

Using Persuasion in Technical Writing to Win the Bid

By Lisa Rehurek

Responding to requests for proposals (RFPs) is a complex activity. While you may only be involved in a small part of the writing, there are many moving pieces that require attention to making sure that the proposal hits the mark. The technical writing component must be complete and accurate, but this is **not** what is going to take you over the finish line.

The good news is you have a live, hot sales opportunity in your hands. Many of the barriers to selling are already gone—whether they need the services or have the money to pay for it. Once an RFP hits the streets, the opportunity is there. The **only** thing you need to do is prove to the evaluation team that you offer the right solution.

The challenge is that you may be a technical expert but not a salesperson. Competence in technical writing is important but it does not persuade buyers. The technical accuracy will not get you the win. While you may have all the qualifications and capabilities to meet the requirements, you are only as good as you present your case. Winning will be a function of how the evaluators perceive your proposal.

There are three important elements to keep in mind when writing technical content for a proposal:

1. The evaluators do not have the same level of expertise that you have (if any!).
2. A confused mind does not buy.
3. People buy based on emotions.

Let's break down these elements. I'll share tips on how to overcome them.

EVALUATORS DO NOT HAVE THE SAME LEVEL OF EXPERTISE

The evaluators will not have the same level of technical expertise that you have. That is why they are hiring you. Maybe one person in the evaluation team will fully understand, but the rest will not. And there is a good chance that procurement officials will be involved, also, with no expertise on the subject.

Tip #1: Keep it simple. You are going to have to oversimplify into layman's terms to keep their attention. Write like you are explaining it to your grandmother.

“This is too easy to read.”—Nobody, ever

(Nielsen Norman Group, after observing more than 4,000 readers in 18 countries and five continents)

Consider this: every 10 years, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education conducts a study to determine how well adults are prepared to function in today's society.¹ According to the last study (2013), **80 percent of readers have either basic or intermediate literacy levels.** That means they can read at no more than an **eighth-grade level.**

Eighty percent! That is a huge number.

Remember, you are the expert, you are many levels above the average reader on your subject matter. It is your job to walk them through the content of your writing and help them understand it. This process gives them a feel of how working with you will be.

A CONFUSED MIND DOES NOT BUY

If you confuse your readers, you're going to lose them. If they have to read a sentence more than once to grasp what you are saying, you will lose them.

Taking this truth into account in your RFP responses will help you to capture the evaluators' attention.

Tip #2: Stop overcomplicating. Do not make your response too complex. If you confuse your readers, they will get lost and start making their grocery list in their head instead of paying attention to your writing. Confusion affects the score your company will receive. It does.

If you are describing a process, describe it step-by-step with basic, high-level statements, followed by the detail. Make it visually easy for them to follow along by using bulleted lists, tables, or graphics. And do **not** include more information than they really need to assess your proposal and give you a favorable score.

PEOPLE BUY BASED ON EMOTION

Nobody, and I mean nobody, gets excited about reading technical writing. Instead, people are drawn in by emotion, by stories. It is your job to create that emotional connection.

Tip #3: Tell a story. People love stories, that is one way to connect to the emotions. In technical writing, stories take the form of testimonials, examples, and case studies. Here is a format you should follow when writing stories:

1. Start with your client's problem.
2. State your proposed solution.
3. End with an outcome that can be quantified such as percentage improvement, increased buy-in, and decreased costs.

Clients value the ability of technical experts to communicate in laymen's terms. Your proposal may be the first experience they have with you. Make a good impression by implementing these three tips.

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¹ Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, or PIAAC).