Covering a manuscript that arrived this week was a letter from the author telling me that he realized the manuscript was long, but to shorten it in any way would destroy it. I have read this so often that I suspect that somewhere in a textbook on scientific writing is a sample submission letter containing this statement. No doubt authors are annoyed if not furious when I ask them to shorten their manuscript by a quarter or a half. But editors’ obsession with brevity is well founded: almost every manuscript can be shortened substantially without losing a thought, and readers, especially weary physicians at the end of a hard day, have neither the time nor the patience to plough through excessively long articles.

How, then, can authors shorten their articles? I think there are two essential steps. The first is simply to ensure that every sentence, table and figure addresses the goal of the manuscript; if not, remove it. This step can be difficult because the goal of brevity must be balanced by that of clarity. However, there are some simple tactics. For example, if the procedure you used is described elsewhere cite the reference; if the results are tabulated note only the important points in the text; if you have fully discussed an issue in the introduction don’t do it again in the discussion; and, above all, don’t reiterate the results in the discussion.

The second step is somewhat easier and is one I usually leave to the last. Go through the manuscript carefully and question the necessity of every word or phrase, removing it if possible or substituting a shorter one. Words and phrases that should be expunged include: ‘in fact’, ‘it is a truism that’, ‘is a process that’ and ‘needless to say’. Also, all redundancies should be removed, such as ‘consensus of opinion’, ‘my own personal’, and ‘period or interval of time’. Some expressions can be shortened dramatically without losing a thought: ‘a number of’ (use ‘some’, ‘many’ or ‘several’), ‘a majority of’ (‘most’), ‘it is our opinion’ (‘we believe’), ‘subsequent to’ (‘after’) and ‘whether or not’ (‘whether’ or ‘if’).

The only impediment to this pruning process is our natural inability to identify the superfluous words or phrases that have become part of our individual speaking or writing habits. Therefore, a competent colleague or secretary may be able to edit your manuscript better than you. When one or the other returns your manuscript heavily marked don’t pout, be grateful. Indeed, if a colleague returns it unmarked and tells you it’s great, never trust him or her again! Brevity is beautiful.