



## Authorship: Who's on First?

Dear Labby,

I am an early-stage investigator who is becoming independent. I have a dilemma for which I am receiving conflicting advice, so I'd like to hear your opinion. I am getting ready to submit my first truly independent manuscript. I came up with the ideas, found funding to support the work, did some of the bench work and all of the writing. Am I first author or last author? I typically think of the first author as the one who did most of the bench work and writing, and the last author as the "senior author" in whose laboratory the work was done. By these standards, I would be first and last author—but that can't happen. Of course, I have a few other names on the manuscript—

two technicians, a postdoctoral fellow from a neighboring lab who helped, and a pathologist who contributed to one of the figures.

What author order is appropriate, and which placement should my name have?

Thank you.

—In Order

Dear In Order,

This is a very important issue and a decision that can sometimes be vexing—so thank you for raising it. Subsequent to your query you kindly provided additional information that has helped confirm Labby's unwavering response: You are the last author.

Why? First, your degree of independence from the head of your unit is substantial. While she/he might have been properly seen as your "lab head" or "PI" in previous years, the project is outside her/his immediate areas of expertise and oversight. Second, you obtained extramural funding for not only your own salary but that of a research assistant and all the supplies. Third, you orchestrated the entire project. This is the traditional role of the PI and senior author.

So now we can focus on the issue of you being first vs. last author. As you say, you did some of the work with your own hands. That criterion for possible first authorship is in play when someone other than the lab head has done the tough slogging at the bench. But in your case that consideration is superseded by the fact that you *are* the "lab head," at least for this project. This publication should therefore be seen as coming not only from your hands but from your assembled staff and collaborators, all catalyzed by your idea for this project. Your originality in conceiving the hypothesis behind this research, your successful pursuit of funding, your direction of a research assistant, engagement of a postdoc, and your lead role in writing the manuscript, leave no doubt that you "own" this work and its publication.

You didn't raise the issue of criteria for co-authorship, but perhaps advice there would also be "In Order." From your description Labby would not assume that the pathologist would necessarily warrant co-authorship. As for the research assistant, it is generally held that very exceptional contributions are required, and that a "job well done" does not warrant co-authorship. In any case, take pride in this, the first paper from your lab. There seems little doubt there will be decades of more to come. ■

—Labby

Direct your questions to [labby@ascb.org](mailto:labby@ascb.org). Authors of questions chosen for publication may indicate whether or not they wish to be identified. Submissions may be edited for space and style.



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