Technical Proposals: How the Language Evolves Through the Proposal Writing Process

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Abstract

Proposal writing is a mainstay for any company trying to acquire work from a funding organization. For a technology focused company that is trying to win defense contract work, the proposal is written in response to a scripted requirement embodied in a Request for Proposal (RFP). An RFP from the Department of Defense (DOD) has a very specific structure. The RFP places strict requirements on what is expected in a proper response. In turn, the company must interpret the language of the RFP, and develop a document that is technically compliant, structurally complete and easily readable. To do this successfully requires inputs from many people, and the proper organization and planning. The goal of this project was to research and describe how a company starts with an RFP and develops language through the various stages to produce a proposal. The approach was to review the literature and proposal and look at how the language changes through the process and explain why it needs to develop the way it does. The research shows how the multiple steps required by the writing process cause the language and general presentation to mature until it is ready to be delivered.

Introduction[1]

When the DOD predicts a need to develop a new piece of hardware, funding is requested, and if approved, put into the budget. Without going into the labyrinth of the government funding cycle, the funding is eventually fed down to a controlling organization. This organization then has the task to develop a document, an RFP, which is a collection of requirements that outline what the customer is looking for to fulfill the contract. RFPs are generally made up of numerous sections, labeled B thru K, a Statement Of Objectives (SOO) and a System Requirements Document (SRD). The definitions and titles of the different sections are shown in Table 1. Once the RFP is ready, a release is made to the general public. The RFP specifies a fixed date, time and location for delivering the final proposal. Between the time of release and the delivery, the work to develop a proposal falls to a group of dedicated people who have to work in a collaborative fashion to write an appropriate answer.

I recently worked on a proposal. The RFP totaled about 200 pages, to which our response totaled about 600 pages, for which I was responsible for one section. This is a case of intense collaborative writing. As mentioned by Farkas (1991, p16), a complex writing task requires collaboration, but collaboration introduces complexity. In order to organize and guide the task, we used a well defined process as shown in Table 2 and Figure 1. This study looks at pragmatics of language that is used in a very restricted case. The goal was to go into the details of the steps and examine how the language was developed, and then explain how this happens and what purpose it serves.

[1] Throughout this paper, I needed to exclude some of the detailed information, due to the fact that much of the proposal data and forms used are proprietary.

Relevant Literature

When I started to research the subject of proposal writing, I quickly found out there was no shortage of books and articles that claim to offer sage advice. I was able to sort through this by looking for references that concentrated on writing and organization. The following review of relevant literature discusses Process, Storyboarding, and Collaborative Writing.

Process

When an RFP is released and received, the proposal team has to read through the document and create a plan for execution. There are a number of ways to begin writing a proposal. One way to approach the writing task is to read the RFP and just start writing. The job is much too large to do this effectively, since there are literally hundreds of pieces of data from different disciplines that have to be melded together. However, for many companies, this was often the approach taken. Part of the purpose of the RFP process is for the proposing company to prove they can organize themselves well enough to write a proposal. If a company cannot produce a coherent response, how can they manage a multi-million dollar project?

A technique recommended by Sant (2004, p99) involves what he refers to as Cognitive Webbing. For each section of the RFP, the center of the web starts with determining what the customer needs. This is put into a statement, and then a brainstorming session is held to determine answers. These answers are grouped into clusters of related points which become the main categories. Each category has subpoints branching off. The categories are prioritized and the subpoints within the categories are prioritized. When the categories and subpoints are listed in priority order, this forms the outline.

Helgeson (1994, p73) recommends starting by reading the RFP and underlining the key nouns from each section, then listing the sentences they are in. This becomes the high level

outline, once it is organized into a sensible order. Each heading of the outline is broken down into subheadings, as determined by the requirements for that section of the RFP.

Storyboarding

To develop this proposal, the writing team used what it commonly called Storyboarding. This is similar to what is used in movies and magazines. The actual application to technical proposals was developed in the early 1960's by Hughes Aircraft Company (Starkey, 2000), and is officially referred to as Sequential Thematic Organization of Publications (STOP). According the Starkey (2000, p41), folklore has it that STOP came from the founder of Hughes Aircraft, Howard Hughes, and his involvement with the film industry. In reality, it was developed as a means to bring reason to the chaos of writing proposals. The technique results in a continual refinement of the language.

Helgeson (1994, p75) refers to Storyboarding as a fill in the blank exercise, where someone else does all the thinking for the writer. Sant (2004, p99) believes that Storyboarding does not work well for proposals since it was developed to produce a visual output. He explains that in the movie business the text is already written before the process is applied. For writing a proposal, the process is turned around, by using Storyboarding to write the text.

As a counter to both Helgeson (1994) and Sant (1999), Starkey (2000) explains that Storyboarding really has the effect of focusing the writer. To summarize repeated proof of this, he states that:

The author who came to the review with a skimpy storyboard left the review with a fleshed-out, agreed-upon writing plan.

From this agreed-upon writing plan (outline), the author can begin the task of writing into full text, confident they are going in the correct direction.

Collaborative Writing

Irregardless of what technique is used to write a proposal, there will always be a great deal of collaboration necessary. According to Helgeson (1994, p141), failure to organize a disciplined team is one of the main reasons proposals fail. An established system for generating the proposal is required. To keep the collaborators organized, Pugh and Bacon (2005) recommend the steps shown in table 2. A corresponding schedule using these steps is shown in figure 1.

However, working in a collaborative fashion will by nature bring together people of various backgrounds and personalities. Part of the review steps needed to keep a large project going involves editing by peers and superiors. Shirk (1991), explains that each of these editing groups brings a different set of strengths and weaknesses to the writing. For peer editing, one of the strengths stems from the fact that there is less of a perceived threat. The reviewer is also more likely to have an in-depth knowledge of the subject. Editing by a superior, or hierarchical editing, brings in a person who will read the document with a "Big Picture" view, and can look for a consistent representation of the organization. For weaknesses, the peer review can create a pride of ownership which can prove to be an obstacle. There is also a tendency to not take a peer's work seriously, and not give it a thorough reading. With hierarchical editing, the weakness is paradoxically related to the strength. The reviewer's higher position can result in a misapplication of authority. A person in a higher position may insist on having their suggestions used whether they are correct or not.

Grice (1991) talks about the various classes of verification, and what types of editing and reviews should be done when. He lists out six phases through which the work progresses, and what type of collaboration is needed at each phase. His recommendation agrees with

aforementioned authors that verification and reviews should be performed at each stage of the development. Each stage of the process should see the writing progressing, with the goal of the each succeeding review being to keep the text focused.

Data Analysis

Following the steps shown in table 2 and figure 1, the remainder of this paper walks through each step and describes the process and results in greater detail.

Module Spec

The RFP must first be read and understood. Once this is done, in order to form an outline and pull the information needed to write the proposal, the entire document is scanned for the words "Shall" and "Will". Of these two, "Shall" is the operative word. In Webster's New World College Dictionary (1999), one of the definitions of "Shall" is "*used in statements of law or regulation."* Under usage for the distinction between "Shall" and "Will", Webster's (1999) states that "Shall" is used in certain formal contexts. All statements and paragraphs with a "Shall" are copied from the RFP and put into a writing form called a Module Spec. The Module Specs are arranged into the order of the RFP to form a draft structure of the proposal. Lead authors are assigned to sections of the proposal, with the writing of the individual Module Specs assigned to authors who are Subject Matter Experts (SMEs).

The Module Spec has a number of sections, listed below, designed to start the writing process and keep the writer focused on the subject extracted from the RFP.

- Document what the customer is asking for
- Identify the approach
- Define data needed
- Define discriminators

- Ghost the competition[2]
- Define graphics

When an author begins writing to a Module Spec s/he goes through each section and writes down whatever they believe will answer the requirement. At this point, the language can vary from very short cryptic sentences and bullets, to fully defined paragraphs. Most of the time, the language will initially be very generic despite efforts to make specific statements. For instance, one of the hardest parts is to write a discriminator that makes you different from your competitor. In most cases, the discriminator comes to read like an elaborate version of, "We're really good at this, and have been doing this for years." Rarely does the language come out of the Module Spec ready to be put into the final proposal, and since the idea is to only start the writing process, this is acceptable. When the Module Specs for all sections are filled out, they are arranged on large easels in the proposal room in the order of the outline to allow other authors and reviewers to view the different sections.

Storyboard Form[3]

The purpose of the Storyboard Form is to begin the process of writing full sentences and paragraphs, and to create rough graphics[4]. When all the Storyboard Forms are completed, the proposal begins to take shape, with the eventual goal to provide a complete view of how everything fits together.

Going from the Module Spec to the Storyboard Form begins with copying the text from one to the other. This is put onto a single page, such that the author can begin to organize the thoughts into coherent text. The form contains prompts such as "Point out benefits and features"

[2] Ghosting the competition means to talk about your competitors weaknesses without mentioning their name. This is done by emphasizing a strength you have that is one of their known weaknesses.
[3] The overall process is called Storyboarding, but this is where the Storyboard Form is created.
[4] In technical proposals, adding graphics to the text is vital to creating a clear message. In fact, in the final document, one cannot exist without the other.

and “Describe and justify the approach” to help the author fill in the details of the section. The authors are encouraged to write out sections in positive, active sentences. However, more research and data is usually needed at this point to complete the writing; i.e. to make the writing specific to what the company can do to perform the task. There is also an emphasis on trying to incorporate jargon that the customer is familiar with. This was a case of using the situational context to prove your in-depth knowledge of the customer’s world.

The main emphasis comes down to the writing adage of showing not telling. The sections have to show the customer the company can do the job, rather than regurgitating the RFP language. This is a common pitfall at this stage in the writing (Helgeson, 1994, p98), and if not corrected frequently results in failed proposals by implying to the customer that you have no clue what you are talking about. The solution to this is usually to gain another perspective from a team member, or to pull in another SME.

One of the biggest difficulties we found was with figuring out what the RFP was asking for. Questions could be sent back to the customer up until a cut off date. After that, the team had to guess what the customer wanted and decide what the best approach was. In my section, there was a large disparity between what the different sections of the RFP. Sections L and M asked for our approach to certain elements, but each section had a different set of elements. Then in the SOO, they only asked us to price a very small subset of those elements. We had to make the assumption that, although the customer only wanted to pay for a small service, they wanted a company to prove they had the capability manage a large program.

Pink Team

When the storyboards are completed, they are reviewed and approved by the proposal manager, and turned into Annotated Mockups (AMUs). The purpose of the AMUs is to combine all the separate storyboards with preliminary graphics into one document that can be reviewed by the Pink Team.

The pink team review is the first test of the proposal draft. Pugh and Bacon (2005, p177) state the goals in the form of four questions.

1. Is the proposal compliant?
2. Is the proposal responsive?
3. Does the proposal sell throughout?
4. Does the proposal communicate?

The review is performed similar to a writing workshop, in that an independent group of people from both inside and outside the company evaluate the document without influence from the authors. The pink team follows the advice from Grice (Lay, Karis, 1991, p227) in that the editing of the first draft focuses on subject matter and audience rather than completed text.

Ideally, the pink team review will be performed at a point where the company has not invested too much time into the proposal. The understanding is that the language is in a preliminary state. Then they scan over the RFP and draft proposal as a team, before breaking it into parts to be assigned to individuals for a detailed review. The results are captured, and sometimes scored (Pugh and Bacon, 2005, p178-181). The pink team then briefs the writing team on their findings.

On the proposal, most of the comments revolved around the fact that there were too many generic statements, and the fact that we did not address the customer needs directly. We also had a tendency to discuss our capabilities that, though impressive, were not related to exactly what the RFP was asking for.

Writing continues

After the Pink team, the detailed writing of the proposal began. I restructured the outline of my entire section, since the original order made no logical sense. One of cases where the language strayed from the objective was in the description of the training. We had gone into great detail for over two pages about our skill and background at developing computer based training, and what a wonderful tool this was. The text itself came across more as ad copy than a technical description, and failed to take into account that all they wanted was a simple plan. The solution was to simply describe how we develop computer based training.

Red Team and Upper Management Review

The red team review is the most critical juncture in the writing process. By this time, the proposal has to be as close to the final form as possible. Leading into the red team review, an effort is made to have the text and graphics complete and clean. The person leading the proposal writing center begins to look at the appearance of the document to make sections attractive to the reader by breaking up large sections of text with graphics and focus boxes.

The absolute outcome of the red team is a determination by the company management that the proposal will have a chance of winning the contract. The level of scrutiny is much higher, though the four basic questions from the pink team form the review criteria.

Despite serious nature of the review, decorum needs to be adhered to, such that the comments are helpful and non-personal. Both Pugh and Bacon (2005, p193) and Helgeson (1994, p195) emphasize that the criticisms need to be presented with explanations of why the particular passage did not communicate what was needed.

As previously mentioned Shirk (Lay, Karis, 1991, p250) explained one of the weaknesses of an upper management review is the use of authority. On the proposal, this happened in a limited way. Most of the upper management comments were useful in that they read the

document from a company perspective to determine if what was said was in line with how they wanted the company represented. However, one of the reviewers entered only cryptic comments such as “So what?” and “I don’t get it” with no further explanation or help. We were unable to make much use if these comments.

Final Writing and Release

The Red Team review resulted in a significant amount of work to incorporate changes. The writing team help peer reviews daily. A pair of professional proposal writers from another company division came in to look for inconsistencies in writing style. From this point forward, the work consisted of rewriting, editing and reviewing up until the deadline.

Conclusion

To write the proposal, the writing team had to put in very long days for weeks on end. Writing in this manner, with a very firm deadline and many contributors, made it difficult to pay attention to anything but the task at hand.

However, being able to step back from the job a few months later, I was able to see how the language changed through the process. Initially, all we had was an RFP that was confusing and contained conflicting statements. From this we were able to develop a plan and begin the job of creating a usable document. The team edited and polished the graphics and text until they fit together properly. This helped create an appearance that kept the reader from being intimidated by seeing pages of unbroken text. We also hoped to strike a balance between presenting technical facts and selling.

In the end, what I found was that this maturing of the language happened for a number of reasons. First, as the writing progressed, the authors began to better understand the subject. The RFP was confusing and program level decisions had to be made about how the writing addressed

the requirements. The writing steps helped to focus the authors so they could develop appropriate responses. Second, the reviews provided guidance to keep the team going in the right direction, and to avoid wasted effort and confusion. Finally, even with inputs from over forty people, the team strove to have the entire document sound as if it were written by a single author.

The writing process has to transform a scattered collection of rough ideas and scribbled sketches into a solid document. And, when everything is put together, a proposal must tell a good, truthful, story that answers the RFP.

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Appendix

Tables and Figures

Table 1

Description of the different sections of a Request For Proposal

B: Supplies or Services and Prices/Costs
C: Description/Specs/Work Statement
D: Packaging and Marking
E: Inspection and Acceptance
F: Deliveries or Performance
G: Contract Administration Data
H: Special Contract Requirements
I: Contract Clauses
J: List of Attachments
K: Representation, Certification and Other Statements of Offerors
L: Instructions, Conditions and Notices to Offerors
M: Evaluation Factors For Award
SOO: Describes what the contractor needs to do to execute the contract.
SRD: Describes what the system to be designed has to do.

Table 2
Proposal Writing Steps

1.	RFP release: This is the actual release of the RFP. At this point the deadline is set.
2.	Module Specifications: These are used to generate high level ideas.
3.	Storyboards: The storyboards are used to lay out the structure of the proposal, and insert notional graphics
4.	Annotated Mockups (AMUs): The writing from the storyboards is put into a single document to represent what the proposal will look like.
5.	Pink Team Review: A panel of internal and external reviewers diagnose the proposal to be sure the team is going in the right direction
6.	Further refinement of the proposal: Comments from the Pink team are incorporated, and detailed writing happens
7.	Red Team review: This review looks at the proposal as it nears the final form. This is the most critical review point, and if not passed could result in canceling the project.
8.	Upper management review: A review by executives of the company.
9.	Final writing: Clean up of any errors and final assembly of the document.

Figure 1
Proposal Writing Schedule

			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18 RFP Release
19 Review	20 Write Mod Specs	21	22	23	24	25
26	27 Write Storyboards	28	29	30	31 AMUs	

Figure 1
Cont.