Staying under the word limit

Finding the limit

Most assignment word limits give you 10% leeway (e.g. a limit of 1500 words can have ±150 words, so you'd aim for 1350-1650). Find out whether your assignment does that. The other good starting point is to split your word limit into pieces, because several small limits are easier than one huge limit. The rubric often helps you do that – for example, if a 1500-word report has the rubric

Introduction	3 marks
Purpose and techniques	5 marks
Discussion	9 marks
Conclusion	3 marks
Referencing	3 marks
Grammar and punctuation	2 marks
Total	**25 marks**

then you can divide the 1500 words according to the marks each section is worth:

Introduction	225
Purpose and techniques	375
Discussion	675
Conclusion	225
Referencing	-
Grammar and punctuation	-
Total	**1500**

Even if the rubric doesn't do that, you can often decide each part's proportion for yourself (e.g. essay introductions = no more than 10% of words). Think about how you want to organise your ideas, then allocate your word count accordingly. Each smaller limit is then easier to work to.

Staying under the limit

Most students use too many words, and saying the same thing more **efficiently** is always better than finding things to cut out. It helps you keep your argument together, include more evidence/ideas, avoid grammatical mistakes, and connect more clearly – and forcefully – with the reader. For example, take this paragraph from a first-year assignment (used with permission).

> The world is changing diametrically and so is the business around the world. For an organisation to stay in business they need to keep working on developing changes to improve the organisation and develop the business. In these days of a changing economy, work force changes in global business and organisation behaviour requires changes. Many studies show that gradual and painless changes always work out for the benefit of any organisation as Kurt Lewin, a famous psychologist, recommends, that any change effort should be viewed as a process that includes several phases (Wood et al. 2010). Many people also believe that rapid changes are a requirement of a successful organisation.

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Before continuing, think about how you'd cut it down yourself. How far can you can shorten it without compromising the meaning, and with what strategies?

I used seven main tactics.

1. **Don't repeat things for dramatic effect.** If "improve the organisation" and "develop the business" are the same thing, then only one is needed. Only use both if they have different (relevant) meanings; never use both just for emphasis.

2. **Don't describe or judge for dramatic effect.** If the world is changing "diametrically", then it's becoming the exact opposite of what it was. That's not true, and doesn't help the argument. If it's there to be exciting or to 'sound academic', take it out.

3. **References don't need extra information.** Most referencing systems only use the author's surname + year (e.g. APA6) or numbers (e.g. Vancouver). This student's using APA6, so they only need "Lewin" and the year of publication – not his first name, job, status or anything else.

4. **Don't hedge unless there really is doubt.** Academic writing is limited to available evidence, so hedging (avoiding total certainty) is a good habit. Some students do this by starting sentences with "Many studies show", etc., but that's vague and useless. If you're thinking of a particular study, make it the subject. Openings like "I think" should be avoided for the same reason – the reader already knows this is your perspective, and just wants your reasoning.

5. **Use vocabulary.** Many phrases can be reduced to words – e.g. "need to-keep working on-developing changes has the same meaning as "must-continually-adapt". Always then read it aloud again to check it still makes sense.

6. **Always be relevant, never be obvious.** Extremely obvious information can (and should) be left out. For example, if change is "a process that includes several phases", the new information is the "several phases". The reader already knows it's "a process", so that part isn't needed.

7. **Use grammar.** Almost any idea can be expressed in many different ways. To express an idea, think of the various options then choose the clearest. That's usually the simplest, and often the shortest. For instance, "the benefit of any organisation" = "any organisation's benefit", and "Rapid changes are a requirement of a successful organisation" = "Successful organisations require rapid changes". Usually, try to have as many content words (e.g. "benefit", "changes") as possible, and as few function words (e.g. "of", "the") as possible.

Together, these tactics reduce the passage to

> As the world changes, so does the business environment. For an organisation to stay viable, it must continually develop and adapt as workforce changes in global business and organisational behaviour require workplace changes. Lewin (cited in Wood et al. 2010) argues that gradual and painless changes always work out to an organisation's benefit, and that any change effort should be viewed as including several phases. Many even believe that successful organisations require rapid change.

That cuts 110 words to 74 words, saving over 30%. The argument's more efficient and powerful, the reasoning is easier to see, and a couple of grammatical mistakes have been avoided. Of course, always check you're still happy with the clarity and amount of relevant detail. Writing is only there to convey your argument, and you should ignore any of these rules if they compromise your point.

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