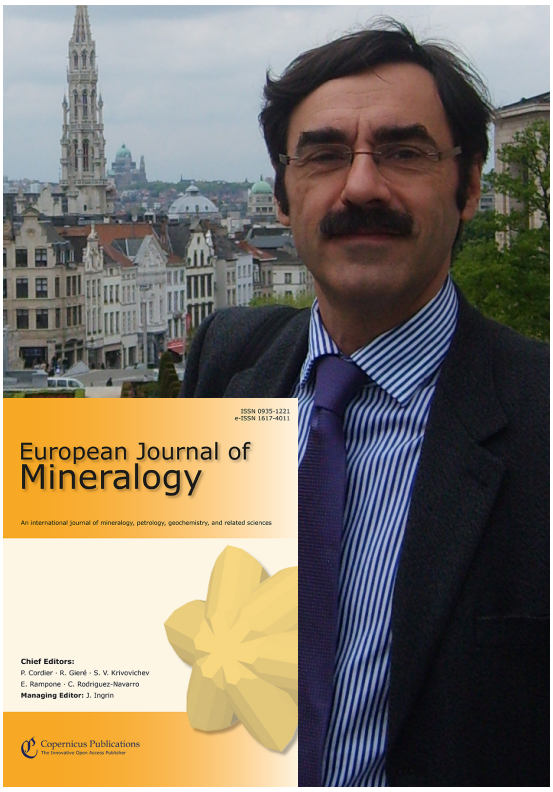
EDITORIAL

Should we continue to let the length of the introductions increase in specialized scientific articles?



The nature of the introductions in scientific articles has changed along the years. Thirty years ago, they were short and focused on the description of the current state of the art, concisely presenting objectives of the article. Now they are longer and are more or less a review of the broad subject, becoming more and more repetitive to read.

To assess factually the changes in the length of introductions, I compared the introduction of articles published in the European Journal of Mineralogy (EJM) in vol. 1 (1989) and in vol. 31 (2019). 66 research articles were published in vol. 1 and 84 in vol. 31. I disregarded review papers to avoid bias. The average length of introductions in 2019 was more than 60% longer than in 1989 (598 words versus 371 words). The difference is significant and not due to the specificity of a year. The same trend is observed if we consider for instance, years 1990 and 2018.

Why this change? It may appear paradoxical considering that authors publish on average more articles per year than in the past. Therefore, shorter papers and a shorter introduction could have been expected. However, the opposite is observed. Why do we become so prolix and what are the impacts?

I looked at the nature of the changes in articles with particularly long introductions (over 800 words). They generally present an extensive review of the subject or/and try to justify the broad impact of the study. One could discuss whether it is necessary to develop an exhaustive review every time we publish an incremental research article in a specialized journal. Except in case of a new topic or field, the community knows the subject well. In addition, dedicated review papers are also regularly published to help new researchers in the field. Therefore, it is somehow questionable to develop extended reviews of the subject each time when publishing new results. Publications in specialized journals should not have to describe the subject for a general audience. There is also no need to explain a posteriori the broad interest of the study, because the project has already been funded and funding institutions do not use such explanations as criterion to assess success.

The first impact increasing introduction lengths is that there is a duplication of information. As direct consequence we now read introductions with less interest and much less care. A second impact is that it contributes to an inflation of the number of citations. The average number of citations per article has increased by 49% in the last 30 years in EJM (1989 - 2019). As the number of scientific publications has continuously increased during these years, this is to be expected. However, more surprising, during the same period of time, the average number of citations in the introductions alone has increased by 97%. We should therefore question the necessity of these citations, especially if this part of the articles is less read and somehow redundant.

I think it is time to come back to more sober introductions and limit this growing noise. There is no added value to produce texts that nobody reads. Everybody could benefit from a more succinct approach: reviewers would have less pages to read to assess the introduction, the editor less volume to typeset and copy-edit, the readers would more easily identify the relevant scientific information and finally the authors would spend less time to write it and to check the proofreading.

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