Not All Page Breaks Are Created Equal

A scoring sheet for page break review

human reliability

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Page breaks are handled by a template, and almost nobody reviews them. Most are harmless. Some are unavoidable. But a few quietly create failure modes that no amount of training will fix, because the operator has been set up to perform mental gymnastics that the layout made necessary.

This sheet scores them. Print the procedure, look at every break, assign a score, and log the ones that matter.

The scale

Score 0 - Clean

What it looks like: No break, or a break that falls at a natural boundary between blocks of work. Nothing on the new page depends on anything the user can no longer see.

Action: None. Worth counting all the same, so you know what proportion of your breaks are already fine and can say so.

Score 1 - Cosmetic

What it looks like: A heading or title stranded at the foot of a page, with its content overleaf. White space in an odd place. Untidy, but no action content is separated.

What it costs the user: Very little. A moment of visual untidiness.

Action: Fix when the document is next revised. Do not spend effort chasing these.

Score 2 - Action and record separated

What it looks like: A step falls at the bottom of the page and the field for recording its outcome falls at the top of the next. Or a table splits, leaving headers on one page and entries on the other.

What it costs the user: The recording step is now out of sight at the moment of doing. It is easy to omit, easy to defer, and deferral means completing from memory later.

Why it matters: Omitted and retrospectively completed entries are a documentation integrity problem before they are anything else. The layout is doing the causing.

Action: Fix. Keep every step and its recording field together on one page.

Score 3 - Cross-check split across the break

What it looks like: The user must compare, verify or reconcile content on one page against content on the next. A list against a diagram. Values against a specification. Settings against a table.

What it costs the user: The comparison cannot be made by eye, so it has to be made in working memory. The user holds items in mind, turns the page, checks, turns back, and hopes they have not lost their place. This is the split-attention effect: separating related information forces integration effort that could have gone into understanding.

Why it matters: Errors here are silent. Nothing looks wrong, an item simply gets missed.

Action: Fix as a priority. Co-locate the two elements, even if it costs white space elsewhere.

Score 4 - Compounded split

What it looks like: A score 3 where 3 does not feel like enough. The break is doing more damage than a single split accounts for. Use this score whenever your instinct says worse, then write down what made it worse.

Common escalators:

- ☐ The information is split across more than two locations. Check items against a list on another page, and against a map in Appendix A. The user is now holding a position in three places at once, which working memory does not do.
- ☐ The content is unstructured. A list embedded in prose gives nothing to work through and nothing to keep place with.
- ☐ There is no way to record progress, so the only trace of where they got to is in their head.
- ☐ The target requires visual search rather than direct lookup.
- ☐ The user has to move back and forth repeatedly rather than once.

What it costs the user: Each escalator multiplies the others rather than adding to them. Two of these on one break is materially worse than the same two on separate breaks.

Action: Redesign, do not re-break. Note how many locations the user has to hold at once, because that count is usually the thing to drive down first.

Worked example: a score 4

The situation. The operator reads a step listing equipment to be checked. They turn the page and are presented with a map of the plant. They must confirm every item on the list appears on the map.

What is stacked here:

Factor	Effect
Split across the break	Comparison held in working memory
List embedded in a paragraph	No discrete items, no visible count, nothing to keep place with
No recording provision	Progress carried in the head across every page turn
Unnumbered map	Full visual search of the diagram, once per item

The fix, in order of value:

1. Same page. Removes the split. Cheapest change, largest single gain.
2. Make the list a list. One item per line, so the shape and size of the task are visible at a glance.
3. Make it tickable. Progress recorded on the page rather than held in mind.
4. Number the items and number the same locations on the map. Visual search collapses into direct lookup.

The principle: each change removes mental gymnastics that the layout, not the task, made necessary.

When the split is genuinely unavoidable

A long task with many steps will span pages. There is no layout clever enough to fit seventy steps and their supporting plan onto one side of A4, and pretending otherwise is not useful. So the question stops being how to avoid the break and becomes where the supporting information should live.

There are two ways to hold it, and they fail in opposite directions.

Approach	Strength	Failure Mode
Centralised: all plan and reference information gathered at the front	Gives the whole picture. Good for orientation, briefing and understanding the shape of the task before starting.	Every step that uses it becomes a page turn. Split attention on repeat, all the way through.
Decentralised: information sits with the step it affects	No split. The user sees what they need where they need it, with nothing held in memory.	No overview. Hard to see the task as a whole, and the same content may appear several times.

In most cases you want both, and that is not a fudge. Put the full plan at the front for orientation, and repeat the relevant extract at the point of use. Repetition of reference information is not accretion. It is designed redundancy, it costs almost nothing, and it removes a page turn from every step that would otherwise need one.

Two further moves help on long tasks:

- ☐ Choose where the breaks fall. If the document must span pages, put the breaks at phase boundaries rather than letting the template drop them mid cross-check.
- ☐ Carry orientation across the break. A running header naming the current phase, and a visible position marker, so turning the page does not cost the user their place in the task.

Running a page break review

- ☐ Print the procedure as it is actually issued, at the size it is actually used
- ☐ Go to every page break in turn, not just the ones that look untidy
- ☐ Ask at each one: does the user need anything from the previous page to complete what is on this page?
- ☐ Score 0 to 4, log the location, and note how many places the user must hold at once
- ☐ Fix all 3s and 4s before touching any 1s
- ☐ Where a split is unavoidable, decide deliberately between centralised, decentralised or both

Review log

Page/break location	Score	What is split	Action

A note on digital procedures

Going digital does not remove this problem. It moves it, and makes it harder to see.

The screen edge is the new page break, and unlike a printed page it is not fixed. It moves with device, orientation, zoom level and font setting, so the same content splits differently for different users and you cannot review it once and be done. Scrolling also removes the physical place-keeping that a thumb on a page provides.

If you are reviewing a digital procedure, review it on the device it will actually be used on, in the conditions it will actually be used in.

The test that matters: if the operator has to hold something in mind purely because of where the page ended, the layout has created work that the task never required.

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