


## Writing Good Proposals

**CMPE 349 E.F.C. LaBerge**  
This lecture is based on  
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Week 1 1-1



## It all starts with a proposal

- To get work (and get paid) you need to propose something
- So the first piece of writing for engineers is a proposal
- Government organizations and large companies generally ask for goods or services by means of a Request for Proposal (RFP)
- Engineering organizations (and others) respond by means of a formal proposal
- We'll look at the seven characteristics of a good proposal

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Week 1 1-2

## 1. Study the Requirements

- The RFP will tell you what the customer (thinks) they want
- You must read the RFP carefully!
- Ask yourself
  - What are the customer's goals?
  - How can we assist them in achieving their goals? (not ours)
  - Is this product or service within our expertise?
  - ...Or a reasonable growth for us?
- Don't bid things that are too far afield!
- How far is too far?
- ...That's the art!

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Week 1 1-3

## 2. Understand the Client

- You need to do some research
- "If you don't understand the client's problem, you certainly can't propose [something] that will solve the problem." S. Freed *Writing Winning Business Proposals*.
- *Talk to your customer*
  - One-on-one (your company and the customer's representatives) is best...
  - ...but large RFPs may have a more formal process
  - This is generally the role of the Marketing group...
  - ...but engineers need to be involved.
- Who are their decision makers? What are their decision processes like?
- Turn over rocks!

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Week 1 1-4

### 3. Develop an approach

- Once you know what customer *really* wants, develop your approach / solution
- This may be a time for brainstorming!
- A brainstorming session in 1994 is where the concept for AHPLS was born!
- Brutally evaluate your approach
  - Is it practical?
  - What are its benefits and drawbacks?
  - How much will it/should it/can it cost (may be a Fermi problem)?
  - How much will it cost to develop?
  - How long will it take to develop?
  - Caution: do not “drink your own bathwater”!

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Week 1 1-5

### 4. Evaluate your solution

- Will your solution be acceptable to the customer?
- Based on your conversations with the customer?
- Do a dry run evaluation of your solution against the criteria of the RFP
- BE HONEST!
- Developing the proposal itself is time consuming and expensive
- ...is the business to be gained worth the investment?

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Week 1 1-6

## 5. Outshine your competitors

- Duh!
- A proposal is a sales document
- If you have done the previous steps thoroughly and honestly, you can be very positive in your writing!
- Make sure you emphasize your company's strengths
- Make sure you counteract any impression of your company's weaknesses
- Marketing/engineering should also know your competitors...
- ...and their strengths and weaknesses.

## 6. Write the Proposal

- One step, but lots of time and effort
- Do your graphic artifacts first!
- Follow the customer outline / structure **exactly**
- ...even (especially) if you would do it otherwise!
- You will need a WBS / SOW to estimate the costs
- Show the customer that you understand their problem!
- Show your customer that you (and you alone) address their needs in a cost-effective manner.
- Proposals will require both technical and price submissions
- BOTH must be right!

## 7. Review and Improve

- Review the proposal thoroughly, playing the role of a skeptical customer.
- Companies often assemble domain expert teams to review the proposal before submission
- Address all of the concerns listed in the RFP...
- ...and all of the concerns you discovered talking to the customer
- Proofread! Proofread! Proofread!
- Worry about nitpicky details of proposal preparation
- ...the better it looks, the better your chances.
- Make sure it is delivered on time (or early)!

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Week 1 1-9

## Facts about proposal work

- Proposal work is the most intense period of engineering activity
- There is a firm deadline – always too short!
- There are fixed requirements
  - Generally a fixed outline for the proposal itself
  - Plus a set of requirements
  - Plus a desired schedule or list of task
- You can expect very long hours
  - Nights
  - Weekends
  - Holidays
  - Vacations?
- But it can also be the most satisfying.

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