

Title:

Business Letters: Keep Them Short and To The Point

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Summary:

If you ever draft letters, or any other documents where brevity is important, you'll want to pay close attention to these little practical "tricks of the trade".

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If you ever draft letters, or any other documents where brevity is important, you'll want to pay close attention to these little practical "tricks of the trade".

The following is an abridged excerpt from a chapter I have included in a couple of my Writing Kits.

Anyone who has read any of my articles on the subject of letter writing or resume writing will know how important I believe it is to minimize the number of pages, preferably limiting them to one page wherever possible.

And we all know how tacky it looks when we put the finishing touches on a letter and it overflows onto the second page by one or two lines. Very unprofessional!

So, there are a number of handy little tricks that I've used over the years that will help "squeeze" a letter or other document onto one page without it being noticed by the average reader. These tricks can be applied using any standard word processing software program.

I'm not sure whether a purist at a secretarial school would approve of some of my methods since they may deviate from certain technical standards, but I have

used them hundreds of times and nobody has ever been the wiser. The main point being that I was able to keep a letter on one page when the first version overflowed by a few lines onto a second page.

Below are my "page compression tips", listed in the order in which I suggest you apply them:

1. Move both the left and right margins out about 1/4 in. closer to the edge of the page.
2. Move the top and bottom margins out about 1/4 in. closer to the edge of the page.
3. Edit out the one or two word "overflows". What I mean here is this: After the letter is drafted take a good look at each paragraph. See if there are any that have an ending sentence that "overflows" onto an additional line for the sake of one word. If so, make a minor edit or two in the paragraph that shortens it a little so that the last word or two will not overflow onto the following line. Using this method, you can often gain two or three extra lines in a one-page letter.
4. Adjust the line spacing on the page. You can gain considerable space on a page by adjusting the line spacing of the text. For example, if the default line spacing is set to "single" at 12 points try setting it to "exactly" at 12 points if your font size is 12. If that doesn't do it, try "exactly" at "11 pts". Often you have to experiment a bit with this one to get the look just right.
5. As a last resort, try reducing the size of the font by 1 point size, say from 12 to 11 points.
6. If it still doesn't "fit", there's one final thing you can try if you're the author of the letter. Go back and edit it one more time. Look for redundant thoughts and phrases, or those that can be combined into one sentence rather than two. Is every word and phrase absolutely essential to your message? You'll be amazed at the space savings that this process can result in.

As I said earlier, try the above methods in sequence, one-at-a-time, checking each time to see if your latest change has done the trick for you.

What happens if it still won't fit?

Now, if you've used all of the above tricks and you still can't get the letter

to fit onto one page, it's time to admit that you've got a real two-pager. In which case, you should then think about "reversing" some of the compression tricks that you applied when you tried to "squeeze" the letter, and then concentrate on making a balanced looking second page.

There's nothing worse looking than a letter with a one or two sentence second page! So in this case, you may want to actually "stretch" the letter out a bit.

Often, at this stage I actually increase the line spacing and reduce the margins slightly so that there will be a decent sized overflow onto the second page.

For example, try reversing steps 1, 2 and 4 above. So instead of decreasing the top, bottom and side margins on page one, try increasing them by 1/4 in. all around. Then increase the point size and see if that helps. Ideally, try to get the page to break cleanly at a paragraph break, for a nice tidy page-to-page transition.

Again, I have used these little "compression" tricks thousands of times, and nobody has ever pulled out their ruler and chastised me for inaccuracy.

The important thing is to end up with a professional "looking" letter.

In fact, if you do a very detailed check of the real-life templates included in any one of my Writing Toolkits you would find that I have used one or more of the above tricks on many of them. But, I'm not telling which ones!