the duty to read and follow the instructions we give in our Guide for Authors as well as personally check (and check again) the content of submitted and revised versions of the manuscript. This will lighten the load of referees, Subject Editors and the Chief Editors and lessen delays to the publication of worthy scientific research.

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D.C. Coleman
R.G. Burns
J.S. Waid