APMP
CALIFORNIA CHAPTER

"Some people have a way with words and others …
uhhh …
Not have way, I guess"

- Steve Martin

Winning Proposal Writing Tips

Jeff Leitner
October 25, 2019

Red Team Consulting

IF YOU REMEMBER NOTHING ELSE...

Proposals
are Scored,
Not Read

Red Team Consulting proprietary material. Duplication or distribution prohibited without prior written consent.

2

Red Team
Consulting

- Proposal writing is like marketing writing but …

  - Focus on facts and substantiation

  - Persuasion through objective analysis rather than emotion

  - Each proposal is targeted at specific client for a specific project/contract

- Proposal writing is like technical writing but …
  - Focus on persuasion, not just transmission of info
  - Organized to score well rather than to decompose a problem
  - Must address multiple levels of reader sophistication

- The number of pages is limited

- There is never enough time

- The proposal will be evaluated by a varied audience

- The proposal must score well to win

- Evaluators are human

- Lots of outside opinions are offered during writing

- Organize the proposal to score, not to tell a story
- Don't make evaluators search to find what they asked for
- Plan each section and sub-section
  - Decompose and analyze the requirements
  - Understand how the section will be scored
  - Prepare a plan for how to use the page space
- Structure a section like a newspaper article, not a novel

- Follow the proposal instructions directly; make it easy for the evaluators to find what they're looking for

- Add to the outline based on evaluation criteria information

- Cover technical requirements as directed by the proposal instructions

- Do not build a cohesive story from front to back if it compromises strict compliance with the proposal instructions

- A proposal is scored, not read

Red Team Consulting proprietary material. Duplication or distribution prohibited without prior written consent.

7

- Public sector "Best Value" evaluation typically includes identification of:
  - Significant Strengths
  - Strengths
  - Weaknesses
  - Significant Weaknesses
  - Deficiencies
- A proposal is unawardable with any deficiencies
- Typical Best Value scoring
  - "Exceptional" rating: numerous strengths and no weaknesses.
  - "Good" rating: multiple strengths and only a few minor weaknesses
  - "Acceptable" rating: must have strengths and may have some weaknesses
  - "Unacceptable" rating: either multiple weaknesses or one or more major weaknesses

- Proposal development commonly focuses on development of "win themes"

- Government evaluation identifies strengths, not win themes

- Must characterize a "win theme" in the proposal such that the customer considers it a "strength"

- Align win themes to evaluation factors

- Clearly describe the win theme in terms of a concrete, tangible benefit to the customer

- A win theme may be considered a strength if it exceeds the requirements in a meaningful way

- Bold Claim (feature)

- Benefit the client gets from delivering on the claim

- Substantiation (makes the claim believable)

- Discriminators are features/benefits that no one else can claim

  - The best win themes are discriminators

  - Sometimes a win theme can be claimed by some of the competitors (i.e., is not a discriminator) but is still important to point out in the proposal

Red Team Consulting proprietary material. Duplication or distribution prohibited without prior written consent.

10

- A <u>feature</u> is what you do or how you do it

- A <u>benefit</u> is what the customer gets when you deliver the feature

Feature	Benefit
Advanced modeling and simulation software	Lower development costs; higher reliability
Initiating detail design and long-lead hardware procurement before Phase II go-ahead	Greater ability to meet program schedules
History of delivering software products on or ahead of schedule	Dependability; low program risk
Program manager reporting directly to the general manager	Higher program visibility; quicker allocation of resources; more responsive to customer needs

APMP
CALIFORNIA CHAPTER

1. Failure to focus on the customer's business problem

2. Lack of persuasive structure

3. Lack of clear differentiation

4. Failure to offer a compelling value proposition; i.e., how the solution will improve the customer's business

5. Key points are buried in the writing

6. The proposal is difficult to read, including jargon, acronyms, inappropriate level of technical details

7. The proposal contains misspellings, grammar errors, inconsistent formats, or inaccuracies

APMP
CALIFORNIA CHAPTER

1. Compliant • Does it meet all customer requirements?

2. Compelling • Will it make your customer want to buy it?

3. Credible • Have you made your case that you can perform the effort?

4. Correct • Is it accurate?

5. Consistent • Are the facts the same across all deliverables?

6. Concise • Is it brief and to the point?

7. Clear • Will the customer understand it right away?

- Lends air of credibility and confidence

- Gives impression that we are proposing something real rather than mere good intentions

- Only exception is when it is important to make a distinction between past, present, and future

Poor:

    The Program Manager will publish a weekly status report for customer insight

Better:

    The Program Manager publishes a weekly status report for customer insight

Red Team Consulting proprietary material. Duplication or distribution prohibited without prior written consent.

14

APMP
CALIFORNIA CHAPTER

- Stronger, more vigorous, more emphatic

- Use "we" and "our" instead of "the ABC Company" and "the XYX Team"

- The customer is looking for a contractor, not a disembodied entity

Bad	Better
Rollout of the first module will occur in week 12.	We roll out the first module in week 12.
Jane Smith has been appointed program manager.	Our program manager is Jane Smith.

- Simple

- More direct and believable

- More forceful and self-confident

- Usually less wordy

Active Voice: Subject, verb, object
- Our relevant programs demonstrate a considerable depth of expertise

Passive Voice: Object, verb, subject
- A considerable depth of expertise is demonstrated by our relevant programs

- Use a persuasive, positive tone using clear, direct language

- Eliminate words such as no, not, never, wrong, fail, and insufficient

- Cover only one subject in each paragraph, leading with the main message

- Keep paragraphs under 12 lines and sentences short (20-40 words)

- Put material in an order that makes sense to the reader

- Use detailed headings that tie directly to the RFP

- Avoid noun-isms, jargon, and fluff

"We use BDD for acceptance automation using Gherkin syntax facilitated by the Cucumber tool."

Red Team Consulting proprietary material. Duplication or distribution prohibited without prior written consent.

17

- Avoid generalizations

- Be definite and concrete

  - Poor: The training impacts a large stakeholder group.

  - Better: Our program of 40 hours of classroom training and 30 hours of online learning impacts a large stakeholder group.

  - Best: Our program of 40 hours of classroom training and 30 hours of online learning enable 100-150 stakeholders to improved their throughput by 35%.

- Good proposals are data rich – they deal in particulars and present the details that matter

- Details create credibility

- Don't attempt to improve the solicitation's choice of words

    - If it says "Past Experience" don't use "Past Performance"

- Embed "road signs" in your headings and text using key words from the solicitation

- To improve flow, include transitional words or phrases in topic sentences to help transition from the previous section to the next.

- Include transitional words or phrases within paragraphs to connect information and evidence.

Transition Type	Examples
Illustration	Thus, for example, for instance, namely, to illustrate, specifically
Contrast	On the contrary, however, in contrast, rather
Addition	In addition, furthermore, further, as a result, for instance
Time	After, then, next, at length, formerly, another, in order to, immediately
Details	Specifically, in particular, to list, to enumerate, in detail, including
Examples	For example, for instance, to illustrate, thus, in particular
Consequence or Result	So that, with the result that, thus, consequently
Summary	Therefore, finally, consequently, in conclusion, as a result, accordingly

- State related ideas in similar grammatical form

- Paralleling your language brings your thoughts together and makes it easier for your reader to understand the document

  - Incorrect: Mr. Jones enjoys eating, laughing, and conversation.

  - Correct: Mr. Jones enjoys eating, laughing, and conversing.

- Use parallel phrasing to balance lists

Instead of:	Use:
• Provide the customer with detailed reports as required • Reporting requires us to collect relevant data • The customer will review and approve all final reports • SharePoint is our tool for storing and maintaining all reports	• Provide the customer with detailed reports as required • Collect relevant data for reports • Submit all required reports for customer review and approval • Store and maintain all reports on SharePoint

- Use technical terms only where applicable
  - Writing a technical section is not the same as writing a technical paper
  - If you must use a technical term, define it or provide an example
  - Use technical terms to describe the process you will use
  - Use simple words instead of complex ones

Instead of:	Use:	Instead of:	Use:
accomplish	do	formulate	work out, devise, form
ascertain	find out	in lieu of	instead of
disseminate	send out, distribute	locality	place
endeavor	try	optimum	best, greatest, most
expedite	hasten, speed up	strategize	plan
facilitate	make easier, help	utilize	use

- Do not use unnecessary words, sentences, and paragraphs

Incorrect	Correct
The question as to whether	whether (the question whether)
There is no doubt	no doubt (doubtless)
Used for fuel purposes	used for fuel
He is a man who	he
The reason is that	because
Owing to the fact that	since (because)
In spite of the fact that	though (although)
The fact that the tank failed	the tank failed
The fact that the test did not succeed	the test was unsuccessful

- "We propose," "We believe," "We will try," "We intend to"

- "We understand"

- Unnecessary qualifiers – totally, completely, definitely, partnership, successful

- Subjective words – impact, strive, comprehensive, fully

- Cliches ("We are pleased to present…")

- Redundant wording ("absolutely essential")

- Shall

- "etc."

- and/or

Red Team Consulting proprietary material. Duplication or distribution prohibited without prior written consent.

24

- Literally (also: "almost literally")
- Unique (also: "very unique")
- Ensure vs. Insure vs. Assure
- Comprise vs. Compose

**Justin Hendrix** ✔
@justinhendrix

Follow

6/ When @LouiseMensch reported on the FISA tap, she included details that implicated Putin's own daughters, Carter Page and Paul Manafort.

- Pages loaded with acronyms are challenging to read
- Define acronyms when first used
    - However, some acronyms are better known than their definition (e.g., NASA)
- Redefine acronyms that are reused after their definition is forgotten
- Any acronym that makes the reader stop and think should be avoided
- Avoid parochial or made-up acronyms
- "ATM Machine"
- "PTW" or "Price to Win" ???
- Plural has no apostrophe

- Turn on grammar and spelling checking in Word to look for:
  - Spelling errors
  - Passive voice
  - Jargon
  - Long sentences and paragraphs
  - Incorrect sentence structure/word use
- Use common sense – these tools are not perfect and the suggested improvements may not be correct

- Technical and management baselines

- Win strategy, themes, and messages

- Overall proposal schedule

- Key words, phrases, nomenclature, numbers, etc. (e.g., how you refer to the team that is bidding)

- Approved words (e.g., abbreviations, hyphens, caps vs. lowercase, etc.)

- Forbidden words

Red Team Consulting proprietary material. Duplication or distribution prohibited without prior written consent.

29

- Must ensure meaning is not changed

- First edit done by member of proposal team

  - Smoothing, "one voice"

  - Reduce page count

- Final edit done by experienced technical editor

  - Grammar, spelling, punctuation

  - Consistency in terminology

  - Need objective, fresh set of eyes
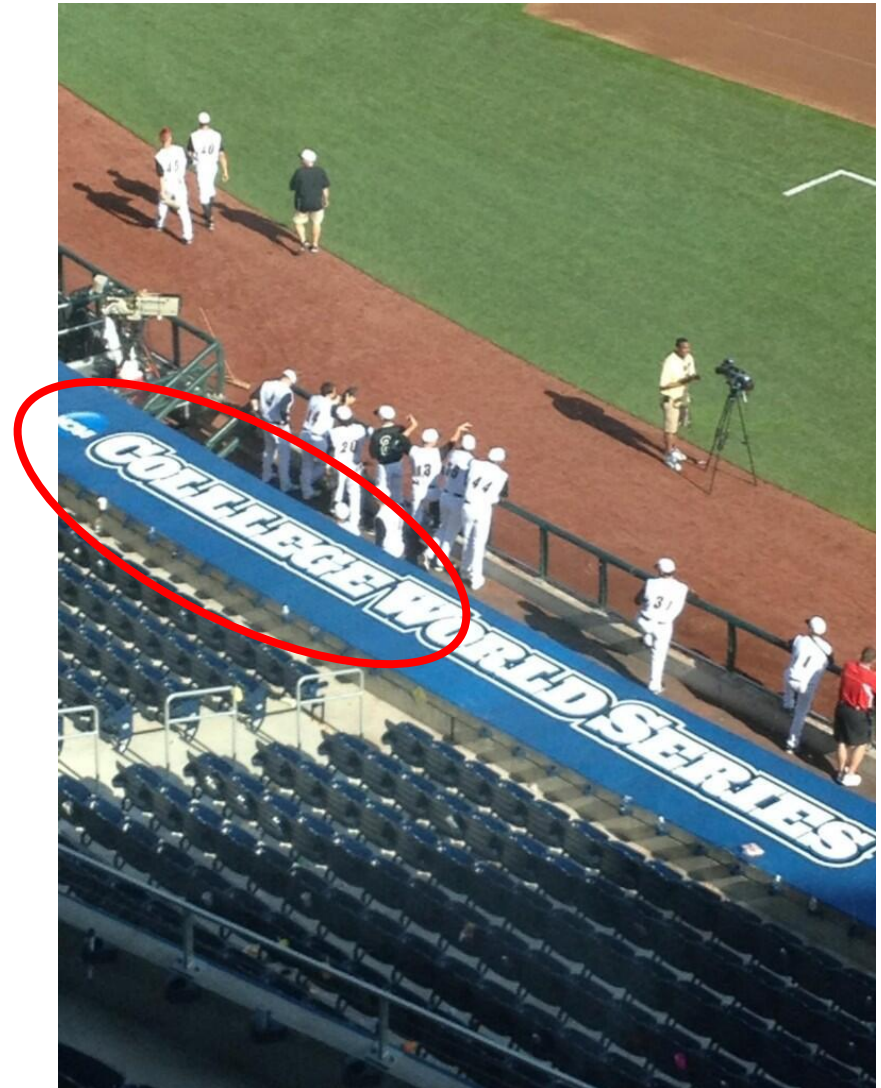
Contact Information

Jeff Leitner

Director of Consulting

202-746-9911

Jeff.Leitner@redteamconsulting.com

Corporate Office:
11710 Plaza America Dr., Suite 100
Reston, VA 20190
703-787-9009
www.redteamconsulting.com