

The Publish or Perish Doctrine and Declining Commitment to Writing

Md. Mahmudul Hasan¹
International Islamic University Malaysia

Abstract

Writers usually write in response to an intrinsic calling to express themselves, instruct the public, or enlighten the reader. Their urge for documenting their ideas and experiences comes from within, as they take the writing career as an expression of the self and as a vehicle of thought and human progress. Given the development of the modern education system, academics of tertiary institutions are found to write even if they do not possess such a bent of mind or innate artistic talent. As a result, there has been a sharp increase in the number of writers and writings. However, when academics write without passion or inspiration, they exhibit certain authorship traits and publication behaviours which are not helpful for editors. Based on my editorial experience, I shall comment on certain authors' lack of passion for scholarship or for their work, making a case for active authorial involvement from the conception of a manuscript to its publication.

Keywords

Publish or perish doctrine, authorial indifference to manuscript accuracy, altruistic writing aims, writing for non-writing reasons, manuscript quality and impact

Introduction

Having been editing *Asiatic* since 2020 and various book projects in the last decade, I have interacted with and benefited from many arduous researchers and serious scholars. They are passionate about their research and writing, and they pour their hearts into their work. Their high-quality manuscripts indicate that

¹ **Md. Mahmudul Hasan** is Professor of English at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and Editor-in-Chief of *Asiatic*. He completed a PhD in comparative literature at Portsmouth, had a postdoctoral research stint at Heidelberg, and taught at Dhaka University. His work has appeared in publications by Brill, IIT, Johns Hopkins University, Orient BlackSwan, Routledge, SAGE, University of Florida, University Press Limited, Wiley-Blackwell, and other presses. Among the books he co-edited and contributed to are *Bangladeshi Literature in English: Critical Essays and Interviews* (2024), *Displaced & Forgotten: Memoirs of Refugees* (2017), and *A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (2017). He is the author of *Islamic Perspectives on Twentieth-Century English Literature* (2017). Email: mmhasan@iium.edu.my

they conduct in-depth studies before producing a manuscript and maintain an unwavering commitment to making their writing meaningful and engaging for readers. Knowing such writers and editing their work have been exceedingly rewarding for me.

I edit works of such writers and give them feedback for further improvement of their content and stylistic refinement and accuracy. They read my feedback carefully and address my comments on their work meticulously and with great attention to detail. Such scholars and I are united by the common goal of working to our best ability to produce and publish high quality and original research papers. Back-and-forth feedback and exchanges between them and me lead to forging a collaborative partnership and teamwork based on mutual respect and gratitude. That eventually develops into a strong and enduring academic rapport which lasts way beyond the publication of their manuscripts.

I have also encountered another group of contributors who seem to have a lukewarm attitude to their work. They lack emotional investment in or deeper attachment to their manuscript. This becomes more obvious when I ask them to address my comments and invite them to take a fresh look at the edited version of their article. In response to my request, they often give the revision process only half-hearted efforts and do the bare minimum without actually engaging with the editing process and without a strong sense of dedication to their work. It seems that their manuscript does not spark adequate enthusiasm in them, as they simply do not care one way or the other about the outcome of their writing exercise. This makes it clear that all they want is to take pleasure from seeing their articles published and to build their publication profile—all with the aim of gaining material dividends in terms of prestige, employment, or promotion.

After multiple rounds of editing, I prepare their essay for publication and request them to read the revised and polished version one more time with “fresh eyes” and to make additional changes (if required) for further improvement. Trusting my gut feeling, I can say with near certainty that the not-so-serious scholars follow my recommendations only in part and do not read thoroughly the updated version of the paper that I prepare for them. This lack of enthusiasm of such authors for the final version of their work becomes the last straw that breaks the camel’s back and pushes me over the edge.

One way how I know that they are non-serious about their work is by considering the rapidity of their response. For example, a careful reading of an essay of approximately 7,000 words should take at least one and half hours. But suspicion makes its way when I receive a reply within twenty to thirty minutes from the author who says that they have read the draft and have no changes to make. Such a nonchalant, indifferent approach to their own research makes me

highly sceptical about what motivates them to undertake research and publish. Complete lack of interest of certain authors in their own work raises many unanswered questions concerning the practice of academic writing. It seems that they do not maintain a high level of enthusiasm for their work. Nor do they cultivate a genuine love for scholarship. In my opinion, any written work is an expression of its author's inner life and an extension of their soul. Therefore, the unique relationship between a writer and their work is very profound and deeply entrenched, which I discuss below.

The filial bond between the writer and their work

From where I stand, a manuscript to its author is like a child to its mother. In the case of multiple authorships, the first author remains the biological mother while its co-authors can be compared to foster mothers. The editor who oversees the review process, ensures the quality of a manuscript, and prepares it for publication can be compared to a caregiver.

Going by that logic, when the editor edits and prepares a manuscript and gives it back to the author for approval, the latter should receive it the way a mother holds her child with intense tenderness and warmth after getting it—well-dressed and well-styled—back from the caregiver. An author who shows reluctance to read the edited version can be compared to a mother who exhibits cruelty to her child and lacks the maternal instinct required to form a strong bond with her offspring. In other words, an author unenthusiastic to read the finished (edited) version of their work is a mother who is so cold and distant to her child that she does not want to hold or hug it after the nurse/caregiver feeds, dresses, and brings it to her.

Being a writer myself, I find it difficult to comprehend the dispassionate and disengaged attitude of an author to their own work. However, having encountered such apathy and lack of interest among multiple contributors, I have contemplated the state of publication practices in today's academia and drawn my conclusions which I intend to discuss in this essay. Part of the blame perhaps goes to the type of motivation for which academics produce research work for publication. Before dissecting wrong motivations for which many academics write research papers, in what follows, I shall address authors' responsibilities with regard to their work.

Authors' roles from conception to publication

An author's connection with their work is long and unremitting—this relationship is a constant. They conceive “of an idea at a specific moment in time or within the total context of [their] thought” (Dieckmann 510), conduct in-depth research, write a manuscript, and then submit it to a journal or other outlet for

publication. They remain an inseparable part of their writing long after the review process, editorial intervention, and its publication. Editors, reviewers, and other intellectual gatekeepers and stakeholders appear at a later stage of the production of a research paper. Despite the involvement of various parties from the submission of a manuscript to its publication, the author remains rooted in their position as the owner of the work and accountable for its content as a whole.

A writer's responsibility does not end with preparing the manuscript and submitting it to a journal for publication. It extends to interacting with the editor and actively participating in the revision and refinement process. In an essay titled "Defining the Role of Authors and Contributors," the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) recommends four criteria for determining authorship. They are:

Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND

Drafting the work or reviewing it critically for important intellectual content; AND

Final approval of the version to be published; AND

Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved. (ICMJE)

Even though these authorship criteria are suggested by editors of medical journals, few will contest their universal applicability. We can use these standards in other fields too, when evaluating or conferring authorship of a research paper on a contributor. To satisfy these four criteria, an author must be involved in the work from its conception to publication.

The first two criteria—conception and writing—have received adequate attention from scholars and commentators who raise concern about fraudulent authorship attribution or deceitful authorship practices. For various (unethical) reasons, (co)authorship is sometimes attributed to people whose contribution to a paper may merit only acknowledgement. Various known as bounty/gift authorship, ghost authorship, guest authorship, honorary authorship, coercion (pressured) authorship, or free riding in authorship, such fraudulent practices have been longstanding concerns in academic publishing. They are recognised as malpractices and perceived as unethical behaviour and publication misconduct.

However, the last two criteria—approval and accountability—that the ICMJE specify have not been sufficiently addressed. Authors' approval is inseparable from their sense of accountability to the content of their work. If they are not actively involved in the editing process and do not read the version the editor shares with them for approval, they may not be in full command of the

material published under their name. If they are not in full cognisance of the changes made to their essay after multiple rounds of editorial intervention and review, they may not qualify to give informed approval for the publication of their work. Nor will they be able to be accountable to the content of their work in a real sense.

Such theoretical and ethical issues aside, I find it inconceivable that a writer will be unwilling or reluctant to read the edited version of their work. It is noticed that such authors generally show indifference to its overall quality and content once they are informed that their writing is going to be published. Since I have observed among multiple authors such reluctance and unwillingness to read the camera-ready version of their revised papers, I sought to understand the reasons behind such poor attitude to, and lack of engagement with, their work. It is obvious that such authors seem to view writing as a chore rather than an opportunity to disseminate knowledge and engage with readers in meaningful ways.

My inexhaustive research on this phenomenon has led me to ask if the problem lies in their (wrong) intention and motivation for writing. Writers with inadequate commitment to their work seem to write not for love of scholarship or for an urge to communicate with readers—they write for social or job-related incentives and for motivations exemplified by the doctrine of publish or perish (POP). Before examining the publication requirement for faculty stemming from the pressure for publishing, in what follows I shall touch on writing and reading practices in the past.

Writers and readers of bygone days

In the past, people did not write to secure a job or to work their way up the employment ladder. Writing was an informal affair, pursued only by those who had the right talent and passion for scholarship and a desire to document their insights and experiences. They had strong intellectual curiosity and inquiry, an enthusiastic dedication for promoting human welfare, and a strong moral foundation for their work. They wrote out of genuine interest, concern for others, and intellectual satisfaction. Their ideas were rooted in a strong moral compass, and their noble pursuit of producing and sharing knowledge outweighed their interests in other vocations. The intense yearning of the writer to convey something they felt important to the reader was matched by the eagerness of a receptive readership that held writers and their writings in high esteem.

Writers stood out as a different breed endowed with the creative spirit and artistic ability. Equally, members of the reading community also stood

somewhat apart from the general run of people in the sense that they had a clarity of thought and a deep-seated desire to explore, engage, and learn. Readers were inspired by an urge for intellectual growth and intrinsic motivation to experience the illumination offered by writers. In a nutshell, both writers and readers sought to remain intellectually engaged and actively involved in disseminating and learning new knowledge.

In an essay published in *The Spectator* on March 12, 1711, British writer and social critic Joseph Addison considered readers his “good brothers and allies” and expected them to “take care to distinguish themselves” from ordinary people whom he characterised as “the thoughtless herd” and as “ignorant and unattentive” masses (Addison [adapted]). In order to reciprocate this high expectation of readers, he took upon himself to “spare no pains to make their instruction agreeable, and their diversion useful” (Addison [adapted]). Addison here talks about the responsibility of both writers and readers. While the former must be assiduous and diligent in presenting their ideas and instruction graciously and elegantly, the latter should have a disposition to observe and engage in the information or idea they encounter and use it in the interest of their circumstances.

People of letters across historical eras and literary traditions have embraced such a notion of writing and reading. In his 1840 foundational essay “A Defence of Poetry,” the visionary English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley discusses the role of literature and puts poets (writers) up on a pedestal and crown them with laurels. Shelley does not differentiate between poets and prose writers and considers the “distinction” between them “a vulgar error” (Shelley 9). He regards writers as “the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers” (5). Shelley ends the essay with the following statement: “Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration.... [Their] influence... is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (46). It is worth noting that, like Addison, Shelley also talks about the need for writers to have unwavering commitment and rigorous dedication to their craft, stating that “the finest passages of poetry are produced by labor and study” (Shelley 39). That is to say, while writers must have novel concepts and innovative ideas to produce a good piece of writing, they should also conduct a thorough study and work hard and diligently to ensure the quality of their work and the accuracy of the knowledge it presents. In my opinion, what Shelley calls “labor and study” or sufficient diligence and effort is inevitable for producing an impactful work. However, a writer will be able to dedicate “labor and study” to a writing task if they are motivated not only by academic goals but also by intrinsic factors like

the urge to share ideas and experiences with fellow human beings, or altruistic considerations such as guiding others and bringing positive changes in society.

Diligence in and altruistic motivation for writing

A written work will bear a greater imprint of painstaking labour, consistent effort, commitment, and true craftsmanship if its author is motivated by higher causes, higher aims, and nobler motives. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech delivered in Stockholm on 10 December 1950, great American novelist and short-story writer William Faulkner associates the writing career with “anguish and travail” and “the agony and the sweat.” Many writers are impelled by pain, anger, and outrage over human suffering caused by deprivation and injustice in society. They offer “sweat” (hard work) to their work, as they are in tears for humanity or for future generations. That is to say, writers will be more passionate and diligent if they are motivated by altruistic concerns. This corroborates what some of the talented and celebrated writers of the past and contemporary time say about writerly motivation for and commitment to writing.

In his book *Essays in Little* (1891), Scottish writer Andrew Lang states that Charles Dickens wrote for “the protection of the poor and unfriended” and “made his art and his purpose blend so happily that his work was all the better for his benevolent intentions” (Lang 126). In other words, according to Lang, altruistic aims, unselfish purposes, and compassionate goals contributed to increasing the artistic mastery of Dickens’s work. Such nobler priorities and altruistic aims also drove the late literary giant Chinua Achebe to write. In his essay “The Novelist as Teacher” that was first published in the British magazine *New Statement* in 1965, he maintains that many of his (African) readers regard him “as a kind of teacher,” and he also believes that “part of [his] business as a writer [was] to teach” (Achebe 41, 44). Achebe states: “The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front. For he is ... the sensitive point of his community” (45). Achebe and other staunch proponents of *littérature engage* (teleological literature that promotes art for life’s/society’s sake) argue that writers are committed to awakening awareness among people, shaping readers’ perspectives, and guiding their audience to certain conclusions and actions. Using their writing as a tool for ethical instruction or social change, they aim to pass down wisdom and provide life lessons along the way.

In an obituary of Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev (1874–1948), the Russian-born British scholar of Russian studies Eugene Lampert said, “And the value of his [Berdyaev’s] own work is that he thought and wrote out of passion” (Lampert 266). There are writers who write to exude their artistic traits,

and readers appreciate their works for their aesthetic value and technical excellence. Others do not write simply for aesthetic and imaginative exploration alone. They write with a purpose—social, political, or moral—and seek to bring changes in the world through their work.

American-Canadian writer Thomas King says about himself and his fellow writer Louis Owens (1948–2002): “[W]e wrote knowing that none of the stories we told would change the world. But we wrote in the hope that they would” (King 92). Commenting on King’s statement, D. Jean Clandinin, Professor at the University of Alberta, says:

I, too, write out of passion and a deep hope that engaging in narrative inquiry will help me change the world, at least in some small way, a way that might help schools become more educative places for all children, teachers, families and administrators. (Clandinin 53)

Such an urge to write for the betterment of fellow human beings, for the environment, or for the society at large should run deep in the bones of writers and cling to their consciousness. Only then, they will develop a passionate attachment and devotion to their work and will give their best and strive for excellence. Even though most of the writers I have mentioned above are mainly known for their creative work, I believe scholars who are chiefly focused on critical (academic) writing should also be driven by similar higher concerns and purposes. When people write only for mundane reasons or material gains, such as better employment, job security, promotion opportunities, or higher wages, it is likely that their research and writing activities will be fixated on them seeing their work published, without aiming for higher goals.

Exponential growth in research versus its impact

Whether intrinsically committed or uncommitted to the act of writing, university faculty members conduct research and publish their work for, among others, employment opportunities, job/position retention, sustainable livelihoods, career advancement, or better incomes. In addition to the “growing pressure to ‘publish or perish’, experienced by academia around the world” (Kuzhabekova 1), universities worldwide have now made the publishing of papers a graduation requirement for research students. Both factors put together have contributed to an exponential growth in the number of publications, as the publish or perish doctrine has contributed to “the anxiety to increase the number of publications in a short time” (Demir 1297). However, such publication practices have “a negative impact on the quality and impact of conducted research” (Kuzhabekova 11). Another study conducted on the publication behaviour and research performance of academics also reached the same conclusion that “the increase in

research output was obtained at the expense of research impact,” as academics publish “more articles but of lower quality” (Abramo et al. 4589, 4591). This is a worrying phenomenon on which all should solemnly ponder. If writing increases in volume only but lacks substance and quality, it will not attract readers and will exacerbate the dwindling supply of readers in the age of social media and AI usage.

The above discussion suggests that, as, in most cases, academic publication is tied to worldly gains such as career promotion and extra payment to the salary of academics, there has been a phenomenal growth in the number of writers and publications. This risks rendering writers largely devoid of higher concerns, nobler aims, and commitment to an inherent calling or intrinsic (altruistic) drive. The lack of higher purpose in writing negatively affects writers’ attachment and dedication to their work. Such a state of affairs perhaps explains some writers’ disinterest and disinclination to review the edited version of their work. They exhibit seriousness and determination during the submission phase and editorial decision-making process. Once a favourable decision is made on their manuscript and its publication is guaranteed, these authors do not care much about the intellectual merit or educational impact of their work.

Conclusion

Unbiased and dedicated editors are necessarily altruistic. They offer feedback on the work of authors and help them prepare it for publication. However, once a manuscript is published, it carries the name of its author, not its editor. With the passage of time, the contribution of the editor is likely to be forgotten. However, as long as the publication exists, it will carry the author’s name and indelible mark on the work. Therefore, the responsibility of the author with regard to their work is far greater than that of the editor. This makes the involvement of the author in every stage of manuscript preparation and production inevitable. It is primarily the author’s concern to recognise editorial intervention to assess, reintervene (if needed), and approve it—as they own the published work.

Authors’ disinterest or insufficient interest in the edited version that they are given for review indicates their lack of commitment to scholarship and knowledge production. It is also a sign of their ungratefulness to the editor who helps them improve their work and prepares it for publication. Moreover, authors’ refusal to read their writing may imply that they possibly do not expect others to find it worth reading. Therefore, while exploring reasons for the decrease in readers in today’s world, there is a need to evaluate writers’ attitude to and motivation for writing. A published manuscript may bring its author material rewards as a by-product, but the primary motivation for writing should

be higher than that. There is pleasure in worldly gains, but a writer should aim for nobler pursuits. If an author has such a bent of mind, they will be more involved in their work materially and ethically.

Works Cited

- Abramo, Giovanni, Ciriaco Andrea D'Angelo, and Myroslava Hladchenko. "Assessing the Effects of Publication Requirements for Professorship on Research Performance and Publishing Behaviour of Ukrainian Academics." *Scientometrics* 128.8 (2023): 4589-4609.
- Achebe, Chinua. "The Novelist as a Teacher." *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. London: Heinemann, 1988. 40-46.
- Addison, Joseph. *The Spectator*, Issue 10, Monday, March 12, 1711. <https://anthologydev.lib.virginia.edu/work/Spectator/addison-spectator-10> (accessed June 18, 2026)
- Clandinin, D. Jean. "Narrative Inquiry: A Methodology for Studying Lived Experience." *Research Studies in Music Education* 27.1 (2006): 44-54.
- Demir, Selcuk Besir. "Predatory Journals: Who Publishes in Them and Why?." *Journal of Informetrics* 12.4 (2018): 1296-1311.
- Dieckmann, Herbert. "Storia delle teorie drammatiche nella Germania del settecento,(1730-1780)." *The German Quarterly* 43.3 (1970): 510-512.
- Faulkner, William. "Banquet Speech: William Faulkner's Speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1950." <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1949/faulkner/speech/> (accessed June 19, 2026)
- ICMJE. "Defining the Role of Authors and Contributors." <https://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html> (accessed June 20, 2026)
- King, Thomas. *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. Toronto: Anansi Press, 2003.
- Kuzhabekova, Aliya. "Ph. D. publication requirement and its effects on research productivity trends in Kazakhstan." *Higher Education Quarterly* 79.1 (2025): 1-13.
- Lampert, Eugenie. "Nicolas Berdyaev: 1874–1948." *Blackfriars* 29.339 (1948): 263-268.
- Lang, Andrew. *Essays in Little*. London: Henry and Co., 1891.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *A Defense of Poetry*. Ginn & Company, 1891.