



# Working Knowledge

*Working Together*

## Interdisciplinary Authorship

by

Hearing the Voice



**'Interdisciplinary Authorship'  
A Project Short by Angela Woods**

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# Interdisciplinary Authorship

## 1. Why take on the challenge?

Interdisciplinarity is very much in vogue but often less directly evidenced in outputs. Researchers who may benefit from working in interdisciplinary teams are not exempt from professional, institutional and disciplinary expectations that they will meet the standards of their respective fields, and it's a fact of twenty-first-century academic life, at least in the UK, that for any given discipline there will be certain kinds of publication which simply do not 'count'. So how should people working on interdisciplinary projects balance the need to demonstrate excellence within their disciplines with the desire to show how and why an interdisciplinary approach to their particular research question is valuable?

Without of course surrendering a focus on disciplinary excellence, we have tried wherever possible in *Hearing the Voice* to ensure that our published outputs reflect the interdisciplinary collaborations that inspire and underpin the work we do. This has been time-consuming, distinctively difficult and occasionally risky, but we think that taking on the challenge of interdisciplinary authorship has significant pluses: it enables individual researchers to reflect upon their own disciplinary practices by trying on others', to influence new audiences, and ultimately to do justice to the new forms of knowledge arising from interdisciplinary collaborations.

Comprised of a series of reflections, practical recommendations and case studies, this Project Short doesn't argue that interdisciplinary authorship should be valued for its own sake but rather aims to illuminate the particular contexts in which we've found it a rewarding if not essential undertaking. While our focus here is on journal articles, much of what's below can apply to book chapters, monographs and other forms of potentially collaborative writing.

## 2. Getting started: How do you write?

One inescapable oddity of academic writing is the extent to which we take its peculiarities for granted. Whether it's the relatively rigid structures of the multi-authored scientific article, or the staged and strategic use of the first person in contemporary literary criticism, the adherence to particular codes, conventions and stylistic idiosyncrasies demonstrates our expertise in a given field (and so qualifies our work to be scrutinised within it) yet is

seldom something we reflect upon. Complicating these structural differences are individuals' own writing preferences and practices. Does the bulk of your energy go into planning or drafting? Are you a perfectionist or pragmatist when it comes

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to your prose? Finally, there's the question of the status of writing itself within the research process. For many empirical and experimental researchers in the sciences and social sciences, the article reports on work that is effectively already done; it is the last of a series of steps going all the way back to study design. For most humanities researchers, writing more fundamentally *constitutes* the work; the idea of 'writing up' makes much less sense as the paper itself is the primary scene or site of intellectual labour.

Granted, these are questions of form more than they are questions of content. But before getting down to the nitty gritty of what it is you are writing *about*—and how you bring different disciplinary perspectives together in the analysis of your chosen topic—it's worthwhile taking the time to reflect upon what might otherwise seem natural, unremarkable or simply 'the ways things are done'.

Here are some of the questions about writing we wish we'd asked ourselves and each other when the project started (it's much more tricky to find the answers out along the way):

- ◇ What do you need to do before you begin writing?
- ◇ How long does it usually take you to write an article?
- ◇ How many drafts do you usually produce?
- ◇ If you have experience of co-authoring, what are the different authorship roles you've taken on? Which did you enjoy most and why?
- ◇ When (if at all) do you use direct quotations, authors' full names or personal pronouns?

- ◇ What are three things that your discipline or sub-field values most in its publications?
- ◇ How long does it usually take for submitted articles to go through peer review?
- ◇ What kind of feedback do you expect to get from reviewers and editors?
- ◇ What happens when your article is published?

### 3. Get started: Who are you writing for?

It would be presumptuous indeed for a Project Short to go too deeply into the question of ‘content’—you are the ones who know what’s exciting, original and important about your research and why you’re interested in writing with people from other disciplines in the first place. Questions of audience, on the other hand, arguably concern us all.

Every researcher is aware of subtle (and not so subtle) differences between key journals in their field and tries to tailor submissions accordingly. If you are writing with someone from another discipline for a discipline that’s not your own, it’s even more vital to pinpoint precisely who your reader is and what exactly they expect from your article. Writing for new audiences can push us into very uncomfortable places: What do you mean, there’s no Methods section? Why would we give away the punchline of our argument in the Abstract? Surely that word count can’t (does) include references?

Again, here are some questions that we now ask ourselves *before* the proverbial pens hit the paper:

- ◇ **What journal(s) are you targeting in the first instance?** Bearing in mind that relatively few journals are explicitly interdisciplinary, are your goals best served by producing one interdisciplinary paper or by two complementary papers targeted at specific disciplinary journals? If the latter, what will define and shape your approach, and how will this affect the (inter)disciplinary identity of the finished products? Given your target outlet, how should you emphasise different facets of the interdisciplinary mix without losing what is special about it?
- ◇ **What are the journal’s specific requirements for the type of paper you’re preparing?** It’s good advice for all authors to be well aware of restrictions around word limit, format, structure and style before you begin.

Interdisciplinary collaborations are no exception, and may require more explicit unpacking of the quirks of journals in a particular field or discipline.

- ◇ **What do readers of your intended journal regard as an excellent article?** And is this characteristic of the discipline more generally?
- ◇ **Does the editor have any advice regarding your submission?** It may not always be appropriate to pitch your paper to the editor or members of the editorial board ahead of submission but where this is possible it can be enormously useful.
- ◇ **Does the article make sense to people from your own discipline as well as your intended readership?** Of the many anxieties of interdisciplinary authorship, the fear of being perceived as an impostor in or mere mimic of another discipline is among the most intense. Engaging two or more distinct audiences may feel as though you are compromising on all fronts and pleasing no one. While this is certainly a risk, it’s also possible to be overly pessimistic about the extent to which colleagues from your ‘home’ discipline appreciate what you’re trying to do. Try them and see.

### 4. Trying it out in person

Attending workshops and conferences gives a fascinating insight into how disciplines work in practice. What hierarchies of evidence are implicitly and explicitly in operation? Are there fashionable topics, sources of on-going conflict, glaring blind spots? What does the style of presentation say about discourses dominant in this particular discipline? If you’re fortunate enough to participate or better still present your research in an as yet unfamiliar academic setting, you’ll know that it’s not just the content of the discussion but the embodied interactions through which it is materialised that make each discipline distinctive.

Conference papers, like journal articles, are also often viewed very differently in different fields. The extent to which the presentation of work in progress is appropriate varies according to context, occasion and even the temperament of individual researchers, so if you are co-presenting interdisciplinary research it’s again worth having a clear discussion ahead of time about the purpose of the performance.

## 5. Case Study: 17 authors, 19 disciplines, 1 article

In September 2013, *Hearing the Voice* hosted the second meeting of the [International Consortium on Hallucinations Research \(ICHR\)](#) at which twelve working groups presented on their findings to date. The largest and most disciplinarily diverse working group was (perhaps not surprisingly) one charged with investigating 'Interdisciplinary approaches to the phenomenology of auditory verbal hallucination'.

The 17 members of the 'Interdisciplinary approaches' working group were based in 7 different time zones and brought expertise from 19 different fields, ranging from medieval history to clinical psychology to neuroimaging. While a majority of authors were able to meet in person at the ICHR, most of our discussions, and particularly the planning and revising of the article, had to be conducted via email. It's not difficult to imagine some of the challenges that teamwork at this scale presents, and some of these are clearly specific to, or heightened by, working across disciplines. Plunged into the deep end (as a relatively junior member of the working group I wound up its coordinator and first author) there's a lot I learned along the way...

Key questions that haunted us all were as follows: How could we make our ideas accessible to other disciplines without rendering them simplistic or two-dimensional? How could we best engage a clinical audience while at the same time staying true to the language, concepts and critical bent of the humanities and social sciences? There's a real risk that clinicians in particular may not have time to engage with work that isn't perceived as immediately relevant to their practice—so how could we capture and sustain their attention? On a more practical level, how could we synthesise individuals' contributions and keep to a very strict word limit and submission timeframe? While they required ongoing negotiation, three things ultimately ensured these questions didn't become insurmountable hurdles. First, because the working group came together through shared interests in studying hallucinatory experience from multiple perspectives, our starting point was an openness and curiosity towards other disciplines and methods. Second, and the commitment to diversity notwithstanding, we all agreed on the importance of addressing a mainstream clinical audience. High-impact psychiatry journals rarely publish findings from the humanities and social sciences, even where these arguments and approaches enjoy strong support in their 'home' disciplines, so some of our in-house disagreements therefore paled in significance when set against the larger goal of demonstrating their relevance to a clinical readership. Finally, the process we set up made clear from the outset that while everyone's contribution was equally valued, and consultation would be as wide-ranging as possible, the final responsibility for the paper fell to me as first author.

And here was the first glitch in our communication. People's experience of co-authoring varied considerably, as might be expected given our different career stages as well as disciplinary backgrounds. Some of us were very used to working in groups of various sizes; others, me included, had very little practical experience of writing with anyone else, let alone 17 others, and even less insight into how the varied contributions should be represented. Differences

*in this respect can be significant—for example, in some humanities and social science papers authorship lists are alphabetical after the first author; in some areas of psychology, the last author position often denotes someone who contributed least; in medicine, neuroscience and the biomedical sciences, the last author is a key position along with first and second author.*

*While mercifully no-one in the working group was precious about their prose, some of the humanities and social science researchers submitted contributions initially of a length or level of detail that could in no way be accommodated in the final version. Working within the constraints imposed by journal—substantively, stylistically and in terms of word- and reference limits—my role was frequently one of ruthless editor, checking as I went that key ideas were not being lost or assumptions smuggled in along the way. Charles—our final author, who had extensive experience writing for clinical audiences and co-edited the ICHR special supplement of Schizophrenia Bulletin in which we were able to publish—also went through the article several times with a disciplinarily distinctive but equally fine-toothed editorial comb. Every word of every sentence was carefully assessed by both of us to ensure its value to the piece as a whole and ability to achieve the goals described above.*



*There were many points along the way when I questioned the wisdom of our endeavour and in particular my capacity to piece together people's contributions into a seamless and single-voiced whole. I doubt that 'seamless' or 'single-voiced' are the first adjectives that readers of the final paper would reach for, and indeed, it seems fitting that a paper about interdisciplinary methods should bear the traces of the interdisciplinary negotiations that brought it into being. Ultimately, what makes this intensive, year-long process so worthwhile is the fact that through it we have been able collectively to articulate our arguments about the value of humanities and social scientific approaches, and to do so in a way and in a forum that mainstream clinical researchers can and do access. As it has only just been published our success in this respect remains to be seen...*

Woods, A., Jones, N., Bernini, M., Callard, F., Alderson-Day, B., Badcock, J. C., Bell, V., Cook, C.C.H., Csordas, T., Humpston, C., Krueger, J., Larøi, F., McCarthy-Jones, S., Moseley, P., Powell, H., Raballo, A., Smailes, D., Fernyhough, C., "Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Phenomenology of Auditory Verbal Hallucinations," *Schizophrenia Bulletin* (2014) 40 (Suppl 4): S246-S254. doi: 10.1093/schbul/sbu003



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Covering everything from managing a research project's social media presence to conducting experimental design 'hackathons', the series is a must-read for anyone considering funding or embarking on interdisciplinary research.

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