

Government Proposal Writing for Newcomers

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It's Like Riding a Bike

The first step to success in proposal writing is to realize that you must have experience to write winning proposals. Otherwise you must hire someone who has paid their proposal writing dues. Companies new to the market usually don't have a clue about how to write winning proposals because it is like riding a bike--you have to do it to learn it.

Wow, That Was Close!

Companies that either miss or nearly miss proposal submittal deadlines usually don't trumpet their unfortunate stories to cohorts. After all, it is not exactly a badge of honor. Yet, at countless bars throughout the DC area, you frequently will overhear the story, "We hit one hundred miles an hour on the Beltway and made the deadline by five minutes." Or, "I hit the send button with one minute to spare and hoped that the email wasn't delayed by busy servers." Or, in a whisper, "We actually missed the deadline on a ten-million-dollar deal."

Why would such a thing happen to supposedly sophisticated government contractors? It's a failure on the part of management to pay attention to the preparation of the proposal.

In order to tame the proposal beast, you must find that rare technical person within your organization who can write, has strong organizational and people skills, and is a meticulous manager. Make him or her the proposal manager who reports directly to the top and make it clear to everyone that the proposal manager has the authority to assign writing tasks and set schedules. Back the manager every time someone doesn't produce. Get involved in proposal writing--it isn't going to go away.

Evaluators Hate Them Too

For many contractors proposal writing is considered an evil exercise that has to be endured as the price of doing government business.

They say misery loves company, and way down deep government agencies and proposal evaluators hate proposals as much as the people writing them. Evaluating 20 dry tomes and possibly missing your child's soccer game is no more fun than writing all weekend to produce the tome. Politically, spending public money for contracts requires real competition (or the appearance of such) and the government hasn't yet figured out a palatable way to get rid of proposals.

Are There Any Secrets?

In government contracting, companies inexperienced in the market want to know the secrets so they can grab some of that low-hanging government fruit, fast.

The closest thing to a secret that I know is to "sell before you write, and write only winners." Yes, maybe a simplistic platitude, but true. For centuries great sales people have said, "Sell only to those who are ready to buy what you are peddling." Translated to government contracting that would be: "Sell only to the agencies that know and trust you and want your solution." Admittedly, selling to government customers can exasperate overzealous CEOs because it is expensive and requires long lead times. But "sell before you write, and write only winners" is common knowledge among experienced government customers.

Like any platitude, selling before you write has exceptions, including:

- Proposals for Indefinite Delivery Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) contracts for which the primary requirements are qualifications and price
- Proposals where you are one of the few who may be qualified (“sweet spots”)
- Teaming situations where one team member has sold the customer
- Intelligence gathered after the issuance of the Request for Proposal (RFP) indicates that you can win

The key to success is to know when one of these exceptions occurs, and experienced contractors will tell you it is often just a gut feeling.

Hire or Grow Your Proposal Writing Talent

You will not succeed in the proposal game without a proven, professional proposal writer. At times a customer-based senior person, or a budding creative talent, can serve as the Proposal Manager. In professional service companies a Proposal Manager is often a partner or a vice president. The creative writing talent is grown in-house from the ranks of the subject matter staff.

You can grow your proposal manager in-house or you can pay a lot more than you probably would like to hire one. Another alternative is to hire Fedmarket to write for you until you find a proposal professional, and to help you train the proposal manager.

Characteristics of a Losing Proposal

Proposals lose for a number of reasons, with the most prevalent reason being that the government had another company in mind when the RFP was drafted. Losing the opportunity to another company invariably occurs when an aggressive competitor has sold the customer well in advance of the bid. But it could also occur because a competitor convinced the evaluators in its proposal that it presented better value, when your proposal presents a “piggish” price. In the case of an incumbent, you can expect your proposal to lose if your company has inadvertently let its performance slip.

A loss will almost always have to do with your relationship with the customer (or lack thereof) and its reflection in the proposal’s content, and in how you have presented your solution to the customer’s problem. ^[L]_[SEP]

Know When to Hold Them and Know When to Fold Them

The well-known country and western cliché about knowing “when to hold ’em and when to fold ’em” is a good metaphor for deciding when to write a proposal and when not to.

In this case, your valuable poker chips are your precious proposal-writing resources. Namely, a happy and motivated professional staff, those who are able to produce compelling technical proposal content when asked. This critical resource loses its zest when the losses start to mount and they recall countless wasted weekends spent in the office.

Above all, don’t waste your precious chips by playing a losing hand. Your firm really shouldn’t bid if it

doesn't have a highly probable chance of winning the contract.

In making bidding decisions, your firm should be realistic in considering six important issues:

1. Is there an incumbent?
2. Have you sold the customer prior to the posting of the bid?
3. Does the customer even know you?
4. What are your unique capabilities?
5. Who will be competing against you and what are their capabilities? Do your competitors know the customer?
6. What are the costs of writing the proposal? How much content do you have on the shelf? Is existing content well done and compelling and what will be required of the professional staff in developing new, required content?

When in doubt, fold 'em and wait for a better hand.

Fedmarket's RFP Deconstruction System

A typical federal RFP will contain a morass of important and unimportant clauses, a baffling and befuddling list of proposal requirements, and statements of work that are poorly written or insufficient in detail. And all of these items can be spread throughout a poorly organized document.

Missing a detail in this morass can lead you to file a proposal that does not meet the agency's requirements. A phrase, a misplaced punctuation mark, or an ambiguity in an instruction or requirement can make the difference between success and failure. The complexity of government RFPs demands a highly structured proposal writing process.

Fedmarket's RFP Deconstruction System is presented in Appendix A. Using this system, a proposal manager deconstructs the RFP, sentence-by-sentence and paragraph-by-paragraph, and constructs a detailed proposal outline based on all pertinent items in the RFP.

Why Have a Structured Process?

Consider using all or part of the Fedmarket system. Stick with what you have if you are consistently winning bids. The key to success is having a system (any system) that meets the following five objectives:

1. Ensures compliance to RFP requirements. (Noncompliance is one of the primary ways the government moves your proposal into the "not worthy of further consideration" pile.)
2. Helps writers produce compelling content.
3. Helps to ensure readability, conciseness, and clarity.
4. Reduces proposal costs.
5. Helps to eliminate last-minute proposal production crises. (Management involvement is the primary factor in reducing crises.)

In my view a system that meets these objectives has to be based on the production of a detailed proposal outline early in the proposal writing process. Writing the proposal does not begin until the outline is complete and understood by all parties involved in the writing process. The larger and more complex the requirement, the more important an RFP-driven, detailed outline becomes. Each amendment to the RFP is deconstructed and added to the proposal outline.

Eliminate “Circling”

Most importantly, if done first the outline eliminates the endless circling around the proposal writing project and wasted billable time, as everyone tries to communicate what the proposal should contain without anyone actual writing anything. Typical circling statements include “Let’s have a meeting so I can tell you my ideas, but you write it,” as well as “Let’s not write; let’s have fun and map out our ideas, themes, and thoughts on whiteboards, and then schedule another meeting to deal with the writing issue.”

Help Writers with Writers Block

The suggested RFP deconstruction system becomes a precise and organized roadmap for multiple writers. One of the purposes of the system is to make writing seem like filling in the gaps in an outline. This is particularly important for technical people who don’t think they can write. With an outline in hand, writing-challenged techies are more likely to respond, “That’s easy, I can do that, I just have to fill in the gaps.”

Minimize Protest Risk

Bid protests are on the rise and they are costly for you, your competitors, and the contracting industry. Plus, vendors usually lose.

Fedmarket’s RFP Deconstruction System will assist in minimizing the possibility of a bid protest. It will also help defend your company against a competitor’s protest of an award made to you.

The suggested deconstruction system makes you examine each critical word in the RFP. You inherently play defense by questioning any RFP flaw, including flaws in the requirements, proposal instructions, evaluation criteria, and so forth. Questions can then be submitted to the Contracting Officer early in the process. (Unless, of course, you think pointing out a flaw would be to your disadvantage.)

The system helps you fend off protests against an award to your company by making your proposal bulletproof-compliant in every way. Specifically, the system will help make sure you:

- Address each and every requirement
- Substantiate all claims
- Check required personnel certifications and related RFP requirements
- Justify your price in every way in case the government attempts to go low bid (price realism rules and you must prove the realism of your price)

Helps with Subcontractor Content and Future Proposals

A detailed outline and template provides two other benefits in producing a winning proposal.

- A template is an absolute necessity for extracting content from subcontractors. Obtaining proposal content from subcontracts is like pulling teeth and the government-contracting world is abounding with stories about the non-responsiveness of subcontractors. A detailed template doesn’t solve all of the problems of subcontractor content but when they do respond it improves the structure, clarity, and quality of what they provide.
- Detailed proposal templates can be stored and improved each time a proposal for similar services is written. In other words, templates evolve and get better and better. The value of legacy technical approach templates depends on the similarity of scopes of work from proposal to proposal. Management

plan templates are like gold and can reduce proposal writing costs and quality because contracts are managed in the same way regardless of the scopes of work.

Ask veteran proposals writer and they will tell you legacy content makes their lives worth living.

It's Harder Than It Appears

Don't let the procedural aspects of Appendix A delude you into thinking that developing a detailed outline is easy. The catch is that deconstruction of the RFP requires a proposal manager with judgment and proposal writing experience. Selecting which items to move from the RFP into the new what content from previous proposals is pertinent and rewriting resumes and corporate experience requires skill gained from previous proposals. Preparing guidance and instructions for technical writers is a creative process.

An effective proposal manager is a valuable asset and the good ones are highly paid (or should be).

It's Too Hard

Persons new to proposal writing may say: that's too hard. My response is: what part of this would you not do, and why not do everything required in the beginning? All writers are working from a common outline and the government is getting precisely what they asked for. Outlining is fundamental to good writing. An editor can work with a sequence of clearly organized sentences, but poorly organized content has to be rewritten from scratch.

How Do Proposal Evaluators Think?

Proposal writers know that it's essential to "think like a proposal evaluator when you write." Making it easy on proposal evaluators always scores valuable evaluation points.

You must assume that the people evaluating your proposal are intelligent, focused individuals--they usually are. They may not read the entire proposal but you have to assume they will read enough to make a judgment consistent with their political agenda and with their objectives. Yes, their agendas play an important role in the final decision but, in the final analysis, the decision is usually related to their aversion to risk and to their perception of your company's capability to perform.

In our view, many companies (usually large ones) provide proposal evaluators with content, which (1) wasn't requested, and/or (2) may actually reflect negatively on the company. Examples of worthless content include:

- Beautifully rendered PDFs with complex, multicolored graphics that say very little--great graphics can enhance a proposal but the graphic must say something pertinent
- Confidentiality statements crafted by corporate lawyers
- Content that pushes the page limits, i.e., too much information
- Complex, state-of-the-art solutions
- Overblown puffery attempting to show technical superiority and slogans like "we strive for excellence"
- Features, features, and more features, but with little emphasis on benefits
- Long and flowery executive summaries that don't succinctly explain the benefits to working with your firm and how your firm will reduce the procurement officer's risk
- A regurgitation of the scope of work

In most cases, evaluators want the facts and the proof that your firm provides the best value, and they want an executive summary that allows them to skip most of the rest of the proposal and just read a few key sections. In fact, evaluators find it very helpful if your executive summary subtly recommends the critical content or sections they should read. Isn't this what you would want if you were forced to read multiple tomes on a dry, technical subject?

As discussed earlier, most Evaluators hates evaluating proposals as much as companies hate writing them. Reading a stack of overly verbose and off-the-mark proposals is no more fun than writing them. The headaches for evaluators come from figuring out how to dump the duds as quickly as possible, how to score your favorite without looking biased, and then how to write the memo required to justify the winner.

Government proposal evaluators tend to have the following traits:

- They find proposal evaluation a necessary evil. Proposal evaluation tends to be done off hours or in a hurry.
- They read as little as possible to form initial opinions and in some cases may read the executive summary only and selected critical pieces of chapters, like the key persons resume and experience summaries. Yes, they will score proposals on a quick reading.
- As they read they form two piles: a "worthy pile" and a "you have got to be kidding me pile." If they have a preferred vendor, its proposal usually automatically goes into the worthy pile. Then they reread and score the worthy pile. How they score the other pile is a mystery.

When former government proposal evaluators attend Fedmarket's proposal writing courses, they invariably agree on the characteristics of proposals that receive the most evaluation points:

- Superior organizational structure
- Brevity and clarity
- Easy to read and understand
- No frills, extras, or puffery
- Contains only what the RFP asked for
- The solution the customer wants, not what they need
- An effective, practical solution to the customer's problem

In short, make their life easy--it is not fun evaluating too many proposals in a limited amount of time.

Proposal Writing Strategies and Tips

Detailed proposal writing tips are included in Appendix B. What it boils down to is this: make it easy on the evaluator. Keep it concise and to the point. Don't give them more than they asked for in the RFP. Cut out the puffery. Show the customer you understand their problem and present a practical, risk-free solution laden with insights and benefits.

Write the Executive Summary first using customer insights, your experience with similar work, and contract performance and management insights. Then refine and rewrite it as the proposal progresses.

Don't just parrot back the RFP requirements. You should rephrase the requirements and add insights that demonstrate an understanding of what you are proposing to do. Why are we doing it this way? What are the benefits of our approach? Why does it reduce costs and minimize the risk of failure?

Develop, name, and store model text, so you can retrieve and reuse what you have written for previous proposals. Model text is particularly effective for management plans but it can also work for repeatable technical approach content. Don't reinvent the wheel in each proposal—you want to have a system where proposal writers know what model text is available. Always tailor model text to the RFP requirements. Evaluators can spot untailored model text from a mile away.

Don't use broad, unsubstantiated claims like “Collectively our company has 100 person-years of experience . . .” or “Our company is a world class . . .” You will make the government evaluators guffaw and they'll end up subtracting evaluation points. Be subtle and if you are going to boast back it up with evidence. Summaries, the evaluators want three of your best. If the RFP asks you to submit a key person's resume only, that is what the evaluators want.

Pack the proposal with understanding of the customer's needs and with compelling solutions. Write to the evaluation criteria and put the emphasis on sections that count the most. Consider not bidding if you can't provide point-scoring content that's clearly based on the customer's needs. There is nothing wrong with abandoning a proposal in the early stages of writing. Be brutal and get out early if it appears that you cannot score evaluation points.

Appendix A: The Fedmarket RFP Deconstruction System

Overview

The Fedmarket RFP Deconstruction System uses the RFP as the basis for building a detailed proposal outline. On Day 1 of a proposal-writing project deconstruct the RFP, sentence by sentence, and build a complete proposal outline that addresses every proposal requirement and meaningful term and condition. Then throw away the RFP and write to the outline. Do the same with every amendment.

Move existing corporate experience descriptions, resumes, and technical and management plan content from old proposals. Add instructions, customer notes, and solutions to the outline.

Flag the holes in the content template that need filling and assign writing tasks to the technical writers, with instructions to draft content that fills the holes. Start praying.

Assign deadlines to the technical writers and then beg management to enforce the deadlines (and pray some more). Reassign content when the results are poor. Pull it together, conduct reviews, edit and publish.

Filling the Holes

Deconstructing the RFP and developing a proposal outline is a detailed and precise exercise. The exercise is hard but it gets harder yet. The outline provides the foundation for the proposal, but filling in the gaps is the tough part. What's left after building the outline are small and large gaps (needed content) that only technical writers and contract managers can fill. An example of a small gap might be the need to update the project description for a past or current contract. A large gap might be the need for a database structure for the proposed solution. The action is in the gap content--that's usually where you win or lose.

In most cases, filling in small and large gaps is like pulling teeth. Moreover, sometimes the smallest of holes can create last-minute crises in getting the proposal out the door. Why does this happen over and over? The primary reasons are lack of attention and focus from the top. CEOs, EVPs, and VPs tend to put proposal writing in the same class as having a root canal. Just let it slide and somehow it will get done. Proposal managers need

to summarize their problems for management, and management needs to act early to ride the professional staff to fill in the gaps on schedule.

What is the most critical step? Step 1, by far. Without an outline, confusion and chaos will reign. Worse yet, you may find yourself with a proposal that doesn't meet the RFP's specifications, or without a finished product. The next most crucial step is Step 4. Many corporate managers find proposal writing distasteful and will hide rather than wield the stick that it takes to get compelling content from technical writers.

Proposal Chapters

A government proposal outline is comprised of the following chapters (or primary sections). Various types of proposals may have a subset of these sections and the sections may be called something different but these are the core elements of a proposal. Sections should be named based on the contents of the RFP, which tells you how the customer would like you to name them.

1. Executive Summary (Introduction, Summary Letter)
2. Compliance Matrix
3. Technical Proposal
4. Management Plan
5. Personnel
6. Corporate Experience
7. Business (Price) Proposal
8. Relevant Contract Clauses
9. Proposal Instructions

Deconstruction Procedure

The following deconstruction procedure is a suggested guideline. Adopt all or part of the procedure; use what works for your company. Use your existing procedure if you have one for deconstructing the RFP.

Read the RFP cover to cover and note the basics of the government's requirements, evaluation criteria, and instructions. (This presumes you have decided to bid.) As you read determine the primary proposal sections (chapters) of the proposal.

Set up the primary chapters (sections) in a Word document.

Now read the RFP again. Read sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph and section-by-section and make a judgment concerning the relevance of each item (sentence, paragraph, or section) before you proceed. Don't proceed until you have decided if an item belongs in the outline. When in doubt move the item into the appropriate chapter(s) of the outline. An item may be moved into more than one chapter and may be repeated in a chapter.

As you read sentence-by--sentence the pertinent items that you will encounter will be various types as shown in Table 1. Move the item into the appropriate Chapter(s) of the outline and color-code as shown in Table 1.

Examples:

Each and every RFP work requirement and evaluation criterion should be color-coded moved into the outline.

Make a judgment as to the relevance and risks associated with a contract clause and move the clause into the Relevant Contract Clauses section of the outline. Most are irrelevant but hidden in the tangled mess of clauses you may find a few that affect your proposed price or the performance risks of the contract. Relevance is usually associated with financial risk, an untenable term and condition, or some compliance requirement that you don't like.

Use Table 1 and the Color-Coding Guide as guides to deconstructing the RFP.

Table 1 Deconstructing the RFP into a Proposal Outline

This table defines the types of items you will encounter as you read the RFP and shows instructions for building the outline. Keep the table open in a window as you deconstruct the RFP. Alternatively you can print the table and use it as a reference as you deconstruct the RFP.

Insertion Step/Type of Information to Insert in Outline	Insert in Outline Section/Chapter	Color Code (Font Color)	Person Responsible	Notes
1. All requirements from RFP (include title and RFP section number)	Compliance Matrix	Black	Proposal Manager	This is the proposal evaluator's road map to check compliance.
2. RFP Statement of Work requirements (item-by-item) into a work hierarchy or solution description	Technical Approach (Work hierarchy or solution description)	Purple	Proposal Manager	Work requirements should be translated into a work or solution hierarchy.
3. Contract management requirements (if in the RFP)	Management Plan	Purple	Proposal Manager	Management plans can vary from not required to extensive depending on the RFP
4. All pricing	Business (Price) Proposal	Black	Proposal Manager Chief Financial Officer	
5. Relevant contract clauses	Relevant Contract Clauses	Black	Proposal Manager Contract Manager	When in doubt as to relevance, insert the clause
6. Evaluation criteria	Anywhere they are applicable	Yellow	Proposal Manager	--

7. RFP pricing instructions, requirements, and formats Proposal Manager instructions to price proposal developers	Business (Price) Proposal	Red	Proposal Manager Sales people	--
Proposal delivery instructions, font size requirements, page limitations, volumes required, number of copies required and binding and packaging instructions	Proposal Instructions	Black	Proposal Manager	--
Proposal Manager instructions to proposal writers, suggestions, notes & writing guidelines for creating content	Where needed in the outline	Red	Proposal Manager	The more the better

Color-Coding Guide

Open the color-coding guide in a window as a reference when building the proposal outline. Or print it out as a convenient way to determine color-codes.

Color Code	Information
Green	Application in-line help instructions
Pink	Editable text in outline chapters
Red	Proposal Manager instructions of any type
Purple	RFP requirements
Yellow	RFP evaluation criteria

Add non-RFP information to the Proposal Outline

Completing this step in the process requires knowledge of previous proposals, model text, resume files, and corporate experience files (legacy content). Insert legacy content into the appropriate chapters of the outline and color-code using Table 2 below. Specifically, insert existing corporate experience descriptions; resumes, technical and management plan content from old proposals. Then add Proposal Manager notes and instructions, customer notes, and solution content to the outline.

Any information you lack in this step has to be written after the outline is complete and published for writers.

As indicated in Table 2 insert only information asked for in the RFP. For examples, insert only the number of resumes and the number of corporate experience summaries specified in the RFP. Don't provide information beyond what is requested; proposal evaluators down score overkill.

Table 2 Adding Non-RFP information to the Proposal Outline

Insertion Step/Type of Information to Insert in Outline	Insert in Outline Section/Chapter	Color Code (Font Color)	Person Responsible	Notes
1. Customer insights, hot buttons, & risk fears; project costs, solution features and benefits, etc. (This type of information will come from knowing the customer.)	Executive Summary Anywhere items should be discussed in the proposal	Black	Proposal Manager with senior customer person, sales people, contract managers; anyone who knows the customer	Write Executive Summary first even if difficult, then refine as the proposal progresses
Staffing Plan (if available)	Business (Price) Proposal	Black	Proposal Manager Contract managers Chief Financial Officer	Try to get the Staffing Plan from contract managers as soon as possible in the proposal process
Model technical proposal content from previous proposals	Technical Proposal	Black	Proposal Manager	
Model management plan content from previous proposals	Management Plan	Black	Proposal Manager	
Resumes and personnel summaries	Personnel	Black	Proposal Manager	Rewrite all resumes to reflect RFP requirements Only include the number of resumes asked for in the RFP
Corporate experience summaries	Corporate Experience	Black	Proposal Manager	Rewrite all corporate experience summaries to reflect RFP requirements Only include the number of experience summaries asked for

				in the RFP
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Put the RFP aside for reference. Moving everything that is pertinent from the RFP into the outline on Day 1 saves hours of “RFP shuffling” and ensures that you will respond to each and every requirement and not overlook small but critical items like page limitations.

Make sure you deconstruct each and every RFP amendment. Also, deconstruct any Answers to Questions published by the government. Missing a critical item in an amendment or an answer to a question is a common error in proposal writing.

Make the outline as complete as possible before assigning writing tasks and beginning the writing process.

Make writing assignments and set deadlines. Hold a meeting to explain the outline and discuss assignments and deadlines.

Monitor writing progress and assist writers as necessary.

Fill in the holes in the Word version of the outline as content is provided and edit.

Hold reviews, edit again, proof read, and produce the final draft of the proposal.

Appendix B Proposal Writing Strategies and Tips

Help the Writers-in-Hiding

Employees tend to disappear on leave or go off to the customer’s site when the smell of a proposal is in the air. Even good writers will tend to hide. And often the engineers and technical people find writing distasteful, whether it’s because they think it’s beneath them or because they were never taught to write.

The greatest assistance you can give a nonwriter is a tight organizational structure to work within. Other assistance techniques include:

- Help a proven writer prepare an effective piece of content early and then present the piece as a model of what writers should be striving for.
- Provide sample pieces of effective content from winning proposals.
- Organize short writer-training sessions based on the proposal outline, model content, and previous proposal content.

Proposal Reviews

Many companies have a series of proposal reviews (coded green, yellow, and red, or other colors of the rainbow) and these reviews often become perfunctory for the following four reasons:

1. The proposal draft is not ready when the review is scheduled.

2. The reviewers are less than thrilled about reading a draft proposal and are not ready to make comments even if a draft is available.
3. A meeting of six reviewers often results in only one or two attendees who have actually reviewed the proposal.
4. Too many reviews are scheduled.

Proposal reviews are necessary, but make them real. Consider having the proposal manager schedule them according to proposal progress and select who does the reviews. Often, having a reviewer mark up a proposal and provide comments to the proposal manager can work as well as a formal meeting.

Make Your Proposal “Win Themes” Real

Win themes are the core of any government proposal. Make your executive summary about the win themes, write it early, and then write your proposal around the executive summary. Bring out one or more of the win themes in each chapter of the proposal. Win themes could include the following:

- Low price
- Best value
- Risk reduction or avoidance
- Customer solutions that are unique, proven, and low-cost
- Solutions that are practical and can be implemented quickly and economically
- Solution benefits
- Exceptionally qualified project manager and/or senior technical staff
- Project manager and/or senior technical staff that the customer knows and trusts
- Previous experience with the agency
- Exceptional experience matching the RFP requirements, with proof of superior performance and references

Weave one or more of these suggested themes into your executive summary and then add themes that are unique to your company. Don't throw themes into your proposal that can't be proven as beneficial to the customer. Don't overdo win themes--prove it or eliminate it. You can't just make them up.

Simplicity Wins

An RFP will often say, “Don't parrot back our requirements in your proposal.” In many cases the requirement you are responding to is routine and you will struggle to come up with content that would be considered meaningful. You are now in the dilemma of having to make stuff up at the procedural level, or having to keep it simple by changing the RFP language and adding any insights you may have on cost reduction, risk reduction, or quality assurance.

Our suggestion is to think hard about what would be considered meaningful, and if you have nothing then to just present, in your own words, how you would meet the requirement. Keep it simple and straightforward. Evaluators know when you are working too hard and making stuff up. They want just the facts and your insights about the facts, if you have any.

Task performance work content can best be made meaningful by adding insights as to why the task is difficult or easy, what the performance risks are, how you have done the work for others, etc. Without these types of insight it is hardly worth writing the proposal, and the lack of insight will tell you a lot about the quality of your

content.

The Facts, Just the Facts

Do evaluators of federal proposals love reading proposals? Generally not--would you? Assignment to a proposal evaluation team requires work that's in addition to evaluators' day-to-day responsibilities. They find reading and scoring many lengthy proposals on the same subject tedious, if not actually painful. So reduce their discomfort and increase your evaluation scores.

- Stop trying to sell them with generalizations about your vast capabilities and experience. Don't use the phrases "world class," "uniquely qualified," and "our collective experience exceeds . . ." Don't spread qualifications information throughout the proposal. Let the project experience summaries in the Past Experience chapter stand for themselves.
- Give them facts, not fluff, and prove every point you make.
- Don't parrot back requirements information from the RFP. Just tell them precisely how you will meet or exceed the requirements.
- Keep content short and to the point. Anticipate what they want to hear and say it simply, with as few words as possible.
- Beware of material that seems to drone on and on and repeat the same point.
- Don't force your content to fill up to the page limit; just make sure you talk to each and every requirement and present that many pages.
- Don't contribute information not asked for in the RFP just to impress the evaluators.
- Try to write content that is unique to your company.

In summary, make your proposal short, sweet, and to the point. Make the evaluators happy with your brevity and conciseness and let them get back to their favorite book or TV show.

An Art and a Science

Proposal writing is both an art and a science. The science is establishing a highly structured business process to assure a well-organized proposal that is completely compliant with all of the requirements stated in the RFP. A tight organizational structure assures proposal clarity and makes the document easy to read and understand. Federal proposal evaluators will score proposals that are easy to evaluate higher, and clarity and conciseness begin with the proposal outline.

The science part of the proposal writing process is fundamental to writing successful proposals but does not assure a win. The artistic aspect of a proposal is critical to a winning score, assuming that your proposal is well organized. It is hard to imagine that writing dry technical and management plan content is creative, but it is. Most companies have only a few proposal artists--and sometimes none. The rare creative quality of great proposal writers is driven by intellect and a sense of how to sell ideas. Proposal artists have the valuable ability to:

- Present what the customer wants and understands as a solution to their problem
- Know what to emphasize and highlight in order to feature the company and its capabilities
- Offer content that instills customer confidence and reduces their sense of risk
- Emphasize solution benefits

Compensate and support the rare proposal artists in your organization--they are worth their weight in contract dollars.

Why Reinvent the Wheel?

At least 50 percent of proposal content can be derived from content written for previous proposals. Examples like “cutting the grass and cleaning the General’s swimming pool” are virtually the same from one base maintenance proposal to the next. A help desk management section can be refined and used in the next IT Infrastructure proposal.

Proposal writing can be more pleasurable (if that’s possible) and creative when you have a model to start with. Each successive use of model content can improve the material because the model serves as a starting point and stimulates new thoughts. Writers have the time to think of more advanced solutions and methodologies, and editing dollars are saved. Writers can focus on how to make the material unique and thoughtful.

For example, a proposal writer with time to research new ideas could propose using the latest technology in pool water purification to make the water in the General’s pool less irritating. This type of nuance can often make proposal content more distinctive and result in more evaluation points.

In summary, refine, tune, and expand existing content and make each generation of proposal material better than the last.

Reduce Proposal Costs to Allow More Latitude in the Number of Proposals You Can Write

“Reduce your proposal costs” is rather an obvious statement. The suggestions in this book are most applicable to complex professional service and technology-based proposals requiring solutions to unique customer problems. Proposal writing can be automated and costs reduced in certain situations, including:

- Product bids requiring more content than just a price bid
- Bids requiring only resumes, corporate experience, and pricing, e.g., Indefinite Delivery, Indefinite Quantity proposals not requiring technical approaches
- Bids for onsite staffing
- Bids for repeatable or highly specialized services
- Bids where model or legacy content works

Obviously, the less they cost, the more you can write.

Proposal Systems and Software

The effectiveness of proposal systems and software is complex and could be the subject of an entire book. My general views on the subject are threefold:

1. Any system that doesn’t deconstruct the RFP in some form cannot ensure compliance and could be risky from a compliance viewpoint.
2. Most proposal systems use database software to store and retrieve legacy content, resumes, and corporate experience summaries. Keeping these types of proposal information in an organized system, complete and up to date, is of immeasurable value in writing proposals. Open-source software can be tailored to store and retrieve proposal information if you don’t have a system in place.
3. Collaborative proposal software is too difficult to use. Maybe someday.

Use what you have if it works for you and wins you contracts.

Fedmarket's Proposal Writing Services and Templates

Proposal Services

Proposal Writing (Full Service)

Fedmarket's proposal team assists you in completing a proposal written to win.

[Find Out More](#)

Proposal Writing (Base Service)

We develop a draft proposal based on your RFP and you complete the draft. This ensures compliance, and results in a completed proposal that precisely addresses evaluator's requests.

[Find Out More](#)

Proposal Library Development

Our proposal writers work with you to prepare scalable templates for your company's mission essentials. Templates required for common RFP responses will be designed based on your unique capabilities and corporate experience.

[Find Out More](#)

Proposal Compliance Review

Don't lose a bid due to a technicality; stay in the running by submitting a fully compliant proposal.

[Find Out More](#)

Proposal Consulting Services

Have your proposal questions answered by an expert.

[Find Out More](#)

Questions? Call us at (301) 960-5817 or >>> [In a hurry for an answer? Schedule a Call.](#)