About right: references in Open Access EGU journals

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Abstract. We investigated the number of references per page for different European Geophysical Union journals, which share the same text formatting. Although the journals formally all focus on geoscience, different disciplines are covered, from ocean science and biogeosciences to the technical description of numerical model development. In this study, we show that the number of references per page is remarkably constant across these journals. In addition, this value has remained constant in the last decade, despite the consistent increase in the number of pages and in the number of references in almost all journals considered. Independently of the quality of the references used in a article, we show that for the EGU journals the average number of references per page is 3.82 ($1.87 - 6.18$ at 90% confidence level). This reveals that there is a consensus regarding optimum reference density, which depends on the journal's layout and not on the journal's discipline.

1 Introduction

The number of references in a scientific paper can influence reader judgement of the paper's quality (Lovaglia, 1991), and is thus an important factor in defining its success, i.e. its number of citations (Fox et al., 2016). Therefore it is important that authors include an optimal (and balanced) quantity and quality of references in their articles.

It has been shown (Abt and Garfield, 2002) that the number of references per page is remarkably constant across a large number of disciplines, and that longer papers are, on average, more frequently cited than shorter papers (Leimu and Koricheva, 2005). Nevertheless, the creation of homogeneous and standardised text length is a challenging task, with each journal having different formatting layouts, which could influence the perception of reference quantity and, indirectly, result in pressure for an increase or decrease in their numbers.

In the last decades, the length of scientific papers has undergone a significant increase. Ucar et al. (2014) showed not only a clear trend towards an increase in the number of pages in papers in engineering journals, but also showed that this increase has not yet begun to level off. This increase in paper length is mirrored by a constant increase in the number of references over time (Biglu, 2008; Jaunich, 2018). Bornmann and Mutz (2015) revealed a large increase in the number of references from the middle of the twentieth century onward. The temporal increase in the number of references per papers varies among different disciplines (Sánchez-Gil et al., 2018). Furthermore, Nicolaisen and Frandsen (2021) showed that "there is a drop in short reference lists and a corresponding increase in a bit longer and medium size reference lists. Long and very long reference lists remain much more stable in shares over time, and does therefore not contribute much to the observed growth." A steady state in reference numbers has until now only been artificially reached in a few journals and/or manuscript types, through the

enforcement of limits in the number of references (Anger, 1999). Nevertheless, most of these studies focused on the number of references per article, without analysing this parameter with respect to the paper length, or, similarly, without investigating reference density. A notable exception is the work of Milojević (2012), which found different temporal trends in reference per page, depending on the field of study.

The European Geophysical Society (a the predecessor of the European Geophysical Union), started its first open access (OA) journal in 2001, with the launch of the journal *Atmospheric-Chemistry and Physics* (Pöschl, 2004, 2012). The success of this first journal prompted The European Geophysical Union (EGU), through Copernicus Publications, to establish additional OA journals. A total of nineteen journals are currently published by Copernicus (for EGU), covering various topics of the Earth, planetary and space sciences.

In this work we examined of the OA EGU journals, which have identical layouts, and therefore allow for a direct comparison between the different journals. In addition, all the paper-related metadata have been published online in a searchable XML format, which allows automatic computer scripting for information gathering. It must be stressed that Copernicus Publications publish other OA journal in addition to the EGU journals considered. However, these journals use diverse layouts, which hinders the comparison between them.

In this work we analyse the reference density, i.e. the number of references per page, in the OA journals published by the EGU. The goal is to investigate whether the reference density varies among journals which cover different topics but have the exact same layout. We show that there exists a well defined range for the number of references per page, similar for all OA EGU journals, and that this has remained remarkably constant over time. In the Sect. 2, the methods for data collection are explained, followed by an analysis of the temporal trends (Sect. 3) is presented. Finally, the main results are derived in Sec. 4, followed by the conclusions.

2 Methodology

We considered articles accepted and published in XML form in the 2010–2020 period from the EGU OA journals. Therefore, only EGU journals which started operating in 2010 at the latest were used in this study, which resulted in the inclusion of a total of 12 journals (see Table 1):

- *GMD, Geoscientific Model Development*,

- *ACP, Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics*,

- *BG, Biogeosciences*,

- *CP, Climate of the Past*,

- *AMT, Atmospheric Measurement Techniques*,

- *OS, Ocean Science*,

- *ESD, Earth System Dynamics,*

- *TC, The Cryosphere,*

- *NHESS, Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences,*

60   - *NPG, Nonlinear Processes in Geophysics,*

- *SE, Solid Earth,*

- *HESS, Hydrology and Earth System Sciences.*

An automatic Python script was used to recursively collect all the information required, such as the number of pages and the number of references, from the XML version of each manuscript.

65   To avoid counting papers which cited an unrepresentative number of references (such as zero references or pure compilation articles), the outliers, which were defined as (i) papers containing no references or (ii) the papers containing a number of references above the average plus 3 times the reference's standard deviation, were removed. In total 30,028 papers were downloaded, of which 787 were excluded as outliers, i.e. 29,241 published papers were used in this analysis.

In Table 1 the total number of papers analysed and those excluded from the analysis for each journal are presented. Roughly,
70    $\simeq 3$ % of the papers published in each journal were excluded as outliers. The outlier fraction ranges from 1.7% for TC to 3.6% for NHESS.

Table 1. Summary of journal characteristics. The number of papers analysed in each journal is listed, as well as the number of papers excluded (also expressed as a fraction) as outliers. The papers with the highest number of pages and the highest numbers of references are also listed for each journal.

Journal	papers	excluded	% excluded	highest num.pages		highest num. refs	
GMD	1931	45	2.3	66	gmd-13-3643-2020	526	gmd-12-3149-2019
ACP	8965	184	2.1	583	acp-15-4399-2015	793	acp-15-4399-2015
BG	4197	147	3.5	56	bg-11-3547-2014	469	bg-7-2851-2010
CP	1318	35	2.7	50	cp-13-1851-2017	531	cp-13-1851-2017
AMT	3210	80	2.5	75	amt-9-4181-2016	346	amt-12-525-2019
OS	849	26	3.1	51	os-6-91-2010	255	os-14-471-2018
ESD	468	11	2.4	74	esd-10-379-2019	572	esd-10-379-2019
TC	1757	30	1.7	47	tc-13-3261-2019	402	tc-12-759-2018
NHESS	2500	91	3.6	42	nhess-18-2561-2018	308	nhess-11-2617-2011
NPG	664	17	2.6	56	npg-18-295-2011	418	npg-18-295-2011
SE	791	26	3.3	49	se-7-1417-2016	293	se-5-1243-2014
HESS	3378	95	2.8	47	hess-23-303-2019	431	hess-20-3799-2016

In addition to the number of analysed and disregarded papers, Table 1 lists the papers with the highest numbers of pages and references in the period 2010–2020 for each journal. The longest articles range in length from 42 pages (*nhess-18-2561-2018*) to 583 pages (*acp-15-4399-2015*). The maximum number of references in an article ranges from 255 in *os-14-471-2018* to 793 in *acp-15-4399-2015*. *acp-15-4399-2015* stands out among all other EGU articles both with respect to its number of pages as well as the number of references. In this paper, a list of measurements of Henry's law coefficient for numerous gases of atmospheric relevance are presented. However, it should be noted that not all the papers with higher numbers of references are review articles or compilations of measurements (see for example, *amt-12-525-2019* or *gmd-12-3149-2019*).

3 Temporal trends

For each journal analysed we estimated the trends in number of pages, references and references per page: our results are presented in Table 2. In EGU publications, the number of pages and references per paper have increased in the last decade. The increase in pages per paper ranges from 0.26 pages/yr in ESD to 0.90 pages/yr in SE. Similarly, the number of references also increased in the same period, ranging from 1.06 to 3.91 references/yr in ESD and SE, respectively. Importantly, all these temporal trends (both number of pages and number of references) are statistically significant at 99% confidence level, with the exception of the ESD journal.

Table 2. Linear fit of the temporal trends of pages, references (column refs) and references per page (column refs/page) for different EGU journals for all analysed papers between 2010 and 2020. The numbers inside the parentheses are the standard deviations of the estimated time trends (slope of the linear fit). The units are in yr^{-1}.

Journal	pages	refs	refs/pages
GMD	0.52 (0.06)	2.01 (0.27)	0.02 (0.01)
ACP	0.34 (0.02)	1.81 (0.09)	0.03 (0.01)
BG	0.38 (0.02)	1.86 (0.14)	0.01 (0.01)
CP	0.43 (0.04)	2.43 (0.30)	0.03 (0.01)
AMT	0.39 (0.03)	1.27 (0.12)	0.01 (0.01)
OS	0.31 (0.05)	1.61 (0.22)	0.03 (0.01)
ESD	0.26 (0.10)	1.06 (0.52)	0.01 (0.03)
TC	0.45 (0.04)	1.99 (0.18)	0.02 (0.01)
NHESS	0.56 (0.03)	2.34 (0.13)	0.03 (0.01)
NPG	0.50 (0.06)	1.04 (0.26)	-0.04 (0.02)
SE	0.90 (0.08)	3.91 (0.39)	-0.00 (0.02)
HESS	0.51 (0.02)	2.28 (0.13)	0.03 (0.01)
total	0.45 (0.01)	1.90 (0.05)	0.01 (0.01)

The increase in number of citations may be attributed to the increasing growing of available literature. In fact, by publishing more papers, more manuscripts can (or must) be cited in future work. Analogously, the increase in absolute number of citations

reflects also the maturity that a specific science field has reached, whereby the large (and increasing) number of citations mirrors the large (and increasing) amount of research performed on the specific topic. Further, accessibility could be a major point for increasing citations over time: OA papers (with the leading role of pure OA journals) enable easy access to citable material. In addition, technological development (e.g. fast internet connection, searchable and online downloadable journals) facilitates the search and usage of previous literature. Finally, Persson et al. (2004) suggested that with the intensification of scientific collaboration an increase in citations of co-published paper must be expected, and therefore this increase is a sign of increasing national and international collaboration between research teams.

In addition to the increase in the number of pages and the number of references in the period 2010-2020, we estimated also the evolution of reference density (i.e. number of references per page) over this period. As shown in Table 2, these trends are very close to zero. The only journal with a clear statistically trend is ACP, which present an increase in reference density per year equal to 0.032, while none of the other journals present a statistically significant trend. This is in contrast to the findings of Ucar et al. (2014), which found a variable reference density along the 50 years of study that, but is in agreement with the work of Abt and Garfield (2002).

Based on these findings, we can consider the reference density to be constant in OA EGU journals, which, in turn, enables us to inspect all papers published in period covered.

4   Results

The probability density distribution of pages against references is presented in Fig. 1. Both pages and references exhibit a clear log-normal distribution, although for a few journals (e.g ESD) the number of papers available was quite low, which precludes the derivation of meaningful statistics. In each plot the linear fit (with no intercept) was also overlaid on the distribution. The linear fits range from 2.8 (AMT) to 4.6 (CP) references/page, showing quite homogeneous behaviour within all the papers, with a coherent and similar reference density in all EGU journals.

For each journal the average number of pages and the number of references were calculated , and the results are presented in Table 3. The average number of pages and references can exhibit strong variations between the journals, with differences of up to 60%. The longest papers appear on average in GMD, with 19 pages, while the shortest were published in NPG with 12 pages. NPG also exhibit the lowest number of references per paper (i.e. 40 references per paper), while CP has the highest, with 77 references per manuscript on average.

Finally, the average reference densities for each journals (based on the reference density for each manuscript) have been estimated (see Table 3 and Fig. 2). The number of references per page ranges from 3.00 to 4.77, for AMT and CP, respectively. Despite the differences in reference number or page distribution between the journals, the numbers of reference per page are statistically similar for all journals.

The reference density for each journal displays a classical log-normal distribution. Combining all the reference density distributions also results (to a good approximation) a log-normal distribution (Mitchell, 1968; Cobb et al., 2012; Dufresne,

Figure 1. 2-Dimensional histogram (center) with frequency histogram for pages (top) and references (right) for different EGU journals. The journal name and the total number of papers, pages and references are listed on the top right of each plot. The black line depict the linear fit (with no intercept). The axes for the 2-dimensional histograms are the same in all plots.

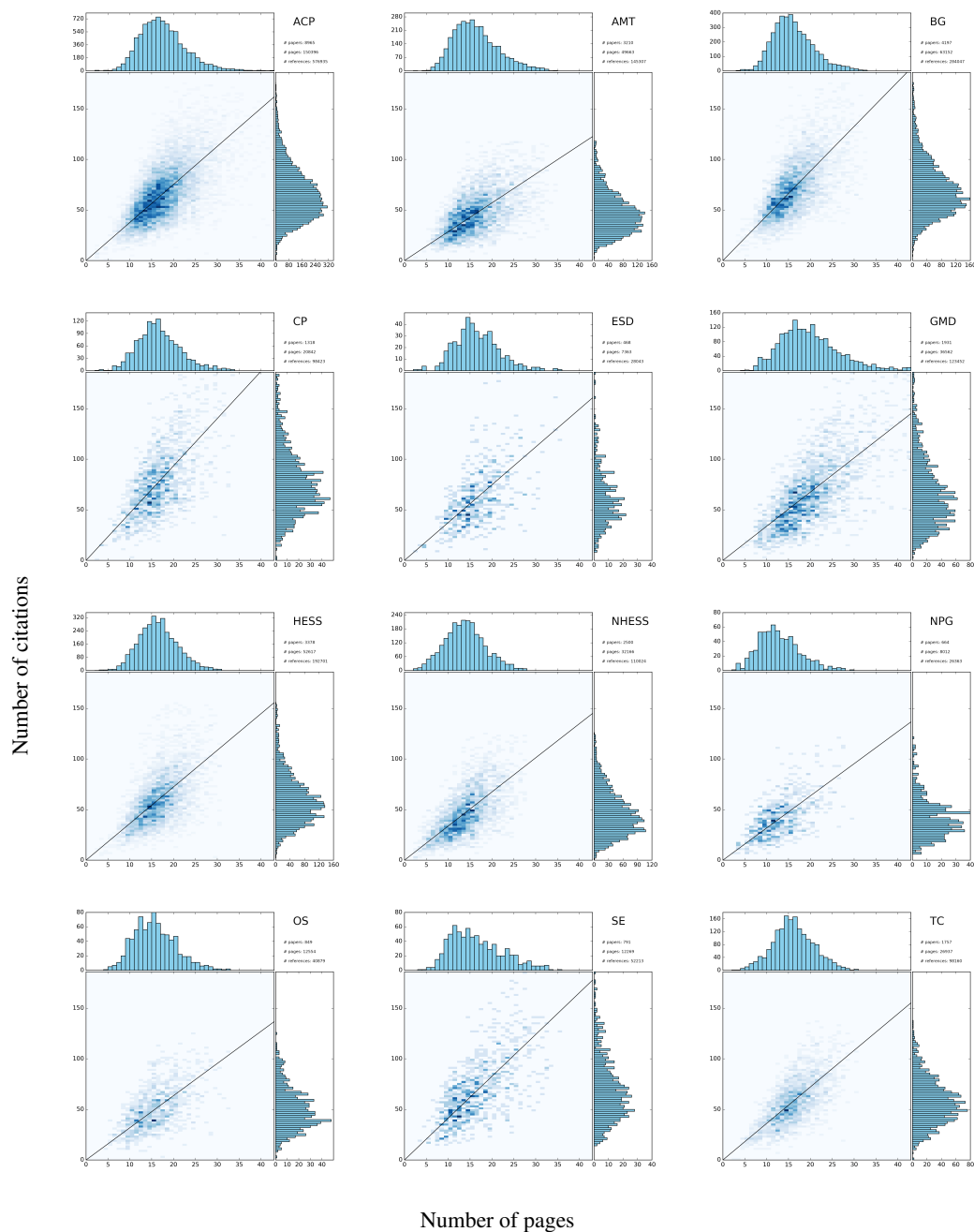
Number of citations

Number of pages

Table 3. Average numbers of pages, references (column refs) and references per page (column refs/page) for different EGU journals for all analysed papers. The range at 90% confidence level is listed in parentheses.

Journal	papers	pages	refs	refs/pages
GMD	1886	19 (10- 32)	65 (22- 129)	3.37 (1.55- 5.50)
ACP	8781	17 (10- 27)	65 (30- 114)	3.90 (2.11- 6.00)
BG	4050	15 (9- 24)	70 (35- 118)	4.57 (2.61- 6.75)
CP	1283	16 (9- 25)	76 (32- 141)	4.77 (2.50- 7.38)
AMT	3130	15 (9- 26)	46 (19- 84)	3.00 (1.45- 4.94)
OS	823	15 (8- 24)	49 (21- 90)	3.34 (1.67- 5.50)
ESD	457	16 (9- 25)	61 (25- 117)	3.88 (1.94- 6.24)
TC	1727	15 (8- 24)	56 (23- 97)	3.68 (2.07- 5.56)
NHESS	2409	13 (6- 22)	45 (16- 86)	3.48 (1.62- 5.80)
NPG	647	12 (6- 21)	40 (15- 74)	3.43 (1.59- 5.70)
SE	765	16 (8- 28)	68 (27- 129)	4.39 (2.14- 7.07)
HESS	3283	16 (9- 24)	58 (26- 103)	3.70 (1.94- 5.86)
total	29241	16 (9- 26)	60 (24- 111)	3.82 (1.87- 6.18)

2008). From this we estimated the overall reference density obtaining an average of 3.82 references/page with a confidence level of 90% between 1.87 and 6.18 references/page.

It is difficult to establish the cause of the relationship between pages and references. Although it is clear that the number of pages and the number of references in a paper influence each other positively, they are influenced both directly and indirectly by multiple factors, including e.g. the number of authors (see Abt and Garfield, 2002). Nevertheless, here we showed that the journal layout plays an essential role in defining this ratio, as this remains constant between all the OA EGU journals, independently on the research field, therefore substantially confirming the findings of Abt and Garfield (2002).

5 Conclusions

The importance of references in scientific journals has been clearly established. In this work we took advantage of the OA EGU journals, which, although they cover different areas in geoscience, share the same layout, thereby allowing for a direct comparison. It is shown that in the period 2010-2020, the number of pages and the number of references has been increasing in a statistically significant way.

Different reason s may underlay this growth, such as open access to existing literature together with technological development which facilitates searching for relevant citations. Additionally, we suggested this growth to be especially strong in EGU journals, as geophysics is still a relative immature field, with a growing number of researchers, and consequently, strong growth in the ensuing literature, which tends to be referenced increasingly in subsequent studies.

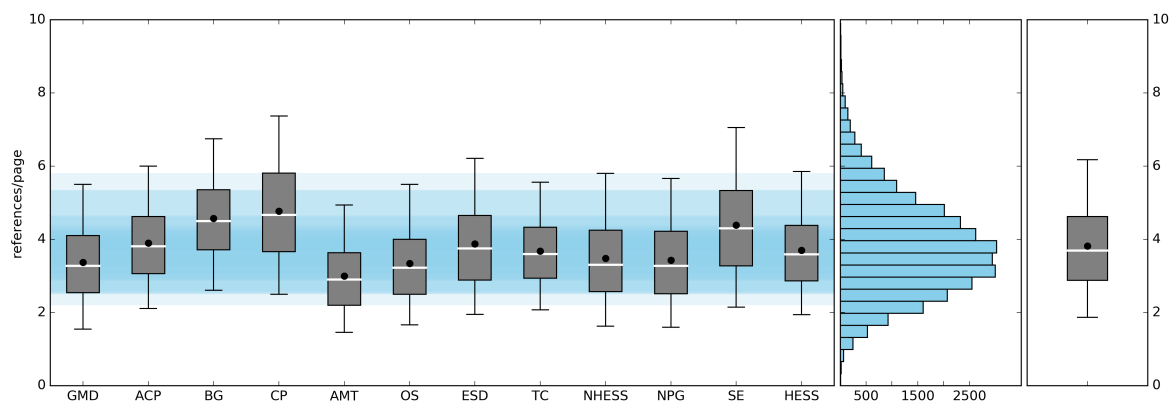



Figure 2. Left: Box plot of numbers of references per page. The box represents the distribution quartiles (25% and 75%), the white lines are the medians, and the black dots the averages. The bars represent the 90% confidence levels. The acronym of the respective journal is listed on the bottom. The light blue area represents the overlap of the 25-75% quartiles range for all the journals. Middle: Probability density histograms of numbers of references per page for all the papers from all journals. Right: Box plot of numbers of references per page as on the left, but for all papers from all journals.

Despite the increases in publication length and number of references in all journals since 2010, the reference density (i.e. number of references per page) has remained remarkably constant. In addition, no statistical difference in reference density can be observed in any of the journals. The average number of references per published page was estimated based on all the published papers, which show that the optimal reference density is 3.82 references/page ($1.87-6.18$ at 90% confidence level).

This work shows that the layout does influence the number of references per page, confirming previous work

It has been shown that papers with a large number of references tend to be cited more (Lovaglia, 1991); here we showed that the number of reference correlate with the length of the paper, suggesting that manuscript presenting work in more detail and with enhanced presentation of data or ideas tend to have a greater impact on subsequent literature. It is therefore important that manuscript should be as long as they need to be, with the authors able to describe their research in sufficient detail.

This work provides an indication for authors preparing their manuscript for EGU journals, suggesting how many references are "about right" in a paper. This is especially important for less experienced authors, as it shows if their citation strategy fits with the existing body of literature. Furthermore, reviewers or editors should be particularly careful in evaluating manuscript whose reference density is outside the range $1.87-6.18$, as this indicate a non-standard (or outlying) manuscript with an uncommonly high (or low) number of references.

150 *Code availability.* The code for analysis is available upon request to the contact author.

Competing interests. No competing interests are present.

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