

## Editorial—A short way to success?

It is a popular belief that everyone has within them, one great novel, just waiting to pour out. Scientists are not renowned for their literary abilities, although there are some prominent exceptions; Isaac Asimov springs to mind as an obvious example, and more recently Carl Djerassi has taken to novel-writing and received some critical acclaim. These, however, are the exceptions which only serve to emphasize the point about literary scientists. The average working scientist may have concentrated all his abilities into his one magnum opus, his PhD thesis, and then gratefully returned to his friendly equations and satisfying structures, giving up the unequal struggle with split infinitives, hanging participles and non sequiturs. Others will need to write research papers for learned journals such as this, and it is in this field where some of them may be tempted to write their masterpieces.

Indeed, some research papers may well be structured like the modern blockbuster. They will have long stretches of introduction detailing all that has gone before the main action, filling in the history of how the hero or heroine's grandfather made his fortune in Australia. Then it must have multiple themes, intertwined into a complexity that may require an appendix so the reader can keep track of all the action in the main text. And of course there is the surprise element provided by the vital piece of information that if we had known about in the first place would have rendered all the turmoil unnecessary; in the blockbuster scientific paper, this bit of information may appear towards the end of the discussion, or even more likely as a note added in proof.

This column has hinted in the past on the various ways authors can improve their presentation and hence their chances of having research reports accepted for publication. You will have guessed no doubt from the tone of the piece so far, that modelling a scientific paper on the structure of a novel would not be recommended by this editor. However, it was recently put to me by a colleague, that a good scientific paper is like a good short story; this is an analogy that may be much more useful. Just consider some of the attributes of a good short story.

A short story has something to say, but generally it will be restricted to a single, clearly put, message. It should of course have something new to say; there are many short stories I will read again and again, but if I am offered a new

one, I expect to learn something I didn't know before; just like a good scientific paper offered for publication in a learned journal.

The cast of characters in a short story will be quite small and their antecedents need only be hinted at; if the principal character is a plumbing engineer (or an ACE inhibitor), then there is no need for an opening treatise on central-heating systems (or a detailed discussion on the mechanism of action of angiotensin).

There is a type of short story where the vital piece of information is deliberately held back until the end, but nowadays such stories are not considered to be particularly good—and we are talking about good short stories here. Our scientific paper should tell a coherent tale, giving the reader all the appropriate information at the right point in the exposition, yet still coming to a satisfying and satisfactory conclusion.

Conversely, all the information in a good short story must be essential to the plot. The short-story writer does not have the luxury of painting in the scenery just for the sheer pleasure of the writing, nor should he deliberately include events and descriptions just to make the story longer than it need be. Similarly, scientists toiling over their word-processors may find it useful to question the relevance of some components of their final piece.

Short stories are not the same as serials, even if the same characters may crop up in a series of stories by the same author. I do not recall ever seeing a title like 'Guys and Dolls. Part 37: Dancing Dan's Christmas', and extension of our analogy strengthens this Journal's resolve to frown on similar titles for papers; this harks back to the thesis that all papers should be reasonably complete in themselves and should not consist of the least publishable unit.

Finally, I would not like to leave the impression that the shorter a story (paper) is, the better it will be. There is of course a need for long papers with detailed new results and sometimes, closely-argued discussion. If this is what is required, then this Journal will certainly encourage such papers. The argument here is that the Authors should make sure they have identified which pieces of work are appropriate for which type of presentation.

JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN