# No More Gappy Typesetting, Please

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To produce readable, professional-looking documents, legal writers should eliminate gappy typesetting. What do I mean by "gappy typesetting"? To answer that question, we must explore the world of typesetting, especially margins in typesetting.

Although we may think that we're merely typing when we produce a document, we're actually typesetting. So when we write, we should follow the best practices that professional printers have used for centuries.[1] This includes paying careful attention to margins and their effect on readability.

We have four possible margin choices: fully justified, ragged right, ragged left, and centered. Below are graphical depictions of each style (often used in computer interfaces):

Fully Justified	Ragged Right	Ragged Left	Centered
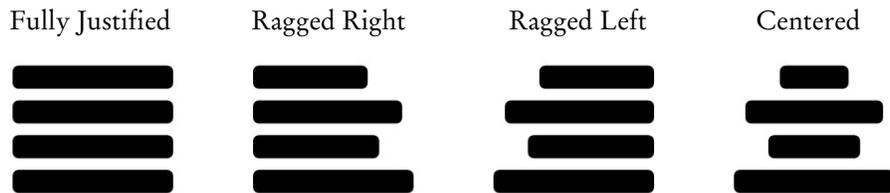
As you see, fully justified margins are even on both the left and right sides of the page (as on the page you're reading right now). Ragged-right margins are even on the left side but uneven on the right. Ragged-left margins are the opposite — even on the right but uneven on the left. And centered does just what the name suggests, pulling text to the page's center. The ragged-left

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[1] *See* Matthew Butterick, *Typography for Lawyers passim* (2d ed. 2018) (https://typographyforlawyers.com).

and centered approaches are usually limited to magazine layouts, advertisements, and other creative documents. Except for centered titles and headings, they're a rarity in standard documents such as letters, memorandums, reports, and books.

Many writers prefer fully justified margins, yet those writers aren't necessarily eager — or don't know how — to resolve the word-division scenarios that invariably pop up at the right margin. As a result, they produce gappy typesetting — that is, lines of type with large and sometimes irregular spaces between words. Note the large gaps in lines 2 and 6 below, which I've circled:

> requesting that such property or territory be annexed to the said municipality, and the governing body of such municipality adopts an ordinance assenting to the annexation of said property to such municipality, the corporate limits of said municipality shall be extended and rearranged so as to embrace and include such property and such property or territory shall become a part of the corporate area of such municipality upon the date of publication of said ordinance.

Likewise, line 7, to use typesetting jargon, is "loose." It needs to be "tighter." (The quoted excerpt also suffers from a host of other style issues, but that's for another article.)

Gappy typesetting looks amateurish. Even worse, documents with gappy typesetting are harder to read. For the best readability, the space between each word in a line of type should be equal — or as close to equal as the typesetter can make it. There's just one way to achieve this uniform, tight spacing: fully justified margins *require* some divided words at the right margin.

When we look at the same excerpt with the word *municipality* divided, we see that lines 2 and 6 are tightened, and we have a more readable and polished paragraph:

> requesting that such property or territory be annexed to the
> said municipality, and the governing body of such munici-
> pality adopts an ordinance assenting to the annexation of
> said property to such municipality, the corporate limits of
> said municipality shall be extended and rearranged so as to
> embrace and include such property and such property or
> territory shall become a part of the corporate area of such
> municipality upon the date of publication of said ordinance.

If you don't like dividing words, the solution is simple: Use a ragged-right margin. In fact, numerous studies show that ragged-right documents allow for easier and faster reading.[2] This is because ragged-right margins leave equal spacing between words.[3] For that reason, the Securities and Exchange Commission strongly suggests that disclosure documents use ragged-right margins.[4]

But even with a ragged-right margin, words may need to be divided if the "rag" is too extreme. Notice lines 2 and 3 below:

> requesting that such property or territory be annexed to the
> said municipality, and the governing body of such
> municipality adopts an ordinance assenting to the
> annexation of said property to such municipality, the
> corporate limits of said municipality shall be extended and
> rearranged so as to embrace and include such property and
> such property or territory shall become a part of the
> corporate area of such municipality upon the date of
> publication of said ordinance.

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2   *See, e.g.*, Christopher J. Johnstone, *Improving Validity of Large-Scale Tests: Universal Design and Student Performance*, Technical Report 37, University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes (Dec. 2003) (https://www.cehd.umn.edu/NCEO/onlinepubs/Technical37.htm), and the studies cited within.

3   *Id.*

4   U.S. Sec. & Exch. Comm'n, *A Plain English Handbook: How to Create Clear SEC Disclosure Documents* 44 (1998) (https://www.sec.gov/pdf/handbook.pdf).

Again, the solution is simple: Divide the word *municipality*:

> requesting that such property or territory be annexed to the said municipality, and the governing body of such munici-pality adopts an ordinance assenting to the annexation of said property to such municipality, the corporate limits of said municipality shall be extended and rearranged so as to embrace and include such property and such property or territory shall become a part of the corporate area of such municipality upon the date of publication of said ordinance.

If you prefer fully justified margins, you can avoid dividing words by adjusting the space between words, letters, or both. In short, a line of type can be squeezed or expanded.

Let's see what happens when we do this with Microsoft Word by accessing the advanced font commands. Select[5] the line of type you want to adjust plus the one word on the next line that you want to "move up" a line. On the **Font** area of the Word ribbon, click on this symbol: ⬏. When the dialog box appears, click on the **Advanced** tab. Use the **Spacing** command to adjust the lettering. In Word, the **Spacing** command adjusts both word and letter spac-ing. Here's what line 2 looks like using this feature:

> requesting that such property or territory be annexed to the said municipality, and the governing body of such municipality adopts an ordinance assenting to the annexation of said property to such municipality, the corporate limits of said municipality shall be extended and rearranged so as to embrace and include such property and such property or territory shall become a part of the corporate area of such municipality upon the date of publication of said ordinance.

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[5]   In computerese, the proper term is *select*, but some people refer to this process as *highlighting* the text.

Special Note About Improving Justification in Word

In Microsoft Word, many of the problems with word and letter spacing can be resolved by using a setting that makes Word justify text in the same way that WordPerfect does.

To turn on this setting, click on **File, Options,** and then **Advanced.** Then scroll to **Compatibility Options** and check the box beside **Do full justification the way WP 6.x for Windows does.** Some new versions of Word do not have this option.

WordPerfect offers a more sophisticated tool for adjusting spacing. Click on **Format, Typesetting,** and then **Word/Letter Spacing.** You will then see a dialog box that allows you to adjust the word spacing separately from letter spacing. Obviously, you can also adjust both, an approach that often provides the best results.

An even higher degree of sophistication is found in Adobe InDesign, a true typesetting program. Click on the **Type** tab, **Paragraph Styles,** and then **Justification.**

Summary of Key Points

1. We are no longer type*writing* but type*setting* because of the wonders of modern computers and their attached printers.

2. For ideal readability, the space between words in a line of type should be equal. That's why ragged-right margins are more readable than fully justified margins.

3. If we use fully justified margins, we must divide words from time to time to prevent gappy typesetting.

4. Gappy typesetting occurs when large spaces appear between words in a line of fully justified type.

5.   Gappy typesetting looks unprofessional.

6.   Gappy typesetting is also harder to read.

7.   There is nothing wrong with divided, hyphenated words at the end of some lines.

8.   Dividing words makes documents (1) easier to read quickly and (2) appear more professional.