

The Proposal Lifecycle

Proposals written in response to Federal Government RFPs are typically given 30, 45, or 60 days for submission. Proposal schedules tend to be proportional --- something that happens at the mid-point on a 30 days schedule will probably happen at the mid-point if the schedule is 60 days.

- **Pre-RFP.** Be consistently successful requires starting ahead of RFP release. There are a number of things that you can do to prepare.
- **RFP Release.** Once the RFP hits the street, the deadline clock is ticking. If you have properly prepared prior to release you should be able to immediately act. A lot of proposals that go bad do so by taking too long to get started. If you have a formal bid/no-bid process you'll want to decide within a day or two of RFP release so that you can schedule a kick-off meeting to get started on the proposal. At the kickoff meeting you'll introduce the team, present the schedule, describe the proposal process, and get people started working.
- **Pre-writing.** Writing and re-writing until "you get it right" is a recipe for proposal disaster. That is why most formal proposal processes include a pre-writing phase to detail what needs to be written. Whether you use annotated outlines, storyboards, or something else it'll typically consume the first 25% of the available schedule. These are normally followed by a review to ensure the quality of the subsequent draft.
- **Draft production.** When it's been thought-thru ahead of time, writing proceeds more quickly. Production of the first draft typically takes the next 25% of the available schedule.
- **Red Team review.** While different people define color-team review labels differently, most people are familiar with a Red Team review as a (sometimes the only) formal review of the proposal by a team of senior managers (who were not the proposal writers). For it to be effective it must be a complete draft of the entire proposal (all writing complete). Ideally, the Red Team review should take place at about the half-way point on the schedule, but they often get pushed back. In any event it should be completed by the 75% point to allow time for recovery. A last-minute review can be worse than useless.
- **Red Team recovery.** A good Red Team will find things that are missing or must be fixed. You need to allow at least 15% of the available time to make these changes.

- **Final Production.** Sometimes the proposal enters final production section by section, some organizations wait until the entire document is ready. Some organizations allow changes while the document is in final production some do not. Typically 10% of the available schedule is required for final production.
- **Submission.** Don't forget to allow time to get it there, whether you are submitting to a office in town or via FedEx. It is not unusual to submit two copies by different routes to ensure that it gets there on time.
- **Extensions.** The complexity of most RFPs usually results in questions that get submitted and answered in writing. If there are a lot of questions or the answers require significant changes, they may also include an extension to the deadline. Count on the answers to the questions disrupting the schedule (such as coming out the day before the Red Team review). In some cases there are multiple extensions, not only prolonging the agony, but wreaking havoc with the proposal budget as work typically continues around-the-clock until the deadline comes no matter how many extensions.

The good news is that all proposals (eventually) end. And some of them you win.