

Make the Document Physically Easy to Read

The physical ease of reading a document involves six factors:

- line length and margins;
- line spacing;
- type font;
- font size;
- justification; and
- paragraph spacing.

Line Length and Margins

Six inches is a safe line length to work with for most letters, memos and briefing notes. The margins used to achieve that length may vary. Some prefer 1.25-inch left and right margins. Others prefer a 1.5-inch left margin and a 1-inch right margin. The advantage of 1.25-inch margins is that it doesn't matter whether the material is printed back-to-back or not, because both margins are the same width.

Line Spacing

A good rule of thumb for line spacing (or "leading") is to set the spacing to 1.1 lines.

Type Font

In choosing a type font, I defer to the judgement of English-language publishers world wide. With rare exceptions, books and newspapers are produced with some variation of the Times New Roman font. Most people find it easier on the eyes than fonts such as Helvetica or Arial.

Font Size

The size of the type font can vary, depending on the line length. For example, classified ads in newspapers can use tiny type fonts because the line length they use is very short. For most letters, memos and briefing notes, 12 points is standard.

Documents that will be converted to Acrobat files are a slightly different proposition. Type fonts will shrink a bit when they are converted to Acrobat from a word processor. If you start with a 13-point font in your word processor, you will find that it ends up at about 12 points in Acrobat.

Justification

Word processors enable full justification with ease. However, I do not recommend it. Using full justification often creates gaping holes between words, which readers can find to be distracting and irritating. Use left justification instead.

Paragraph Spacing

As a rule, I use one full line of spacing between paragraphs. However, there are times when I reduce that space to about 0.8 lines between paragraphs. This can be helpful in fitting text onto a page if carrying over to the next page would mean an awkward break in the text. Conversely, sometimes you might want to increase the paragraph spacing for the same reason.

As long as it remains clear where one paragraph ends and the next begins, shrinking or expanding the space between paragraphs should not affect ease of reading very much.