Make it snappy

(In praise of short papers, short speeches and, yes, the sound bite)

Ian Wilmut, the king of clone, will have to wait a while to claim his Nobel Prize. But it is not too early to give him the 1997 Brevity Award. His paper in *Nature* announcing his creation of Dolly runs fewer than three pages. (Technical notes take up part of a fourth). Most scientific papers – most people – take three pages to clear their throat.

Yet even Wilmut fell short (so to speak) of the standard set in 1953 by Watson and Crick, whose own *Nature* paper announcing the most important scientific discovery of the half-century, the structure of DNA, ran just over one page.

Concision is highly prized in science. The premium on pith is enshrined in perhaps science's most important law, known as the law of parsimony, or Ockham's razor. It states, in essence, that when confronted with two or more explanations for a phenomenon, we assume that the more compact, less complicated, simpler one must be correct.

Why? Because of an assumption shared by practically all scientists: God does not waste a gesture.

Thus physics finds itself in a great funk today because it cannot neatly account for all the new particles it keeps discovering. It is saddled with a particle zoo whose inventory has the bulk and elegance of a Chinese menu.

This cannot be right – even if it accords with all the experimental evidence. Why? Because it is just too ugly. And everything in our experience tells us that nature abhors ugly. The most powerful and universal laws of nature – Newton's third (action-reaction) or Einstein's $e = mc^2$ – are breathtakingly compact and elegant.

The belief in elegance is more than a matter of experience. It is an article of faith. We believe the universe is beautiful, and in science there is nothing more beautiful than a large truth expressed with simplicity and brevity.

And not just in science. Brevity is the first principle of rhetoric too, and perhaps the most violated. Visit the Lincoln Memorial and see two of the greatest speeches in American history (the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural), each inscribed in its entirety on a part of one wall.

Or take the Truman Doctrine, the 50th anniversary of which we celebrate this year. It set the course of American foreign policy for a half-century. It took 18 minutes to deliver. That's about when the average Clinton State of the Union address reaches the "Let me begin by..." stage.

Brevity is so highly prized that one good aphorism can earn its coiner immortality. Yet there is one form of brevity that gets no respect at all: the sound bite.

The sound bite is to politics what the aphorism is to exposition: the art of saying much with little. Yet the high priests of the press denounce the sound bite, staple of the 30-second political ad, as a degradation of political discourse. They insist that we be fed a sturdier diet of five- and 10- and 30-minute speeches to elevate our sensibilities.

Well, we have our five- and 10- and 30-minute speeches all the time, and their principal effect is to dull our senses. Can anybody remember a single Saturday presidential radio address? A single State of the Union response? Or, for that matter, a single State of the Union address?

An age of MTV and fast-cut editing is not going to produce a Gettysburg Address. Let's get used to it. Our genius is concision. Let's appreciate it.

"Where's the beef?" – now there was a piece of rhetoric. Artful, no. But short, loaded and deadly. Three words, and Gary Hart's vacuous 1984 presidential campaign was forever deflated.

Or take James Carville's much abused "It's the economy, stupid". It will stand the test of time, not just for capturing the essence of the 1992 Clinton candidacy but for uncannily foreshadowing the narrowness and shallowness (and one unalloyed success) of the entire Clinton presidency.

"Vigorous writing is concise", writes William Strunk in his classic *Elements of Style*. "This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short... but that every word tell". The sound bite is the ultimate in making every word tell. It is the very soul of compactness. Brevity is not enough. You need weight. Hence some sound bites qualify for greatness: F.D.R.'s "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself" or Reagan's "Tear down this wall". Others – "a bridge to the 21st century" – are just short and gaseous.

Yes, of course the Lincoln-Douglas debates were great. But their time has passed. Modern political debates are a travesty of the form. Indeed, their main purpose is to produce the one sound bite – "I knew John Kennedy, Senator ..." – that will register on the evening news. Sound bites are what we do best. Let's give them honour.

Why, even the good old days could tire of loquaciousness and appreciate the fine bite. Stephen Douglas, after all, made it into the *Macmillan Dictionary of Political Quotations* with "Sit down, Lincoln, your time is up".

Charles Krauthammer. Courtesy, *Time*, 21 July 1997.