Why POORLY EXECUTED RFPs Create a Severe FINANCIAL BURDEN for Agencies:

THE IMPACT THE WRITTEN WORD PLAYS IN DEVELOPING AND RESPONDING TO GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS

[By FERGAL McGOVERN]

In the universe of government procurement, you can find a lot of online advice about how to write a good response to a request for proposal (RFP). You will not, however, find nearly as much content about how to write the RFP *itself*.
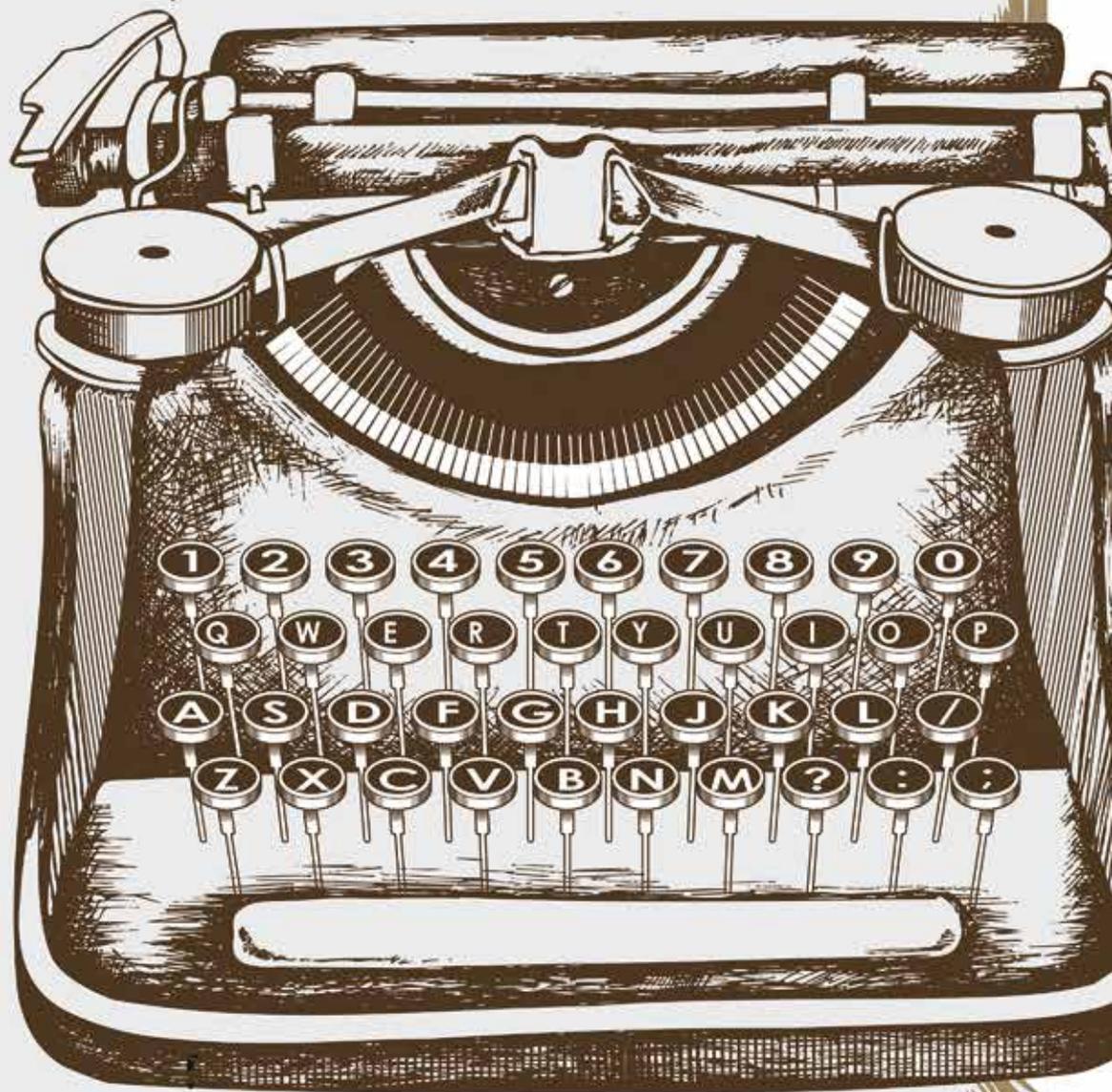
That's too bad, because clear and concise RFPs create win/win scenarios for agencies and contractors alike. Contractors submit proposals that more effectively address requirements, flagging unique benefits and features. Agencies, in turn, receive better-quality, more-responsive proposals. Also, the bidding process becomes more efficient. When bidders know what the government needs and how to respond, the entire process requires less time and fewer resources.

In contrast, poorly executed procurement documents may eliminate the best contenders over mere technicalities—technicalities that are avoidable when instructions are clear. Unclear, overly complex

The business of the U.S. government greatly depends upon a uniform procurement process and a level playing field for all. However, agencies assume a significant share of risk when they issue bad proposals. To quantify the situation, earlier this year, we conducted an analysis of five of the largest current federal RFPs:

"Human Capital and Training Solutions" (HCaTS), General Services Administration (GSA);

"Unified Program Integrity Contractor" (UPIC), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS);

"Research, Measurement, Assessment, Design, and Analysis" (RMADA), HHS;

documents, examining and assessing them based on several factors, including:

Overall readability—An "eighth-grade comprehension level" is considered "acceptable."

Use of passive language—The use of passive voice can omit the "actor."[1] This can often lead to contractual ambiguity (especially in the delivery stage). An "acceptable" amount of passive language should account for no more than 4 percent of a document.

Density of multi-clausal/long sentences—Since overly long passages can cause confusion, no more than 5 percent of the document should contain these sentences.

U.S. Government—Q1, 2016		Clear Writing	Readability		Passive Language		Complex/Long Sentences		Complex Language	
		INDEX	SCORE	RANK	SCORE	RANK	SCORE	RANK	SCORE	RANK
1 HHS UPIC	SOW	2.5	46	1	9%	2	8%	1	3.52	6
2 U.S. Navy	Section L	4.25	40	3	10%	3	17%	6	3.52	5
3 GSA	Section M	5	45	2	10%	4	9%	2	3.78	12
4 HHS RMADA	SOW	6.5	29	10	13%	6	20%	8	3.12	2
5 GSA	Section L	7	36	4	16%	9	24%	12	3.18	3
6 HHS UPIC	Section L	7.5	35	6	18%	11	16%	5	3.70	8
6 U.S. Navy	SOW	7.5	29	10	13%	5	16%	4	3.76	11
6 U.S. Air Force	Section L	7.5	36	4	14%	8	22%	9	3.73	9
9 HHS RMADA	Section L	8.75	32	8	17%	10	23%	10	3.64	7
10 U.S. Navy	Section M	9	28	12	8%	1	25%	13	3.75	10
11 HHS UPIC	Section M	9.25	25	14	18%	12	18%	7	3.44	4
11 U.S. Air Force	SOW	9.25	34	7	19%	13	10%	3	4.29	14
13 U.S. Air Force	Section M	9.5	31	9	19%	14	29%	14	2.80	1
14 HHS RMADA	Section M	11.25	28	12	14%	7	23%	11	4.80	15
15 GSA	SOW	14.5	20	15	20%	15	37%	15	3.96	13

FIGURE 1. FINDINGS

requirements result in unnecessary costs for all parties, and the financial burdens linger well after the award. Muddled award contracts comprising direct extracts from the RFP lead to looseness in program delivery. They also introduce a high probability of "scope creep" and delivery overrun. Contracts that remain ambiguous and untestable cost taxpayer money.

"Joint Range Technical Services" (J-Tech II), U.S. Air Force; and

"Fielded Training Systems Support IV" (FTSS-IV), U.S. Navy.

The combined, estimated value of these five RFPs exceeded $7 billion.

We used an automated analysis to scan more than 300,000 words within these

Density of complexity—In the same vein, overly complex wording can also sow confusion (we calculated this percentage by totaling the number of complex words ÷ total words × 100).

We based our measurements upon published standards from respected third parties, including the Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid readability tests.[2]

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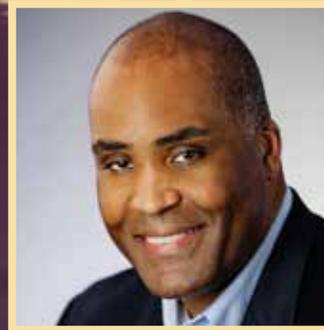
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Ultimately, we concluded that government contract procurement documents generally reflect a poor quality of writing, although the quality varies from agency to agency.

RESULTS IN DETAIL

We focused primarily on three key areas of the RFPs:

The "statement of work" (SOW)–Details the scope and general nature of services/items sought;

Section L, "Instructions"–Provides specific preparation requirements for bidders; and

Section M, "Evaluation Criteria"–Summarizes how the agency intends to assess each bid, with weights attached to factors such as "price" and "materials."

Of these three key areas, Section M has the most potential to influence the government's objectives since it holds the bulk of the requirements. In our most worrying discovery, we found that Section M fared the worst in each of the five RFPs.

We've drawn the following, additional conclusions from our evaluation of the five RFPs:

The average readability score was more than four grade levels higher than recommended for clear writing;

Passive voice was present in 14 percent of sentences–more than three times the recommended amount.

One-fifth of sentences exceeded recommended levels for length–more than four times the recommended levels.

The average complexity score was 3.67–suggesting opportunities to simplify word choice across the document classes.

We show the full detailed results in **FIGURE 1** on page 29. Green indicates best, red indicates worst. Color-coding helps us to understand sites where one or two scores may be dragging down the overall ranking.

Documents from HHS and the U.S. Navy performed best. Across all three document classes, those analyzed from HHS UPIC and the U.S. Navy also conveyed

	Agency Index Rank (Total)	Agency Variance
1 HHS UPIC	19.25	6.75
2 U.S. Navy	20.75	4.75
3 U.S Air Force	26.25	2
4 GSA	26.5	9.5
4 HHS RMADA	26.5	4.75

FIGURE 2.

	Document Class Index Rank (Total)	Agency Variance
1 Section L	35	4.5
2 SOW	40.25	12
3 Section M	44	6.25

FIGURE 3.

higher levels of quality. Of these two RFPs, the U.S. Navy's document was more consistent, with a lower variance between sections (see **FIGURE 2** above).

Among document classes, Section L documents were the easiest to read, and had the least quality variance (see **FIGURE 3** above). Section M documents produced the worst scores:

Readability scores averaged 31.4 (out of 100),

Passive voice accounted for 14 percent of the sections,

Long sentences accounted for 21 percent of the sections, and

Complexity measured at 3.71.

CONCLUSION

By presenting our analysis here, we do not seek to single out any one agency. Instead, we hope to raise general awareness of the existing problems across government procurement content. These are just a representative sample and the issue is not just limited to these contracts. It is suggested that "red" areas in this study (for instance, passive language is far too frequently used among this sample) should be flagged for possible further study and improvement.

You cannot improve unless you can measure. The government needs to introduce systematic checks for clarity and complexity as part of the production cycle. It will lead to less-costly procurements and better program delivery. $\overline{\text{CM}}$

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ENDNOTES

1. I.e., the thing that performs the action in the sentence. In active voice, the actor is the subject of the sentence and performs the action that the receiver will receive–e.g., "ABC Company will construct the new office building." In passive voice, the receiver is the subject of the sentence–e.g., "The new office building will be constructed by ABC Company." The problem is that it takes a second to unravel the passive voice sentence, since the office building is still the receiver of the action (it is not doing the constructing). Active voice is much more clear and concise, and less prone to misinterpretation.

2. These tests were developed by the U.S. Navy to simplify communication. Generally speaking, these tests measure such things as average sentence length and number of syllables per word and use an equation to calculate a "reading ease" score. Text with a higher score is considered very easy to read, and generally consists of short sentences and no words of more than two syllables. *See* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flesch%E2%80%93Kincaid_readability_tests for more information.