

How to save space and stick to the limit when writing research funding applications



*Research funders impose length limits on applications for practical reasons: to discourage epic submissions, and to ease the burden on reviewers. It's also true that concise ideas are generally stronger ideas. But sticking to these limits can often seem a difficult and frustrating task. **Jonathan O'Donnell** offers advice to researchers looking to find a little more space in their applications. These range from simple pointers that make for an improved proposal, such as ditching the passive voice and exploiting simple formatting functions, to more desperate moves, such as compressing references lists or resorting to the ampersand.*

Wouldn't it be wonderful if you had all the space that you needed to explain your research carefully and completely to the funding agency?

Wouldn't it be lovely if there was space for nuance and complexity?

Wouldn't it be terrific if your application fitted within the stupid page limit and you didn't have to delete another half a page; it's already midnight and you just want to go to bed.

Much as I feel for your sleep-deprived editing self, it wouldn't actually be very pretty at all. I've seen people provide 30 pages when they were asked for two. I've had researchers complain that they can't attach their 50-page CV to an application. I know what it is like to have 130 pages of application to review and comment on, with just a couple of hours to do it. I know there is never enough space to write what you want, in the way you want.

I also know there is never enough time to read what is submitted, with the attention it deserves.

Funding agencies impose limits for two practical reasons:

1. If they don't, people submit epic applications.
2. They want to ease the burden on their reviewers. It is easier to review a two-page application than it is to review a 200-page application.

Underlying those practical reasons are two equally good philosophical reasons:

1. They know, from experience, what information they need to rank applications.
2. Concise ideas are generally stronger ideas.

So, they impose limits. Page limits, word limits, character limits. Limits you have to observe. Limits that are often enforced by the online systems they administer. Limits that drive you crazy at half-past midnight when you just want to go to bed.

Here is my practical advice for finding a bit more space in your applications. These are the things that I do to help my applicants fit within the limits. These techniques won't help you if you are way, way over. They will be most helpful if you just need to find that little bit of extra space.

Saving characters

Many applications have character limits for each answer. Here is where I find space when an answer is over the character limit:

Double spaces: search and replace every occurrence of two spaces with one space. Two spaces generally sneak in when someone types two spaces after each full stop. It is a habit, a typist's tic. Nothing you can do about it except search and replace. You don't need two spaces, you only need one.

Spaces at the end of paragraphs: search for spaces at the end of each paragraph and delete them. Sometimes your word processor helpfully adds them automatically. Sometimes you break a paragraph in two. It doesn't really matter how they get there. You don't need them. Find them. Delete them. To do this in Microsoft Word, you can either show invisible characters (like spaces and paragraph marks) or search for "^p" (that is, [space] [paragraph mark]).

Delete redundant phrases, like "of this research" and "of this project". These appear in phrases such as "The aim of this research is..." or "The outcomes of this project will be...". You are writing a grant application focused on one single project. As such, these phrases are redundant. Your readers already know that this application is about your project.

Active voice: third-person passive voice ("This research *will be undertaken by* CI Needs-Grant et al...") is much more verbose than first-person active voice ("We *will undertake* this research"). First-person is also generally easier to understand. For most funding applications, you are writing for people who are just like you. Ditch the faux voice of authority and speak directly to your equals. Your message will be clearer. Saving some characters will just be an incidental bonus. Some people will say that you shouldn't use active voice, that it just isn't done. Actually, that is just a convention. I've yet to see grant guidelines that say "Please sound as pompous as possible". Journals sometimes specify using third-person voice, I think, to achieve consistency between articles. Grant applications don't need to do that. It is the quality of your ideas that will get you funded, not the conventions of your field.

Ampersand: this one is simple: "and" is three characters; "&" is one character. Two characters saved. However, I know several researchers who refuse to use the ampersand, on the grounds that it isn't simply a replacement for "and". They are right. Sometimes, I'm desperate.

Saving lines or pages

Sometimes, you face a limit on the number of lines or pages you can include. Here are two techniques that I use in these cases.

Look for paragraphs where the *last word wraps* to a new line. Edit the paragraph to bring that word back onto the previous line. There you go – one line saved. If you have four or five paragraphs where you can do this, it adds up.

Please, please learn how *paragraph formatting* works. It surprises me how many people use blank lines to separate paragraphs. This demonstrates a fundamental failure to learn how to format text. The problem with using blank lines between paragraphs is that it gives you no flexibility at all. You are stuck with exactly that much space between your paragraphs. If, on the other hand, you style your paragraphs to have a 4-5 millimetres between them, you suddenly have much more control. Half a page too long? Simply reduce the space between paragraphs by a millimetre. Depending on how long your document is, this can represent a major space saving.

Given that you use your word processor every single day, and writing is one of the primary requirements of your job, I would have thought that it would be worthwhile to learn how styles work. It is probably a half-day course. It might even be offered for free by your university. Please just do it – it will change your working life.

If you get really desperate, you can reduce the space between paragraphs to a minimum, and indent the first line of each paragraph. This will still indicate where each paragraph starts, but it will probably also look like a wall of text. Whatever technique you use, [respect the white space](#). Make sure that your final document is still readable.

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