

Getting it write

Ignore the word limit at your own peril, warns **Krista Bell**
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Okay, so I'm writing a newspaper article of 1000 words for a teen audience on how to write to a word length. Right. How do I start? I need to list all the points that I want to make and then juggle them into a logical order. Then I'll expand on those points, referring to my work as an author and journalist. Sounds like a plan.

But what if it doesn't fit into 1000 words? Maybe if I write another few hundred words it won't matter - the editor mightn't notice.

But even if he does, he'll be so impressed with my piece he'll use it all anyway. Or not! You see, just like you, as a writer I'm given a word length.

For example, as a journalist I'm allotted a particular space, perhaps a page in a journal, or a number of paragraphs in a newspaper, which translates to a particular number of words.

Earlier this year I had an article published in Reading Time, the Children's Book Council magazine, and I was specifically asked to fit my piece into a double-page spread, which meant 1500 words.

The article was about my fellowship at the May Gibbs Children's Literature Trust studio in Canberra in 2004, writing Who Dares? It was such a huge month that it seemed impossible to meet that limit.

So I began by listing the experiences that I felt were of most interest to my audience of teachers and authors. When I wrote the draft I sometimes added too much anecdotal detail, which I later had to delete.

I reckon the most difficult part about writing is admitting that something you've written needs to be cut, and that editing will make your piece stronger. To be honest, over-writing comes naturally to me (I grew up on Enid Blyton) so I've learnt to be ruthless, cutting out the extraneous stuff.

This is the hardest thing to learn about the craft of writing - not everything you write is worth keeping! You must be objective and self-edit your work.

If I'd sent off 2000 words to Reading Time, saying "what the heck, it's all fantastic - they'll fit it in", the editor wouldn't have written back thanking me for wanting more of his precious space than I'd been commissioned to use - he may have declined the article altogether. Alternatively, he may have patiently returned it, asking me to edit it down to the agreed length.

But more likely he would have edited it himself and I would have lost control of the thrust of my article. That's why I made sure it was 1500 words before I sent it to the editor - and the article was printed exactly as I wrote it.

As an author, if I'm writing a novel for 10 to 14 year olds and use 60,000 words instead of 30,000, my publisher will reject it, asking for a re-write, or refusing to publish it at all. There are established criteria I must adhere to if I want my work to be published.

And it's the same for you writing a creative piece, an argumentative piece, or an issues response — when you're given a word length, you must stick to it if you want your work read.

Ten words here or there isn't a worry, but if the limit's 500, and you write 1000, you're destined for disaster.

Like the newspaper editors and book publishers I write for, teachers and examiners read mega-millions of words each year - and, believe me, they don't have time to muck around with students who have verbal diarrhoea. If you write too much, they're likely to only read to the allotted word length (especially in exam conditions) and then mark you on that much, never ever reading the stunningly brilliant resolution to your piece.

Writing way over the limit is literary suicide - so is illegible handwriting.

In my experience, it's better to write fewer words that accurately address your intention, rather than over-write, lose your direction and fail to communicate what you wanted to say, or risk contradicting yourself.

Quality rather than quantity is always the better option. Keep it snappy, to the point and totally interesting, making sure you write in your own voice, or that you can adhere to the persona you elect.

Krista Bell has written 17 books for young people, including her recent novel *Who Dares?* (Lothian Books). In 2004 Krista won the Australian Family Therapists' Children's Literature Award for her junior novel *Who Cares?* A screenplay based on her novels *No Regrets*, *No Strings* and *No Tears* is being written. Visit Krista's homepage: www.kristabell.com