

# How Long Should a Business Plan Be?

by [Tim Berry](#)

Page count is not a good way to measure length. A 20-page plan with dense text and no graphics is much longer than a 35-page plan broken up into readable bullet points, useful illustrations of locations or products, and business charts to illustrate important projections.

Measure a plan by readability and summarization. A good business plan should leave a reader a good general idea of its main contents even after only a quick skimming, browsing the main points, in 15 minutes. Format, headings, white space, and illustrations make a big difference. Summaries are very important. Main points should show up in a business plan as quickly as they do in a business presentation.

Unfortunately, many people still use page count as measurement. And in that context, some of the more practical, internal-use-only business plans can be only 5 or 10 pages long. Corporate business plans for large companies can run into hundreds of pages. The more standard start-up and expansion plans developed for showing outsiders normally run 20-40 pages of text – easy to read, well-spaced text, formatted in bullets, illustrated by business charts and short financial tables – plus financial details in appendices.

The right length of the plan depends on the nature and purpose of the plan. Will it include descriptions of the company and management team for outsiders to read? Does it need an executive summary good enough to stand alone? Does it include detailed research, plans, drawings, and blueprints? Is it worded to withstand legal scrutiny as part of an investment proposal? Form follows function.

Venture contests often limit a plan to 30 pages, sometimes 40, rarely 50 – and that includes detailed financials in the appendices. Unfortunately the page limitation leads some contestants to very bad choices, as they cram content into dense typefaces and thick texts, making their plans worse, not better.

Palo Alto Software's annual business plan contest has run four years now. Several hundred plans have entered that competition. Finalists have never had less than 20 pages or more than 50 pages. Most run 30-40 pages. These are all 20-30 pages of text, not counting useful graphic additions to show locations, designs, menus, etc., and not counting the appendices pages containing monthly financial projections, resumes of team leaders, etc. You'll want to add some pages for the standard financials, usually that means appendices with monthly tables for sales, personnel, income statement, cash flow, and balance sheet. You also want to include the main annual numbers of those tables in the body of the plan.

Don't ever shorten a plan by taking out useful graphics. Page count matters far less than readability. Use business charts to illustrate numbers so your projections are easier to absorb. Use photographs and drawings to show locations, products, sample menus, product pictures, and other illustrations as much as possible. However, don't ever extra graphics like clip art, not directly relevant to the matter at hand, as if that would make a plan better.