The Editor’s Field—Length of Manuscripts

This editorial has nothing to do with how long a manuscript should be when submitted to this journal. The manuscript should be as long as the author(s) and editor decide it should be. What this has to do with is the length of the manuscripts I have been turning out over the last several years. That’s right—I have to submit manuscripts to some ogre of an editor who is bound and determined to absolutely demolish my well-thought-out logic and scramble the flow of my prose. There is no cabal of editors, no club only for those of us who pronounce judgment on authors, no secret society of heartless fiends that make others miserable and get a free pass when it comes to publishing. We too must make sure we follow the format of the particular journal, determine whether the citations are correctly constructed, and, by the way, produce quantifiable and repeatable science that is described in such a way that others of like mind can read and understand. Go on admit it—you feel better now. It is easier being an editor than it is being an author. When you read something you have not written, you recognize whether it rings true or clunks. Curiously, or perhaps not so curiously, being an editor makes me a better author.

Back to the point. I received my PhD in 1982. I was, like you, doing research for years leading up to the construction of my thesis and dissertation. I have been at this at the PhD level for 27 years. When I was younger and starting out in the business of asking “What if . . . ?” I was schooled in the philosophy of, or perhaps been warned about, “publish or perish.” That seems to be associated with the halls of academia, but a variation of the theme exists in government and private laboratory settings. It does not take long for the enterprising young scientist to figure out the system. Do some stuff in the laboratory, greenhouse, or the field that either can be quickly completed or that does not take up much computing time and get some publications before that first big review occurs. There is nothing wrong with that activity as long as the outcome is worthwhile science, even if major questions are not answered. The wall of knowledge is made of building blocks of enterprise, enthusiasm, and appropriate experimental design. That’s philosophy, that’s why I have a PhD. In many journals there is a category of publication called “short communication” or “note.” What happened—did the author run out of words? I suspect that the journals, who, after all, cater to the scientist, recognize that if they provide an outlet for worthwhile, but short, manuscripts they
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will build a loyal base who submit manuscripts that will fill the pages, that are bought by libraries and other scientists, and in the case of some journals the scientist, or his or her employer, pays to have published. All perfectly respectable and necessary. This is specialized information. If we did not read the content of this and other journals, who would?

I am at a point where the time to make way for a younger scientist is nearer than before. Although I—and I am sure others in this same stage in a career—do not know who would replace me. As a result, I have some luxury to do more comprehensive research. I can plan and execute a multiple-year project or more complicated shorter projects and gather amounts of data that, when analyzed and written, will take up several pages in a journal. The question is whether I am producing longer manuscripts because my circumstances allow me to do so or because I have matured as a scientist and am not chasing that next promotion or next job. Are we doing younger scientists an injustice or a favor by forcing them to deliver quickly, if less substantially? Is the ability to ask many questions, and juggle the answers, more important than asking the larger question and concentrating on manuscripts that contain more information and greater length? Does “publish or perish” invariably lead to more accomplished scientists or a great number of scientists that produce a large number of shorter papers?

The universities in the United States do a good job of teaching how to do science and, more to their credit, have come to understand that it is also necessary to teach how to write science. Incoming graduate students must write proposals for their research aims. In the United States federal government, by which I am employed, during the first 3 years after hire, new scientists are schooled on how to prepare for reviews that will determine whether they are retained and whether they are promoted. However, the immediate aim is still to quickly write manuscripts early in the career and lead to production of a relatively large number of short papers. One argument is that by developing several small papers the scientist is building a database that will, when taken as a whole, provide the grand truth. Well, maybe.

I think that scientists at all levels should be encouraged early on to take a long-term view. There should be two tiers of research required. One would be the precise, shorter papers dealing with specific questions. The other should be purposefully designed research that by definition would be accomplished over a longer time frame with the aim of developing at least one manuscript that considers, and describes, a bigger picture. The latter would develop a mind-set that the long haul is every bit as important as the quick sprint.

REVIEWERS OF SUBMITTED MANUSCRIPTS

In addition to the Editorial Consulting Board, I want to extend my gratitude to the voluntary reviewers who provide their time and efforts to assure that
the quality of the manuscripts meet the standards expected by the journal and its readers. They are C. Cannady, N. Kamal, M.G. Kumar, V. Jeliazkov, M. McGiffen, M. Mozourek, E. Sanchez, B. Santos, C. Saravitz, C. Shock, J. Sloan, J. Snyder, and T. Waters.

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