

Think Twice About the One-Page Rule

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Chances are you've heard of an executive who refuses to read any letter or memo over one page long. The impatient-reader-syndrome extends far beyond executive privilege. People from all walks of life resist scrolling down to read a long e-mail. Based on this resistance, I've always recommended that my clients stick to one-page letters and one-page memos.

The following observation, from Dianna Booher, in *E-Writing: 21st Century Tools for Effective Communication*, makes me want to qualify my advice:

In a false attempt to be brief, writers have frequently crowded their words, omitting paragraph breaks, headings, or bulleted lists to save a line or two. They often accomplish the task of getting everything to a single screen or page—and lose the ability to win over the reader.

Here's the qualification: Remember that people make the decision to read or to put a message aside based on how that message looks. Brevity is only one aspect of appearance. A short message that looks visually crowded is still perceived as unwelcoming. A single screen of size 8 font still hurts the eyes.

By all means, strive for brevity. At the same time, generate small, manageable chunks of information that can be quickly scanned. Use informative headings, surrounded by white space, to draw people in. Write in such a way that a quick scan reveals a relevant message. Never ask your readers to squint.

Sacrificing a visually attractive and readable message for the sake of sticking to one page is like shooting yourself in the foot. Don't do it!

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