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The beauty of brevity

As a counterpoint to the increasing complexity and amount of data in manuscripts, we introduce Brief Communications as our shortest article type yet.

Generating, managing and publishing vast amounts of data are easier than they have ever been before. What can be a blessing for the increase in valuable knowledge has, however, also seemingly changed the expectations of how much data the average scientific paper should contain. As a result, main and supplementary figures — as well as the number of panels within figures — have ballooned in recent years.

This trend is concerning for several reasons. Complex papers with large amounts of data are often convoluted, which can make them difficult to follow and to peer review rigorously. Projects also take longer from inception to publication — so much so that even well-resourced laboratories may struggle to obtain sufficient data to meet the demands of referees. Perhaps most worryingly, the long time and effort that it takes to publish such large papers is increasingly uncoupled from the duration of funding and graduation cycles. This dilemma creates a mismatch between the resources afforded for a typical research project and the publication outcomes that are expected in return. What is more, PhD students and postdoctoral researchers may find it impossible to generate sufficient data for a high-impact publication in one funding cycle, which is unsatisfactory at best and delays graduation and career progression at worst.

Science is a team sport, and complex multidisciplinary studies certainly benefit from collaborations between specialists. At the same time, smaller pieces of research can still make important contributions — especially if they are at the cutting edge of a field. As editors, we have influence over the shape that research takes in our pages. This is why we now offer authors more choice in the content types that are available for publication, by introducing our shortest article type yet: Brief Communications.

Brief Communications are typically 1,000–1,500 words long and contain up to two figures (although Extended Data are allowed). Brief Communications are suitable for concise but rigorous studies that report highly exciting findings. The substantial immediate interest to others in the field makes up for their limited scope, or comparatively limited depth of analysis. We expect that the majority of Brief Communications will probably represent translational and clinical studies. The first Brief Communication is published in this issue, and nicely complements the related Letter by Xiao et al.

Since the launch of the journal, we have offered Letters as a more-concise article type that can be up to 2,500 words long and accommodate four figures (plus Extended Data and Supplementary Information). We will continue to publish Letters and encourage authors to consider these for particularly noteworthy discoveries (often made in preclinical models) that are rigorously phenotyped, but for which a deeper analysis (for example, mechanistically) is lacking. Ideal for smaller, more-focused studies, Letters thus offer an attractive alternative to increasingly complex and data-dense papers. However, the inherent limitations of a Letter need to be counterbalanced by high interest of the findings to the community. The Letter moniker also serves as a signal to readers — including editors and reviewers — that the authors are aware of the somewhat preliminary aspects of a study and are not keen to expand its scope to the level of depth expected for a regular Article.

Comprising up to 5,000 words and eight main figures (plus Extended Data and Supplementary Information), our standard Article format remains the template for the typical research article — whether basic, preclinical or clinical — and offers sufficient space for complex and comprehensive studies that are conceptually novel and of broad interest.

On the other end of the spectrum, we recently introduced Resource articles. Although their formatting requirements are identical those of standard Articles, Resources convey clearly that the perceived main value of the paper lies in its associated dataset. The study itself may not offer the same level of novel biological insight as an Article, but the dataset that underlies a Resource should be easy to reuse and of high utility to others in the field. The study by Pietzner and colleagues in this issue serves as a nice case in point.

Deciding on how to structure a project for publication often boils down to identifying the most compelling story to tell. Just as inspiring literature can take many forms, exciting research also comes in different shapes — some big, and some small. Watson and Crick's seminal work[1] contained just one, single-panel figure. Perhaps striving for simpler and less data-dense papers — taking cues from the time when a concise piece of research could transform a field — is worth a thought.

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References

1. Watson, J. D. & Crick, F. H. C. *Nature* **171**, 737–738 (1953).