Does this sound familiar? You’re sitting at your desk happily working on some tidy software documentation, testing and typing, ready to build your online help, when a two-inch binder labeled “RFP” lands on your desk filled with a dozen post-it notes.

Or maybe your boss clears his throat behind you. “We need you to work on this response,” he says, handing you a 100-page printout of solicitation documentation. Your stomach turns with the sick feeling that your next month and a half has just been turned upside down.

These scenarios represent a common occurrence with professional writers and editors these days. As companies make decisions to pursue government projects and opportunities, like those available through the American Relief and Recovery Act (ARRA), writers previously tasked in traditional roles of marketing and public relations, instruction development, and communications are being asked to respond to government RFPs—Request for Proposals—and losing a lot of sleep over it. Whether you have experience with these RFPs or not, the leadership...
perception seems to be: “A response needs to be written for this thing, and hey, you’re a writer, whip this up!” The responsibility can be terrifying the first time, and sadly, many proposals, especially early efforts, are so poorly executed that even those writers with experience wind up having more issues than many rescue dogs.

But before you go hiding and whimpering behind the office sofa for the next 45 days (RFPs have notoriously quick turnarounds), here are five key strategies to get you through the process. And although there may not have been a Proposal Writing 101 class in college, technical communicators have many of the skills needed to actually pull off a strong proposal, so good luck!

1. Don’t start from scratch. Build the proposal around the instructions provided in the RFP.

The good news about drafting a response to a government solicitation is: 1) you will be given instructions, and 2) you are expected to comply with these instructions. This means that 1) you don’t need to completely develop the outline and template of your submission from scratch, and 2) if any self-appointed designers or writers try to assert that the paper should be pink and the text blue, you can gracefully reject their advances with, “I’m sorry, but we need to comply with the submission instructions. Our proposal will be rejected if we stray from the directions, even for your most-excellent suggestion.” I wish all projects had these types of parameters built in because, from formatting and margin sizes to volume titles and page limits, the RFP provides the guidance that frames your outline and template.

2. Find the submission RFP instructions online and focus on the sections you need.

The detail of the submission instructions varies depending on the award and contract type, but there is always some guidance in an RFP. In smaller solicitations, you may find the guidance in a section called Submission Instructions. In larger RFPs—some of these tomes are 100 to 1,000+ pages with appendices!—you will find detailed guidance. There’s no need to panic about sifting through all this documentation. Large government RFPs have standards that are dictated by the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), ensuring that submission instructions are always in the same place. In short, understanding key aspects of the FAR-dictated structure will save you lots of reading time and allow you to skip right to the sections you need. The current FAR is close to 2,000 pages long (see https://www.acquisition.gov/far/current/pdf/FAR.pdf). In a nutshell, here are the sections you need to know:

- **Section L—Proposal Submission Instructions**

Section L provides formatting, submission, and preparation guidance. To illustrate, here is a sample of the type of language found in Section L: “There is no specific length restriction regarding proposals, but it is desirable for offerors to limit the Technical and Past Performance Sections of the proposal to no more than a total of 350 pages, 8.5 inches X 11 inches, typed for both sections. This means no more than 175 sheets of paper with printing on both sides or 350 sheets with printing on one side. Foldout pages depicting such items as sketches and tables may be used.”

By using the formatting directions in Section L on the outline from Section C, you’re well on your way to having a document that has pieces you can delegate. In fact, once you get this far, leveraging your company knowledge to develop Win Themes (what sets you apart from the competition) will allow you to provide subject matter experts (SMEs) and contributing content creators with a favorite tool—the storyboard (this will be discussed further in strategy 4 below).

- **Section M—Evaluation Factors for Award**

Unlike Section L, this section does not include instructions. Instead, this section tells you how the reviewers will judge responses. For example, you might see here that cost considerations are weighted more heavily than past performance samples. This may give you some insight into how to tweak the outline of your proposal, but since this section is usually only a few pages long, it’s worth checking. Section M is your last stop for finding information about how to organize the response before actually drafting storyboards and content.

Sometimes instructions are hidden in other sections of the RFP, so it’s always a good idea to read the entire document. Armed with the information in these three sections, you should have a fairly good idea of what your proposal template should look like, as well as the outline.

3. Consider your audience and write from the customer’s point of view.

Remember you’re proposing to fill a need or find a solution. That’s why the RFP was issued. Make sure your writing addresses the customer. They don’t want to hear that your company is great; they want to know how you’re going to solve their problem.

4. Leverage the experience and tools you already have to get the most out of SMEs and executives on the proposal team.
Depending on the size of the potential award, the length of the response, and the culture at your company, you may end up with a highly collaborative document with multiple SMEs writing different parts. What’s more, due to the significance and high-profile nature of a well-written proposal and successful award, there will be no shortage of interested contributors with various motivations and egos. Luckily, as a writer, you have some skills with guiding collaborative documents.

Use storyboards to reign in egos and guide development. Work with the authors to create storyboards with specific content instruction that includes the headings from the SOW, overarching Win Themes, and instructions about the length you require from each of the sections to be compliant with the Section M guidelines, as well as the instructions about how to deal with graphics. Storyboard development could be a class in itself, but as a seasoned writer with experience working on collaborative documents, you probably have some ideas about how to get started.

A Note about Win Themes
Because proposals are highly collaborative documents, establishing clear Win Themes are an important part of creating a consistent “voice.” Win Themes are bullet points about what makes your team uniquely qualified to do the job. These are not just marketing bullets but marketing statements with tangible proof. These bullets are shared with the authors so that the concepts can be woven into each of the section narratives. Examples of good Win Themes are:

- **Our team is an industry leader in implementing this technology.** In fact, we have won many awards including X, Y, and Z and published many articles.
- **Our team has a long history of successful projects with this client.** In fact, X project had an ROI of $XM.

Develop a journalistic approach to information gathering. Some SMEs can write and some need to be interviewed. Most writers know that research is important to the process and are savvy about getting necessary information. You’ve probably informally interviewed more than one SME during your career. Use an interview approach to the questions that will guide answers to the storyboard requirements—leverage those journalism skills!

Offer and accept criticism. How to handle criticism, both giving and receiving, is one of the most powerful tools that a writer and editor should master. Writers know how to tactfully suggest changes without insulting authors, and how to buff and polish a narrative without stepping on toes. This is not a skill everyone has. And, since proposals attract a lot of attention, you and your proposal team may find yourself receiving some harsh words. Do your best to protect your team from the critiques of executives. When you’ve got a month to prepare a giant document, you don’t have days to wait while their morale recovers.

5. Use your production experience to build the proposal core team.

Even if you’ve never dealt with a proposal, you’ve probably had to deal with graphic designers, proofreaders, document formatters, and reprographics professionals before, and these relationships will help you. Identify the professionals with which you work best, cruise the RFP together, and identify ways to get them engaged right away. Here are some ideas:

- **Graphic designers** Go over the SOW or PWS in Section C and brainstorm graphics ideas, research client logos or favorite colors, and begin the photo research that will help build a compelling narrative right away.

- **Proofreaders** Since this will be a collaborative document, a style sheet will help guide development and implement a consistent voice. Get the editorial details clear, right off the bat. For example: should you use one space after a period or two? First person (“We will deliver”) or third person (“The company will deliver”)?

- **Document formatters** Go over the template and formatting instructions. A multivolume proposal built in Microsoft Word can get tricky. Make sure the template behaves correctly, footers will be consistent, section breaks won’t reset page numbering, photo captions are identified correctly, etc.

- **Reprographics professionals** Read through Section L with the reprographics team and determine how many copies need to be submitted and where, or if it is electronic submission only. Also identify shipping methods and if any original signatures are required.

Proposals can be intense; there’s a lot at stake, but you are probably better equipped to get the job done than you think. These strategies can help you create a compliant, well-written, timely response to a government RFP.

After a few hard lessons and proposal all-nighters, **Julia LaSalle** (lasallej@ctc.com), **Christine Menna**, and **Stephanie Putt** have finally learned to execute collaborative and compliant proposal responses at Concurrent Technologies Corporation (CTC). Taken together, they have worked on more than 100 proposals last year alone and lived to share the tale. Christine recently presented her proposal management findings at an Association of Proposal Management Professionals conference.