Ethical Guidelines for Ghostwriting

1. **What is the communicator’s intent and what is the audience’s degree of awareness?** In other words, does the communicator pretend to be the author of the words he speaks or over which his signature appears? And how aware is the audience that ghostwriting is commonplace under certain circumstances? If we assume, as most do, that presidential speeches are ghostwritten, then the only unethical act would be for the President to claim to author his own speeches.

2. **Does the communicator use ghostwriters to make himself or herself appear to possess personal qualities which he or she really does not have?** In other words, does the writer impart such qualities as eloquence, wit, coherence and incisive ideas to a communicator who might not possess these qualities otherwise? The degree to which the writing distorts a communicator’s character has a great deal to do with ethicality.

3. **What are the surrounding circumstances of the communicator’s job that make ghostwriting a necessity?** The pressures of a job often dictate that a ghostwriter be used. Busy executives like busy politicians may not have the time to write all the messages they must deliver on a daily basis. However, we don’t expect the average office manager or university professor to hire a ghostwriter. Part of the answer to this question lies in the pressures of the job itself, and the other part has to do with the need and frequency of communication.

4. **To what extent do the communicators actively participate in the writing of their own messages?** Obviously, the more input a communicator has in his or her own writing, the more ethical will be the resultant image. We really don’t expect the President to write his own speeches, but we do expect that the sentiments expressed in them will be his own.

5. **Does the communicator accept responsibility for the message he or she presents?** When former president Ronald Reagan’s press secretary, Larry Speakes, disclosed in his book that many of the quotes attributed to the president were, in fact, either made up or “borrowed” from someone else, he caused quite an ethical uproar. Part of the problem with the Larry Speakes revelation was that the President denied the accusations. In other words, he claimed he never approved Speakes’ work. Most communicators simply assume that whatever they say or whatever they sign their names to is theirs, whether written by someone else or not. This is obviously the most ethical position to take.

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