The Company of **Biologists**

EDITORIAL

Going format-free

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As some readers will already be aware, we have recently introduced a new 'format-free' submission policy. We've been delighted by the early feedback on this – from what we're hearing, this has been a popular move and will help make life easier for authors submitting to Development. But what do we mean by format-free and how does it differ from our earlier policy?

Now, when you submit your paper to Development, you don't need to worry about specific formatting requirements for the journal – we don't care if your references are not in Development style (they can even be numbered), whether your materials and methods section comes after the introduction or the discussion, or whether you've provided the figures in the format that we need for final publication. We hope this should make things easier for all authors, but particularly for those submitting to Development after their paper has been considered elsewhere; while we like to believe that all our authors select Development as their first choice of venue for publication of their work, we are realistic and recognise that at least a few of you might already have tried another journal first! In general, we don't see the value in asking you to reformat (or just format) your paper in our house style before you know whether it is likely to be accepted for publication with us. Instead, we want to remove as many of the hurdles to submission as we can and make the whole process as quick and smooth as possible.

So what do we need at initial submission? The most important requirement we still retain, and one that we recognise will not be universally popular, is a length restriction. Research articles over 7000 words and Research reports over 3000 words (excluding title page, abstract, reference list and, now, materials and methods – more on which below) will be returned to authors with a request to shorten the paper to within this limit. We make this a requirement because we believe that length limits serve a valuable purpose – to ensure that a paper remains relatively concise and accessible to the reader. And we have chosen to enforce this guideline at initial submission because, in our experience, papers tend only to get longer during the revision process, meaning that it will become even more difficult to meet these limits at a later stage in the process. In exceptional cases, and following consultation with the handling editor, we may be able to consider papers that exceed this length, but we generally believe that it should be possible to write your paper in a way that does not run over this limit – and that this will make the paper a better read upon eventual publication.

We will also return your paper before sending it to the editor if text or figures are unreadable following conversion to PDF (although this is rare), and we may also ask you for a smaller PDF if the file is too large to be easily handled by editors and referees. In addition, we may have to delay assigning your paper to

an editor if we can't confirm the identity of your co-authors. You might be aware that a few journals (fortunately not us) have encountered problems with corresponding authors submitting papers with fake email addresses for their co-authors, allowing them to circumvent the normal checks that ensure that all co-authors are aware of and approve the paper and its submission. Therefore, where non-institutional (e.g. Gmail) addresses are provided, we will query these with the corresponding author and request either institutional email addresses and/or ORCID IDs. We are sure you understand that it is important we make sure all authors are kept fully informed of the status of their work, and hence why this is an essential check to keep at first submission.

With these changes, we hope to make initial submission to Development as easy as we can. In fact, we were already operating on a largely format-free basis before the announcement of this policy, but we have further relaxed our guidelines with this latest set of changes. We will, however, ask that you ensure your paper complies with our formatting guidelines at revision stage – should your work meet with positive assessment from our editors and referees. At this point, we will also require you to fill in our submission checklist – confirming that your paper complies with various policies and best practise guidelines – to provide high-resolution versions of the figures that our graphics team can process for publication, and to tell us about your funding bodies. Given that, according to recent statistics, we accept over 95% of papers where we have invited a revision, we hope that you won't mind taking the extra time to format your paper at this stage, when you know the chances of eventual acceptance are very high.

The other significant change we have made, as alluded to above, is to remove the materials and methods section from our word count. The aim here is twofold. First, we want to give you a little more flexibility with article length – the total word limit remains the same even though we now exclude the materials and methods. Second, and more importantly, we recognise the importance of this section of the paper and want to encourage authors to provide appropriate details of all experimental protocols. Length limits often mean that methods sections simply cite previous papers, which cite even earlier papers, so that a reader can find it impossible to figure out how an experiment has been conducted. We would prefer that methods be provided in greater detail, allowing readers to fully understand the protocols. Where materials and methods are particularly lengthy, we will still encourage some of this information – additional details that are primarily of interest to the real expert in the field or to those wishing to replicate the experiments – to be provided in the supplementary information, but again we will not enforce this at initial submission and can work with the authors to make appropriate changes at revision stages.

Together, we hope these changes will make the submission process for authors – whether you are submitting to Development as first choice (which of course we hope most of you do!), or have already been elsewhere – a quicker and easier process. As always, we will continue to review these policies as we go forwards, and we welcome your feedback.

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