

## Drawing legs on a snake: A reflection against word count tyranny in academic publishing

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### Abstract

Once again, a manuscript is silenced not by scientific flaws, but by the tyranny of word count. As a basic researcher who has lived the tempo of discovery, I write this reflective note in response to the recurring rejection of concise, complete papers that simply fail to meet the so-called "minimum requirement" of 5000 words. This absurd numerical demand has nothing to do with scientific rigor, yet it is used as a gatekeeper. This article defends the power of brevity, questions the false equivalence between length and quality, and reveals the broader damage caused by this publishing culture; from distorted p-values and publication bias to the unfair silencing of non-native English-speaking scholars. This isn't just a complaint. It is a protest against drawing legs on snakes just to please those who confuse verbosity with value. Let truth be enough, in the length it naturally takes. Let us stop dressing up snakes with legs just because policy says so.

**Keywords** Academic publishing, word count policy, editorial failure, scientific integrity, reflective protest

### 1. Introduction: The paper that wasn't reviewed

Dear editors, I am writing this not out of bitterness, but out of necessity. You told me my paper is carefully written, data-backed, complete in logic but, it cannot even be reviewed because it is under 5000 words. No methodological flaws were raised. No comments on rigor. Just one cold line: "To qualify for peer review, the minimum requirement is 5000 words." I've seen this before. And now, I've had enough.

This is not how science should be. This is how bureaucracy poisons discovery. When editorial policies become so obsessed with the format that they forget the function, we all lose. This is not about me. This is about the snake. The above issue is represented and exactly explained by the Chinese proverb: 画蛇添足 (*huà shé tiān zú*) (to draw legs on a snake).

Yes; the snake. If I ask you to draw a snake, you draw a snake. That is enough. But if your journal policy says every snake must have two legs; then the snake is no longer a snake. It becomes a monster to satisfy a policy. That is what word count rules do to honest research.

A rule meant to streamline screening has become a filter that blocks evaluation of merit. Science is served when editors ask whether the claim is clear, the method is transparent, the data are available or auditable, and the inference matches the evidence. These four

sufficiency tests protect rigor better than a numeric floor ever could. The metaphor matters because it exposes a simple truth. Format should be a vehicle for function, not its replacement.

Practical alternative: allow submission to review at any length that satisfies a sufficiency checklist covering method transparency, data access, analytic clarity, and stated limitations.

### 2. Quantity worship: When size matters more than truth

The obsession with word counts reduces research to a number game. What nonsense is this? Do you think science becomes better by adding 2000 meaningless words? Elman et al. [1] argued exactly this: that arbitrary length constraints shift the researcher's energy away from inquiry and toward satisfying formatting rituals. Why is it that the system punishes those who write clearly and succinctly? The English proverb says: Brevity is the soul of wit.

They say, "Longer papers get more citations." Fox et al. [2] showed that. So what? Is this academia or a popularity contest? What about the small discoveries that change a field forever in under 3000 words? What about the moments when fewer words mean clearer science? When you force us to stretch the paper like a rubber band just to meet word minimums, what you get

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is a bloated carcass of ideas. Not a discovery. Not a contribution. But compliance.

Length is at best a noisy proxy for contribution. It imposes cognitive cost on readers, invites repetition, and can mask uncertainty under layers of prose. The right editorial question is simple. Is the evidence sufficient for the scope of the claim and is the reasoning reproducible. If yes, more words do not add value. If no, more words hide the gap rather than close it.

### **3. The dangerous games researchers are forced to play**

Now let's talk about what really happens. This policy encourages fraud; yes, fraud masked as formatting. As Harvey [3] stated, publication pressure causes people to cherry-pick results, chase p-values, and fit into molds rather than speak the truth. And Ridley et al. [4] proved it with p-value distributions that magically cluster just under 0.05. Why? Because people are shaping their "significance" to please reviewers and editors. This is no longer science. It is theatre.

Now throw in the word count tyranny, and researchers are forced to stuff their papers with unnecessary content just to pass the editorial gate. Is this integrity? Is this scholarship? No; it is inflation without value. Like drawing legs on a snake to meet a checklist. When metrics become gates they become targets, and targets invite gaming. Word floors encourage ornamental literature reviews, redundant method text, and over-interpreted discussions that swell length without improving inference. The result is predictable. Readers work harder to find the signal and the literature grows in pages while shrinking in precision.

### **4. Who suffers the most? Not the native English speaking giants**

Let's not pretend the playing field is fair. For scholars from non-English-speaking backgrounds, every sentence takes double the time and double the stress. Rasool [5, 6] has made it painfully clear: translation is not just linguistic, it is cognitive, cultural, and deeply exhausting. And now, you want us to add another 2000 words? Words that don't even serve the science, just to meet your format?

This is injustice disguised as professionalism. This is editorial power crushing those who can't afford to stretch. For us, every word is weighed. Every sentence is negotiated. And yet the rule stands: No review unless you cross the sacred word count. Is this the kind of science publishing we want to build?

A uniform minimum that ignores unequal writing costs amplifies existing disparities. Precision in a second language demands time that many scholars cannot spare, especially when research and teaching loads are high. Equity requires removing noise that blocks signal, not adding hurdles that favour those with more linguistic slack.

Why not the journal editor to formalize a concise article category with equal prestige and provide language support aimed at clarity, not expansion.

### **5. My snake has no legs – let it be**

Let me be very clear. I know how to go slow, and I know when to go fast. I know when a story is ready. And I know when it is not. My paper was ready. It had no need for two extra pages of fluff. It was lean, focused, and sharp. Like a snake.

But your policy insists: "Add legs to it, or it cannot enter." How absurd. Do you want truth, or do you want length? If it is the latter, then perhaps I am in the wrong era of publishing. Vanclay [7] made a powerful case: journals should move toward certifying editorial integrity, not enforcing archaic rules that penalize precision. If you trust your reviewers, let them judge the science. Not the word count.

Peer review exists to assess sufficiency and importance. Denying entry before expert eyes see the work replaces judgment with a blunt instrument. Trust the review process. Use formatting guidance after acceptance to improve communication, not before review to block science.

Why not the journal editor to publish an editorial policy titled: Sufficiency over size and state that length will not bar a manuscript from external review when core transparency criteria are met.

### **6. Conclusion: A plea for those who still believe in the integrity of small science**

This is not merely a rejection note to me. It is a symptom of a wider academic culture that increasingly confuses decoration with depth, where form overtakes function, and polish takes precedence over purpose. When word count becomes the gatekeeper, we risk allowing bureaucracy, not curiosity, to dictate what science is worth reading.

To those who uphold such policies, perhaps without ill intention to consider this: if you were truly doing basic, fundamental science, if you had ever lived through the slow rhythm of discovery in the field or lab, you would understand that the best science doesn't always come in big packages [8, 9]. Some truths arrive quietly. Some breakthroughs are subtle. If we continue to raise barriers based on size rather than substance, how can small, genuine science ever grow? This is not an attack on individuals, but a call to reawaken scientific sensibility. Policies that measure research by the number of words do not serve the spirit of inquiry. They stifle it. They do not help emerging voices but they muffle them.

Let us not demand that every snake come with legs just because someone made it a rule. Let the snake be a snake. Let the story end when it should. Let science speak, not at the length we require, but at the length truth demands. In science, enough should be enough. And sometimes, less is the most honest way to say more. The path forward is clear. Replace numeric floors with transparent sufficiency tests, reward economy of expression, center equity for scholars writing across languages, and let reviewers judge claims on their evidential merits. If we align format to function, we restore

trust that journals curate knowledge for its truth rather than its length.

The above issue can be summarized in the following Malay *Pantun*:

*Ular di bendang meluncur girang,  
Anak menimba air di telaga,  
Tulisan ringkas jangan dipandang kurang,  
Nilai pada bukti, faedahnya berharga.*

[A snake glides through the paddy field in delight,  
A child draws water from the village well;  
A brief writing should not be judged as slight,  
Its worth lies in evidence, with benefits that excel.]

### Author Contributions

The author did all the research work for this study.

### Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest exist.

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