

It's your journal

"WE would be happy to publish your letter if you could cut it in length by about 30%."

"We could publish your communication at letter length of about 1,000 words but not as a 3,000-word article."

"We regret it is almost impossible to publish an article of 6,000 words."

"We regret that your letter seemed too specialised for a journal aiming at a wide readership."

These are four of the types of letter that we don't like sending any more than you like receiving. For some years *Nature* has been publishing communications in the form of commissioned articles or reviews, research articles and letters. Looking back further, however, one sees that this format has only been reached by an evolutionary process; indeed the early issues of *Nature* contained an extraordinary diversity of material which the editor did little to segregate. Quarrels, opinions, anagrams and observations of atmospheric phenomena rubbed shoulders with announcements of scientific progress. Presumably those with a serious message did not have as great an objection as present-day scientists would to their scientific wheat sitting amongst anecdotal chaff—probably because they knew that next time they wrote it was as likely as not to be an anecdote that they sent.

In the past year we have tried to continue to evolve. A section has been started in which scientists can raise, briefly, points relating to earlier papers in *Nature*. (Though not too much earlier—about a year after publication we have to assume that ideas floated in our columns are starting to go through the normal refining process in the specialised literature and need no corrective action from us.) Further we occasionally take a more general communication and publish it in News and Views, particularly when it raises a controversial point of broad interest. Finally, we try to include after the leader a piece concerned with broader issues of science—policy, politics, method and so on. As often as not this will have been submitted originally as a letter. We are always pleased to see potential material both for News and Views and for the 'broader issues' pages, although the criteria by which we accept or decline have to be fairly subjective.

Although we have some instinct for what should go into these sections of the journal, and we expect that referees will have an instinct for the accuracy and general significance of the technical content of the papers communicated to us, we have a very limited ability to tell whether our present division into articles and letters and our present prescribed maximum lengths are in tune with authors' and readers' needs. Of course, we have (quite conflicting) opinions in the *Nature* office, and, of course, we do discuss the matter on occasions with scientists. But we lack any sort of market-place response. The number of subscribers who will cancel their subscription simply

because they find articles too specialised or letters too telegraphic is probably few. Again, it is difficult to judge whether a particular paper goes to another journal because it could not be condensed to a thousand words, because of the delay time in publication (though watch ours drop) or for any of half a dozen other reasons.

Because of all this, we take the perhaps foolish step of inviting opinions on how the medium could change the better to proclaim the message. There are some constraints. The upper limit of 3,000 words and six displayed items could not be revised upwards, simply because very long articles restrict the spread of interests in any particular issue and cut the acceptance rate for other manuscripts. Further, any policy by which the average length of letters is increased necessarily means that fewer can be published, as the number of pages that we can produce is unlikely to grow under present economic conditions. We do not, however, believe that the present acceptance rate of about 35% is an unalterable number.

Granted this, should we publish less or more papers of article length? And should we require that an article be particularly accessible to the general readership or would this destroy an important means of scientific communication? Should the distinction between articles and letters (a frequent bone of contention amongst authors cunningly submitting an 1,800-word paper) be abolished? Should the length limit for letters be raised—or even lowered?

We do make two pleas. First, that many authors have an ability to write to the limit whatever it may be and do not see it as a challenge to say in 600 words what might be expanded to 1,000. We shall continue to try to keep papers short and to cut out material which would be appropriate to a specialised journal but which gets in the way of the reader with limited time attempting to find out if there is anything in it for him. It is undoubtedly true that the shorter the paper the better the chance it has of being read widely.

Second, many papers have a depressing opacity which could easily have been alleviated before they were sent. If more authors would try out manuscripts on colleagues in different disciplines before submitting and would attempt to make the first paragraph into a crystal-clear description of what the paper is about rather than what other people's papers have been about, *Nature* would be an easier journal to read.



M. MARTIN, a French telegraphic engineer, has invented an engine for recording votes. The contrivance has been designed on the principle of the *sonnettes électriques*, and is exhibited in a shop in the Place Dauphine. The peculiarity is that the votes are registered and their total reckoned automatically. The invention is attracting public notice, as it is expected that the Versailles representatives will have an immense number of votes to register during the next session.

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