

Reading an RFP Without Drowning: Triage First, Write Later

How to read a solicitation in about thirty minutes and decide whether to bid before you write a single page. Part of getting ready for contracting and The Business In Development (B.I.D.) Academy.

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This guide describes general practice for reading public solicitations. Every solicitation sets its own rules. Always follow the requirements of the actual document you are responding to.

1 Why You Triage Before You Write

A solicitation can run dozens of pages. If you start writing before you know whether you can win, you can lose a weekend on a bid you were never eligible for. Triage first. Spend thirty minutes deciding whether to bid at all, then commit your writing time only if the answer is yes.

RFP, RFQ, IFB: same idea, different rules

Buyers use different names. An RFP, a request for proposals, weighs price and approach together. An RFQ, a request for quotes, is usually price-focused. An IFB, an invitation for bids, typically goes to the lowest responsive, responsible bidder. The document tells you which one you are reading and how you will be judged, so read that part first.

2 The Three Things to Check First

Three things decide bid or no-bid before you ever read the scope. Find them first.

- 1 The due date, time, and time zone. Late is almost always disqualified, with no appeal. If you cannot realistically finish and submit early, stop here.
- 2 The submission method and format. Portal upload, email, or a sealed paper copy. Page limits, required forms, and file types. Miss the format and a strong bid gets rejected unread.
- 3 The mandatory requirements, the pass-or-fail conditions covered in the next section.

3 Mandatory Requirements: Pass or Fail

Mandatory requirements are the conditions you must meet to be eligible at all. They are not scored. You either clear them or you do not.

- Insurance minimums and bonding.
- Required licenses and certifications.
- Minimum years in business or prior contract experience.
- Registration requirements, such as an active SAM.gov record for federal work or the Texas CMBL for state work.

If you cannot meet one, no proposal fixes it

A mandatory requirement you cannot meet ends the bid. Do not talk yourself past it. Your options are to move on, or to team with a prime contractor who meets it while you subcontract. Both are smart. Writing a proposal you are not eligible for is not.

4 Then Read the Scope, Criteria, and Pricing

Only after the three checks and the mandatory requirements do you invest real reading time.

- The scope of work. What is actually being bought, and whether you can deliver it.
- The evaluation criteria and their weights. This tells you exactly how you will be scored.
- The pricing structure. How they want pricing submitted, and whether it goes in a separate file.

Weight your effort by the points

If technical approach is worth forty points and past performance twenty, your writing time should follow that split. Do not pour hours into a section worth five points while shortchanging the one worth forty.

5 Make the Bid or No-Bid Call

With triage done, the decision is usually clear. Bid when you can meet every mandatory requirement, deliver the scope, submit on time and in the right format, and price it to make sense. If any of those is a no, that is your answer, and it is a good one. A disciplined no-bid frees you for the next opportunity you can actually win.

Note the questions deadline, and watch for addenda

Most solicitations let you ask questions by a set date, and the answers come back as an addendum that can change the requirements. Ask early. Read every addendum. A requirement can change after the solicitation first posts, and missing that change is an easy way to lose.

6 Where to Get Help

Resource	What you do there	Where
SAM.gov	Find and read federal contract opportunities	sam.gov
Electronic State Business Daily	Find State of Texas opportunities	txsmartbuy.com
PV Extension	Help reading a live solicitation and deciding whether to bid	cblilly@pvamu.edu

Bring a real solicitation to PV Extension or The Business In Development (B.I.D.) Academy and we will help you triage it, map your response to the evaluation criteria, and decide whether to bid.

This guide is general educational information from Prairie View A&M University Extension, Community and Economic Development. It is not legal, tax, or procurement advice. For your specific situation, consult the appropriate licensed professional or contracting officer. For more help, contact PV Extension.

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