
*“My contribution is to find ways
to put the entire proposal into a table.”*

The smartest guy in the building, never mind on the proposal team, is typically understating his contribution but I take his point.

Sometimes page limits are an editor’s joy. As, for instance, when they keep writers from dumping everything they can find on a subject into a file and calling it a response. Sometimes they’re an editor’s pain. As, for instance, when the client lists 27 points to address and gives us 10 pages to do what should reasonably take, oh, about 27.

But joy or pain they must be followed, complied with, adhered to, and otherwise met. This creates some angst for the more expansive communicators among us, and for those less inclined to feeling bound by rules.

Page limits? Or the client?

My question to a marketing person who had muttered, “I hate them.”

Whatever.

His response.

Both.

His meaning.

I’ve been called in from far away—from a whole other country—for the last few weeks of this effort because the proposal arrived at a senior review stage and did not yet follow, comply with, adhere to, or otherwise meet the specified page limits.

I tackle each section, eliminating fluffy introductions, converting run-on-and-on paragraphs into concise bullets, cutting

unnecessary words to get even one line back, swapping out longer words for shorter ones, and finding simpler ways to say everything. No longer is anyone “responsible for the supervision of someone”: Now they supervise someone. No longer does “installation of a piece of equipment often have the outcome of resulting in a reduction in fuel usage”: Now its use reduces fuel usage. And so on.

Are subtleties lost? You bet. Important distinctions? Sometimes. Are actual errors introduced? I hope not. But page limits rule. Scrunch scrunch scrunch: It’s a gas gas gas.

*But it’s all right now, in fact it’s a gas.
- Jagger & Richards*

At the end of Day Four, Buddy arrives at my office door with an impish grin: a grin that can’t quite be accounted for merely by it being quitting time. Nope, he has something for me: a two-page table he has crafted to replace a five-page narrative section. I go through it in awe: Everything important has been captured, and the table format actually makes it easier to see what’s there. Wow.

Is it primarily conceptual genius? Absolutely. Does it get a teeny-weeny assist from the RFP rules that allow a smaller font in tables? You bet. Why didn’t I think of that?

*“I wonder what else
we can put in a table . . .”*

As Buddy sees that thought take hold, his grin gets even broader. His work here is done.