Description

As a researcher, you probably spend a lot of time with papers—either reading the work of others or preparing your own research for submission to a journal. By one estimate, about two million articles are published in a year. This means that it is very easy for your paper to not receive the attention of your colleagues, even those who may need it to answer a question or guide their next set of experiments. Every time someone chooses to cite your paper, it is an indication of the impact of your work. After all, that person read your research and needed information from it for their own paper. What do we know about the factors that influence how your paper will be cited? A recent study examined this question for ecology journals. The authors found that longer papers with more references and authors are cited more often.

Longer Papers Cited More

Studies which examine complex questions or have groundbreaking conclusions are usually in the form of longer manuscripts. In the process of submitting the manuscript to an academic journal, however, authors have to trim the content so that it conforms to the journal's Instructions for Authors. Many journals either state their preference for more concise papers or impose strict word count limits. When the story that you wish to tell has one or two main points, the process of writing concisely may actually improve your paper. However, if you are publishing a complex story, you may be forced to remove a lot of valuable information in order to publish in your chosen journal. Alternatively, some authors choose to split their data over several smaller papers to conform to the journal limits while still sharing all the results from their complex research project.

When compared, it was found that longer papers are consistently better cited than shorter ones. Paper length, in and of itself, is not likely to dictate how much influence your paper has on your field. The authors suggest that paper length may be a proxy for the diversity of data and ideas that the paper contains. Papers which share data that is relevant to more than just a specific niche will be interesting to more readers. Since these papers reveal insights that matter to more areas of study within a field, they will attract the attention of a wider audience and thus receive more citations. This suggests that academic journals that impose limits on article length may actually damage the progress of science. When economics journals imposed strict limits on manuscript length, there was a noted decrease in paper submissions. This could have been because authors simply chose to submit their papers in their longer form to other journals. It could also be a result of authors having studies too complex to be sufficiently explained within the given limits. In order to comply with stated page limits, some authors have instead changed fonts, spacing or margins to get their data published while still being within the given page limits.

The fact that more authors are now choosing to publish supplementary data is also indicative of the problem caused by imposing limits. Academic journals with strict page limits tend to have more papers with supplementary material which tends to be more extensive. Authors seem to be responding to the imposed limits by simply cutting valuable data from the main text and submitting it as a supplementary file. Supplementary data is almost always separate from the article itself, frequently does not contain links to the main article, may not have been subjected to peer review and is not usually read. All of

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these factors mean that although the data is available, it may not be as useful as if it had been included in the main text of your paper.

More Authors = More Citations

Papers with more authors also receive more citations. A diversity of authors allows for a greater variety of expertise to be represented in a paper. It is also possible that the author list could be longer when the paper is interdisciplinary in nature, requiring the input of researchers from many different specializations. Again, this is likely to make the academic research presented in the paper richer in data from a broader range of fields. The questions answered in a paper to which many experts contributed are likely to carry more weight than a paper authored by a few researchers. This could explain the impact of these papers leading to increased citations. Papers with more authors could also lead to higher numbers of self-citations.

Check the Reference List

Papers with many references also tend to be more highly cited. Longer papers tend to cite more references and have more authors. A 10% increase in page count was associated with a 1.8% increase in citations. Similar increases in author number and references cited were associated with 1.9% and 3.3% increases in the number of citations a paper received. The reference list, therefore, had the greatest impact on the number of citations gained. Again, this could be an indicator of the fact that the paper has many ideas that need to be contextualized or supported. Having more references may also lead to a paper being retrieved in more searches, which could aid its visibility and increase the number of times it gets cited.

What Does This All Mean?

This examination of data from the ecology journals is quite insightful as it highlights the fact that arbitrary limits on article length may actually be hindering the quality of papers published. Longer articles typically arise from complex, interdisciplinary studies whose impact can be lost if they are forced to conform to word count limits set by a journal. The study also points to the fact that having more authors on a paper may actually strengthen it and make it more relevant to a larger subset of researchers. Longer papers with more authors which cite more research articles tend to be more substantive, have greater impact and tend to be more widely cited. It might, therefore, be time to take up the challenge of forging the collaborations necessary to address the truly complex questions in various fields of study. The citations will then follow.

Category

1. Reference Management
2. Reporting Research

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