



Tips and tools
FOR THE WRITING WORLD

Creating Proposals in “One Voice”

Proposal managers know they want to submit proposals written in one voice — in other words, proposals that convey their company’s brand clearly and unmistakably. That can be a challenge when multiple SMEs are contributing content and different writers are penning different sections. Here’s a guide for getting your writers on the same page.

START WITH YOUR KEY MESSAGES

To ensure your proposal ends up having “one voice,” everyone needs to start with the same basic understanding of the messages you want to convey. Early in your proposal process, take time to make sure your team understands your win themes, discriminators, and evaluation criteria. Show them connections between the portions they will be writing and the overall win strategy. Doing so will help them frame the language they use in their sections with the key words and phrases you’ve included in the win themes.

Be very clear in your instructions about exactly how and why your writers should use these key terms; being unambiguous helps everyone have a common understanding and uniform expectations. It also makes the writing process easier if they can see how their sections fit into the strategy to win the entire opportunity.

CREATE AN EDITORIAL STYLE SHEET

Next, create an editorial style sheet that lists the terminology and writing conventions unique to this bid. Proposal teams sometimes call this their “wall of truth.” Sample entries might include the names of products or services offered in the bid, partners and subcontractors, and unique technologies.

The guide should also address deliberate but unconventional style choices, like capitalizing *Soldier* and *Warfighter*, or using *healthcare* as one word (most dictionaries list it as two words). And it should answer style questions likely to crop up in your proposal, like *US* vs. *U.S.*, *Government* vs. *government*, *figure* vs. *exhibit*, and *10%* vs. *10 percent*.

If you’d like help getting started, check out [Dragonfly’s Proposal Style Sheet Template](#).

CHOOSE A DEFAULT EDITORIAL STYLE

To supplement your style sheet, choose a default style guide, such as the *AP Stylebook*, the *Chicago Manual of Style*, or the *GPO Style Manual*. These comprehensive guides to grammar, style, punctuation, usage, and formatting will answer a range of questions that your writers may occasionally wonder about that aren’t covered in your style guide.

For example, your proposals may occasionally include geographic terms like *The Hague*, *the Netherlands*, *Central America*, and *central Asia*. You can sort out the capitalization questions these terms present via the *AP Stylebook* online without adding pages and pages of geographic entries to every style sheet.

PROVIDE A TEMPLATE FOR SECTIONS

One of the most intimidating things about proposal writing is starting from a blank page. It’s also a surefire way to get proposal sections that look and feel discordant from one another. Avoid these problems by providing section templates. Section templates can include subheadings, graphic requirements (giving suggestions and examples is a huge help), feature benefit tables, or areas for emphasizing callout messages and theme statements.

Using common elements across sections helps proposal content written by multiple authors feel more uniform.

CLARIFY BRAND VOICE

Make sure your writers know your company’s brand standards for voice and tone — in other words, “how you should sound.” For example, maybe you’re supposed to sound casual, friendly, and welcoming. Or clear and decisive. Or innovative and unconventional.



How much will you use first-person (we, us, our) and second-person (you, your) voice? Will you allow contractions?

To help your writers nail your tone of voice, provide clear examples. For instance:

CASUAL, FRIENDLY TONE OF VOICE

instead of this

Grover Co. will ensure that our clients are regularly apprised of industry trends.

write this:

We'll keep you up to speed on industry trends as they happen.

CLEAR, DECISIVE TONE OF VOICE

instead of this

Grover Co. was founded in 1975 with a staff of just two employees. We have since grown into the leading provider of clinical testing for the healthcare industry. Our Healthcare Division now serves over 3,000 clients around the world, and our Healthcare Division represents the largest percentage of Grover Co.'s overall client base and is growing rapidly. Staffing is a close second.

write this:

Grover Co. is the global leader in clinical testing for the healthcare industry, serving over 3,000 organizations worldwide.

DECIDE ON LEVEL OF DETAIL

As your SMEs write, they may each have their own ideas about how detailed the proposal needs to be. In fact, this is a common cause of proposals having many voices.

To help avoid this issue, provide writers with a few examples that show exactly what you expect. Make a point of including explicit examples of what "too detailed" and "too vague" look like. Specify the number of "quantifiables" each author should have in each section. Then, revisit drafts early and often to hone content that's too vague or too detailed.

ESTABLISH A READABILITY STANDARD

Setting readability standards for your proposals is a win-win. They'll help ensure your proposal is easily understood by your evaluators. They'll also dramatically align the tone of your content across different writers.

That's because readability metrics are largely based on word length and sentence length. If you can consistently get your writers to replace words like *consequently* with *thus* — and wordy phrases like *due to the fact that* with *because* — this will go a long way to creating a consistent voice in your proposals.

What should your readability standard be? We recommend seventh to ninth grade on the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level readability scale, or 70+ Flesch Readability scale. To learn more, refer to our [7 Steps to Writing for Readability](#).

FINISH WITH A COPY EDIT

Even with the best preparation, writers aren't necessarily going to get every style point correct. And actually, why should they? Their No.1 job is to create clear, compelling, persuasive content — not stress out over the placement of periods or the details of dashes.

That's why we recommend every proposal get a thorough copy edit before submission. A good copy editor will ensure consistency and accuracy in spelling, grammar, and punctuation, as well as capitalization, hyphenation, and number style. They'll make sure acronyms are spelled out at first reference and figures are labeled correctly and numbered sequentially. They'll also flag formatting snafus, inconsistent data, gaps in logic, and other random errors that have sneaked past your reviewers. (Want more details on [what a copy editor does? Here's our checklist.](#))

In short, a copy editor mitigates your risk of submitting an error-filled proposal — while providing a final smoothing out of voice and tone.

ONE TEAM = ONE VOICE

We all know proposals are written by multiple people. But that doesn't mean they have to look as though they were written by multiple people. With the right preparation and follow-up, you can make sure your proposals are written in one voice — not by several individuals, but by one team.