

Technical Briefs

There is an ASME Journal submission type that is frequently a subject of misunderstanding and occasionally a source of ill feelings in authors: the Technical Note or Technical Brief. A note or brief is almost always a shorter contribution than the “full” research paper, and therefore less worthy by implication. I will argue here that this implication is just not true.

There is no real definition for the term, but there is a wide range of uses. Here is a sampling:

A technical note is a document that provides additional technical details on a technology, product or application (from Afymetrix, a genetic analysis company).

Technical Notes: Short, focused essays and supplementary documentation. Technical Notes discuss some of the more complex issues related to programming with Apple technologies (from Apple Developer Connection).

Technical Brief is an indispensable publication for technical managers in theater. Written by professionals for professionals, its purpose is simple: communication. Technical Brief provides a dialogue between technical practitioners from the several performing arts who all share similar problems: “Make it fly! Make it roll! Make it disappear! Make it tomorrow!” (from Yale University School of Drama).

I suspect most of us would not feel slighted if our work were described in this general spirit. However, the definitive one for us is, of course, the one from the ASME journals guidelines to authors, straight from the horse’s mouth as it were:

Technical Brief (Technical Note, Brief Note)

A technical brief reports results that are of significant and archival value to the engineering community; however, these works are more limited in scope and length than a research paper. A technical brief may contain any of the following:

- preliminary report of a result not yet fully developed or interpreted
- commentary on a technical issue of potential interest to readers

Technical briefs undergo full peer review.

Recommended Length: 2500 words

And here is the rub: the tip on the horse is not always what happens on the racetrack—to follow the picturesque horseracing Americanism. For one thing, technical briefs are rarely 2500 words in length, and more like 6000 words, which is what used to be the limit for full-length papers. For another, we would never publish any contribution of “potential” interest to readers. Really.

The important, operative words here are: significant and archival value to the engineering community; limited in scope and length; full peer review. A technical brief is subjected to the same extent and rigor of review as a full-length paper. The difference is in the scope and, usually, length. These apparent limitations can be often advantages. For example, a limited scope allows the author to concentrate on some important aspect of his or her work, and provide additional depth than might be otherwise allowed within a full-length paper. Reporting a “preliminary result” as a technical brief might attract early attention quickly and give the author advanced credit, as opposed to reporting the work in full maturity 2–3 years later. Incidentally, this is what usually happens with the so-called “high impact factor” publications.

Occasionally, a reviewer might insist that the submission should be recast as a technical brief because of the perceived contribution not being deep enough. Limited in scope does not mean limited in depth, and so such a suggestion is generally not appropriate, and it is what usually causes ill feelings among authors receiving this feedback. Reviewers should refrain from suggesting conversion of research papers to technical briefs as a consolation prize, and authors should refrain from assuming that this is the reason for a technical brief classification. You can take it from this horse’s mouth: Technical briefs are high quality, fully reviewed contributions of special value to the journal.

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