

Editing Grant Proposals:

How to Reduce Length Without Sacrificing Content

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To fund their research, academics must typically submit grant proposals to highly competitive grant programs. These programs have rules that limit the lengths of submissions to ensure reasonable fairness in the competitions and to minimize the workload for their reviewers. They typically use *page count limits* (including restrictions on page and font characteristics), *word count limits*, or *character count limits* (sometimes but not always including spaces).

Granting agencies are quick to weed out proposals that break the rules set out in the instructions. Other proposals that are just poorly written or carelessly formatted may not be rejected immediately, but they will still be at a disadvantage compared to those that are highly readable and that look professional.

Academics often find it quite difficult to meet the length restrictions and feel that they must delete parts of their proposals, but cutting down content could reduce their chances of success.

Editors can provide three services:

- Ensuring that the instructions are followed to the letter;
- Maximizing readability while minimizing length; and
- Making the text flow smoothly, logically, and convincingly.

Good editors don't need my advice on the third point, so this handout is just about the first two.

Table 1. Ways to reduce length and improve readability for each type of length restriction. (The column on character limits shows the case where spaces are included.)

Methods that reduce length (■) or improve readability (□)	Page limits	Word limits	Character limits
<i>First of all...</i>			
- Read the instructions! Your client may just have skimmed them or assumed that last year's instructions still apply.	■□	■□	■□
- Ask for access to the application form so that you can check the fit and the look of your edited text.		■□	■□
<i>Page layout</i>			
- Set the page to the maximum allowed paper size.	■		
- Set the margins and the gutter to the minimum allowed. Compare the specifications for inches vs. centimetres.	■		
- Consider adding line numbers temporarily to help track length reductions and to flag the locations of blank lines.	■		
<i>Headers and footers</i>			
- Include only the required header and footer text.	■		

Methods that reduce length (■) or improve readability (□)	Page limits	Word limits	Character limits
- If possible, restrict headers and footers to a single line of text. Use left, centre, and right tabs to separate the text elements.	■□		
- Adjust the position of the text in the headers and footers to leave white space above and below the line (but without increasing the widths of the top and bottom margins).	■□		
- Replace text boxes used for page numbering with in-line text.	■		
- To provide contrast with the body text, reduce the font size (usually allowed within the margins) and use a different font.	■□		
- Check after all section breaks to ensure that the headers and footers are consistent throughout the document.	■□		
<i>Hidden characters</i>			
- Remove all blank lines in the headers and footers.	■		
- Ensure that the text in the headers and footers does not include extra line spacing above or below the text.	■		
- In the body text, remove as many blank lines as possible. Substitute narrower white spaces as needed by specifying the spacing before or after headings and paragraphs (see the <i>Styles</i> section below). Sometimes 3-point spacing is enough.	■□		
- Remove white space above headings that follow page breaks.	■		
- In forms, insert blank lines above and below headings and perhaps between paragraphs as well to improve readability.		□	□
- Optimize or remove page breaks and section breaks as necessary (but follow the instructions).	■		
- Remove unnecessary hard or soft returns within paragraphs (such as those originating from e-mailed text).	■		
- Remove unnecessary spaces and tabs (using FileCleaner).	■		■
<i>Styles</i>			
- Apply a self-consistent family of styles to all text, including headings, headers and footers, tables, figure captions, text boxes, and references. Use these styles to control the formatting of white spaces, characters, and paragraphs.	■□		
- Check that no unwanted formatting remains anywhere.	■□		
• <i>Fonts</i>			
- If the choice is unrestricted, pick a compact font that offers good readability in all the font styles that will be used (bold, italics, etc.). Garamond is elegant and quite compact, but Garamond Bold is wide and wasteful of space and Garamond Italic is so narrow that it qualifies as (disallowed) condensed type. Reviewers are generally happier with single-spaced Times New Roman (TNR) for body text and Arial for short headings, but other choices are also acceptable. Some fonts have greater line heights than others, so it's prudent to compare the number of lines that fit on the required page.	■□		

Methods that reduce length (■) or improve readability (□)	Page limits	Word limits	Character limits
- In body text, substitute bold type with italics wherever possible, because bold is wider and takes up more space on the line (and too much bold text may irritate the reviewers).	■□		
- Italic is slightly wider than roman type in some fonts (e.g., TNR). In such cases, consider minimizing the use of italics.	■		
- Avoid all-caps text except in short headings.	■		
- Change all instances of raised or lowered characters to superscripts or subscripts, respectively (using FileCleaner).	■		
- Eliminate all instances of reduced font sizes and condensed character spacing. (These are usually forbidden.)	□		
- Convert text in “decorative” fonts such as Symbol and Wingdings to the normal font chosen. Decorative fonts may not match typographically with the normal font and can sometimes increase line height (e.g., upper-case Greek letters). Convert with care, however, because Greek letters in Symbol convert to English letters in normal fonts; e.g., “μ” maps onto “m”. Therefore, a global font conversion would change “μm” to “mm” and cause a 1000-fold error in measurement that might go undetected.	■□		
• <i>Paragraph formatting</i>			
- For single columns of text that span the width of the page, set the alignment to left justified. The ragged right edge makes it easier for the reviewers’ tired eyes to track to the next line. (Multiple columns are almost never used because the internal margins waste space and bad line breaks are more frequent.)	□		
- Do not indent the first paragraph below a heading.	■		
- Use a narrow formatted indent (e.g., 0.25”) for all subsequent paragraphs and remove all extra white space between paragraphs.	■		
- Replace lower-level headings with run-in headings.	■		
- Ensure that any use of “Keep with next” or “Keep lines together” is necessary and does not waste space.	■		
- If necessary, turn off “Widow/Orphan control” to reduce length. This also may reduce readability a bit, but it is quite commonly done and seems to be forgivable.	■		
- If absolutely necessary, reduce the line spacing to the allowed minimum (which is often less than single spacing). Beware, however, that this may reduce readability and irritate reviewers, especially if the ascenders and descenders of the letters become truncated.	■		
• <i>Lists</i>			
- Replace numbered lists with bulleted lists.	■	■	■
- Eliminate terminal punctuation and “and” from list items.	■		■

Methods that reduce length (■) or improve readability (□)	Page limits	Word limits	Character limits
- Reduce the widths of initial indents and hanging indents for list items.	■		
- Avoid using Roman numerals in numbered lists, and use letters instead of Arabic numbers for lists of 10 items or more.	■		■
- Use periods or single parentheses rather than double parentheses to punctuate list numbering.	■		■
• <i>Equations</i>			
- Convert simple “display format” equations to in-line equations (use MathType rather than Word Equation).	■		
- Reduce the line height of “stacked” fractions by using a slash or an exponent instead; e.g., ab/cd or $ab(cd)^{-1}$.	■		
- If absolutely necessary, close up often-used short equations (e.g., change $N = 10$ and $p = 0.05$ to $N=10$ and $p=0.05$). This practice is discouraged by most scientific style guides, but it is commonly seen in the literature and will likely be forgiven.	■	■	■
• <i>References</i>			
- Use a numbered reference list system and superscript Arabic numerals for in-text citations. May need to move punctuation; e.g., “text (4, 7-9), text” becomes “text, ^{4,7-9} text”.	■	■	■
- Remove all spaces between the body text and the numerals and all spaces and any brackets or parentheses within superscript lists; e.g., “text ^{[17], [21], [23], [35]} ” becomes “text ^{17,21,23,35} ”.	■	■	■
- Convert all series of citation numbers to ranges of numbers; e.g., “text ^{17,21,22,23,35} ” becomes “text ^{17,21-23,35} ”.	■		■
- If allowable, use Vancouver style (also known as Uniform Requirements or ICMJE) for the reference list. For examples, see the style guides of the American Medical Association, the Council of Scientific Editors, or the (US) National Library of Medicine (<i>Citing Medicine</i> , available online).	■	■	■
Abbreviations			
- Reduce the use of honorifics; e.g., change “Dr. Jane Doe” to “Jane Doe” (and use “Dr. Doe” and “she” subsequently).	■	■	■
- Minimize the use of periods with abbreviations; e.g., “PhD”.			
- Define and use abbreviations for the names of universities that are used more than once, but use forms that have no spaces (e.g., UofA, UBC, and USask).	■	■	■
- Replace “University” with “U.” throughout (without defining the abbreviation).	■	■	■
- For amounts of money only, replace “million(s)” with “M” and “thousands” with “K” and close up; e.g., \$3.5M and \$276K (without defining the abbreviation).	■	■	■
- Replace “Figure” with “Fig.” throughout.	■	■	■

Methods that reduce length (■) or improve readability (□)	Page limits	Word limits	Character limits
- Define and use abbreviations for <i>a few</i> selected technical terms that are used frequently and that take up a lot of space.	■	■	■
- Do not define abbreviations of technical terms that are widely known in their abbreviated forms (e.g., DNA and HIV) or that are defined in the instructions (e.g., HQP).	■	■	■
Other options			
- Substitute “that” for “which” in restrictive clauses.	■		■
- Use optional spellings that are shorter; e.g. “enrol” instead of “enroll” (use a Canadian dictionary for submissions to Canadian granting agencies and use PerfectIt for consistency).	■		■
- If necessary, remove the serial comma throughout (except where clarity would suffer).	■		■
Objects: Figures, tables, and text boxes			
- Position <i>the visible parts</i> of these elements right against the margins at the top or bottom or in the corners of the page.	■		
- Reduce the white space between these elements and their titles or captions.	■		
- Reduce the external white space between these elements and the body text: use “Tight” text wrapping.	■		
- Balance the widths of the element and any wraparound text to minimize length and bad line breaks in both.	■		
- Make the titles, captions, and internal text easy to distinguish from the nearby body text: use a contrasting font with a small x-height or with a slightly smaller font size (preferably with the permission of the granting agency).	■□		
• Figures			
- Ensure that the text within figures is large enough and that figures have high enough resolution that they can be easily read by the reviewers without needing magnification.	□		
- Minimize bad line breaks in captions by grouping small figures together and using a single wide caption (e.g., Figs. 2A, 2B, and 2C) instead of multiple narrow ones.	■		
- Eliminate parentheses and other punctuation from Figure numbering; e.g., Fig. 2A instead of Fig. 2(a) or Fig. 2.1.			■
• Tables			
- Use the minimalist table style described in the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS), because extra horizontal grid lines take up extra vertical space. Also consider reorganizing the table to reduce the space needed.	■□		
- For larger tables, set the table width to the full width allowed and centre the table between the margins.	■□		

Methods that reduce length (■) or improve readability (□)	Page limits	Word limits	Character limits
- Reduce table height by adjusting column widths to minimize height and bad line breaks within the table.	■		
- Shorten column heads by moving extra information into the table title or to table footnotes.	■		
- Reduce the widths of tabs and indents within table cells.	■		
- Reduce the interior margins of the table cells.			
• <i>Text boxes</i>			
- Reduce the interior margins of the text box.	■		
- For larger text boxes, set the box width to the full width allowed and centre the box between the margins.	■□		
<i>Hyphenation</i>			
- Add “optional hyphens” to lengthy words to avoid bad line breaks. Don’t use regular hyphens for this because they may become buried in the word in later versions of the text.	■		
- Insert “no-width optional breaks” into long website addresses to avoid bad line breaks (see “Word Division” in the CMS for advice on where to insert them).	■		
- Hyphenate or close up words wherever possible; e.g., “oilsands” and “healthcare”.	■	■	■
- Minimize the use of hyphens after prefixes (see <i>Editing Canadian English, 3rd, ed.</i> , §4.8.3); e.g., “nonprofit”.	■		■
- If necessary, turn on end-of-line hyphenation. (In long lines of text, this might reduce readability somewhat.)	■		
<i>Stylistic editing</i>			
- Reduce or remove all repetition, especially cut-and paste repetition (except perhaps in summaries and abstracts). Follow the instructions about the material that is required for each section: most material needs to be stated only once.	■	■	■
- Rearrange or reword text to avoid bad line breaks.	■		
- Rearrange or reword text to eliminate short lines at the ends of paragraphs.	■		
- “Omit unnecessary words.” Strunk and White and many others provide reams of advice on editing for conciseness; e.g., you can reduce the use of passive constructions (but be wary of changing the author’s voice).	■	■	■

Appendix: A Family of Microsoft Word Styles

The first-generation style below controls the formatting of all its “descendant” styles (because they are all “Based on” that first-generation style). Whenever a first-generation style is modified, that change automatically applies to all its descendant styles. This property works for changes

made in subsequent generations as well (as in SJB Headings 1 through 3). Designing a family of styles in this way ensures consistent formatting throughout and makes experimentation with fonts and spacings much quicker and easier. The particular family of styles outlined below features white-space values that progressively decrease with heading level to save space without sacrificing readability. Each style in such a family should be given a unique name (here the initials “SJB” were added) so that it can be distinguished from the built-in Word styles and the multitudes of styles imported by the authors. Numbered lists, table column heads, table text, page headers, page footers and so on can all be assigned descendant styles as well.

Importantly, any changes made to earlier generations do not overrule changes that had been made *previously* in later generations. For example, if the font in SJB Normal is changed from Times New Roman to Garamond, the font in (second-generation) SJB Heading 4 Run-in changes accordingly but the font in (third-generation) SJB Heading 2 remains as Arial Bold, because a font change was already in place in that line of ancestry. A change can take effect in descendants *only* if that characteristic had not already been changed in an intermediate generation.

First-generation style

SJB Normal (first paragraph below a heading; no added white space above)

Font: (Default) Times New Roman; 12 pt; Black

Paragraph: Left alignment; single line spacing; Widow/Orphan control on; Tab at 0.25” left

Second-generation styles

SJB Normal Indented (second and all subsequent paragraphs below a heading)

Based on SJB Normal

Paragraph: Indentation of first line at 0.25”

SJB List Bulleted

Based on SJB Normal

Paragraph: Indentation left at 0.25” (but this could be set to 0”); Hanging indent at 0.25”;

Bullets and numbering: Bulleted list

SJB Heading 1

Based on SJB Normal

Font: Arial; 12 pt, bold

Paragraph: Hanging indent at 0.25”; Spacing 6 pt after (and you may add 12 pt spacing before, but beware wasting space at the tops of pages); Keep with next; Keep lines together;

Outline Level 1 (Outline Levels are included so that the Navigation Pane can be used.)

SJB Heading 4 Run-in

Based on SJB Normal

Paragraph: Spacing 3 pt before and 0 pt after

(The heading itself is manually formatted in bold or italics and placed within in the first line of the initial paragraph. The extra white space makes the heading stand out from the text.)

SJB Figure Captions (placed below the figure.)

Based on SJB Normal

Paragraph: Spacing 3 pt before and 6 pt after; Keep lines together

SJB Table and Box Titles (Placed above the table or box.)

Based on SJB Normal

Paragraph: Spacing 6 pt before and 3 pt after; Keep lines together; Keep with next

Third-generation style

SJB Heading 2

Based on SJB Heading 1

Font: bold, italic

Paragraph: Spacing 6 pt before and 3 pt after; Outline Level 2

Fourth-generation style

SJB Heading 3

Based on SJB Heading 2

Font: Times New Roman bold

Paragraph: Spacing 3 pt before and 0 pt after; Outline Level 3

Heading 1

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Maecenas porttitor congue massa. Fusce magna eros quis urna. Nunc viverra imperdiet enim. Donec ullamcorper fringilla eros.

Vivamus a tellus. Pellentesque habitant morbi tristique senectus et netus et malesuada fames ac turpis egestas. Proin pharetra nonummy pede. Mauris et orci. Aenean nec lorem:

- In porttitor vel ante adipiscing rhoncus.
- Donec laoreet nonummy augue.

Heading 2

Suspendisse dui purus, scelerisque at, vulputate vitae, pretium mattis, nunc. Mauris eget neque at sem venenatis eleifend. Ut nonummy. Cras faucibus condimentum odio. Fusce est.

Fusce aliquet pede non pede. Suspendisse dapibus lorem pellentesque magna. Integer nulla. Donec metus, in lacinia nulla nisl eget sapien. Vestibulum quis dolor a felis congue vehicula.

Heading 3

Donec ut est in lectus consequat consequat. Etiam eget dui. Aliquam erat volutpat. Sed at lorem in nunc porta tristique. Proin nec augue. Sed ac ligula. Aliquam at eros.

Heading 4 Run-in. Quisque aliquam et tempor magna. Pellentesque habitant morbi tristique senectus et netus et cum malesuada fames ac turpis felis quam egestas. Nunc ac magna. Maecenas cursus odio dolor, vulputate vel, auctor ac, accumsan id, vivamus ex.

Table 2. Pellentesque porttitor.

Head 1	Head 2	Head 3	Head 4
Velit	1	2	3
Lacinia	4	5	6
Egestas	7	8	9

