A short guide to working within word limits for Postgraduate Taught students
Word Limits

Last-minute panic scenario!

You have two days before you submit the essay and you are 753 words over the 3000 word limit. What is your strategy? Use the steps below to help you decide what do.

1. Stay calm

What you are going to do next is create a strategy for cutting the words and get down below the word count. You are going to stay calm; you are going to take some rational decisions. Then, when you’ve weighed up the consequences, you can make the necessary cuts. On no account rush into wildly deleting entire paragraphs.

2. Surplus words

If at all possible, do one more edit. Go through your text and look for phrases or sentences which are surplus to requirements.

3. Quotations?

Do the quotations that you use count towards the word count? Find this out from the module handbook, or alternatively from your student handbook. If necessary, check with the module tutor. If quotations are included in the word count, can you make some savings by cutting the quotations and simply giving a concise paraphrase or summary of the reference?

It would be very surprising if you could not make a substantial difference to the word count simply by rewriting and deleting redundant, meaningless or over-wordy sentences and phrases. (You are correct; two of the three adjectives in the preceding sentence could be cut). Yes, more editing takes a little time, but you can save a lot of words simply through careful rephrasing.

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For instance:

‘James (2012) is somewhat dismissive of Kingsley Amis’s approach: “That’s what I’d like to say. But... there are so many. How could one be guiltless of them all? Amis classifies brutalise, decimate, crescendo, alibi, avid, oblivious optimistic, eek out, and refute, among many others, as “unusable through ambiguity”.’

This becomes:

‘James (2012) is somewhat dismissive of Kingsley Amis’s approach.’

An immediate saving of 40 words.

4 Assess further choices

Your choices are either

- one or two large and dramatic cuts or
- many additional smaller cuts.

Before you proceed, make sure that you have a copy of the marking scheme so that you can be sure how the marks are allocated.

Do not do this by guesswork alone.

One very large cut

- Can you cut a big portion of text without many marks?
- If you do have to cut that big portion of text, what percentage of your marks do you think you will lose? Is it worth it?

A potentially large number of smaller cuts

- Can you identify a number of areas where smaller cuts can be justified?
- For instance, retain the beginning and end of each paragraph but consider cutting at least one sentence from the middle. (However, do not cut content which helps the reader)
- Look for repetition and redundancy.
- Make your cuts and then read the text carefully to make sure that the internal logic of the text is still there. In other words make sure that you have not destroyed the connections between sentences and between paragraphs.
- You will almost certainly need to do some final editing to make sure that the document flows smoothly and does not still have a number of awkward jumps in it.

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Conclusion
Ideally, you would plan your work so that you never face the prospect of last minute cuts. But if you have to make last-minute cuts, stay calm, logical and cut anything which is superfluous or which does not directly contribute towards the mark you will receive.

Further references on working within word count


Academic Skills Centre. March 2015.