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Which words kill your best proposal?

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VisibleThread[™]



Analysis and Score Card

We will look at 5 actual Bids
(4 Government, 1 Commercial)

across a number of dimensions...

1. Plain Language

Are we clear in our response?

2. Bad Language

Are we credible?

3. Win Themes

Are we pushing our differentiation?

High score on all three dimensions positions us for a **win**



Low score on either of these dimensions positions us for loss



Who cares? - The Reviewers Perspective

'Plain Language' seeks to simplify written language; the result is clear, unambiguous and strong communication.

Government reviewers clearly understand value, feel confident in vendor's offering due to strength of language & clarity of actor.

Language liability and credibility.

Government reviewers are sensitive to 'market-ese' and will subliminally view over the top claims as a negative. They want proof for claims. They favor a professional & measurable tone.

Win Theme's articulate your business differentiation.

Government reviewers clearly understand differentiation when the themes are clear and consistently re-enforced with benefit statements.

PASS



PASS



PASS



1. Plain Language

Are we clear in our response?



Average words per sentence: **10.5**

Hard Words: **2.9%**

FOG Index (readability): **5.5**

VS



Average words per sentence: **21.6**

Hard Words: **5.11%**

FOG Index (readability): **10.7**

‘Plain Language’ seeks to simplify written language; the result is clear and unambiguous communication.

From: http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/index.cfm

“When the process of freeing a vehicle that has **been stuck** results in ruts or holes, the operator will fill the rut or hole created by such activity before removing the vehicle from the immediate area.”

■ Long Sentence
■ Passive

OR

“If you make a hole while freeing a stuck vehicle, you must fill the hole before you drive away.”

Plain Writing Act of 2010 (Obama signed on Oct 2010), E.O. 12866 & E.O. 12988

<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/plLaw/index.cfm>

Plain Language Analysis for 5 Bid Responses

We scanned these docs



The scans revealed these stats



Project/Document	Size	Readability	Passive Language	Average Sentence Length (words)	Long Sentences	Bad Language # Hits
1. RFP 1 TXZ-Corp_HSHQDC-08-R-00071.doc	2 documents 8896 words	33	6.62%	9	8.61%	47
2. RFP 2 (BO) X-5 Vol 2 TechnicalPart1.docx X-5 Vol 2 TechnicalPart2.docx	2 documents 10687 words 9019 words	44 32	6.42% 15.79%	10 19	10.19% 25.89%	57 55
3. RFP 3 (IN) Vol I Tech XXX_TO4_v13.docx Vol I Tech XXX_TO4_v16.docx Vol I Tech XXX_TO4_v20.docx Vol I Tech XXX_TO4_vFINAL.docx	4 documents 9967 words 12537 words 12099 words 13186 words	31 28 30 35	8.70% 7.71% 3.64% 1.72%	14 14 12 10	18.99% 17.41% 7.28% 6.94%	69 74 74 79
4. RFP 4 (DD) Response to HC1028-08-R-2001.doc	2 documents 9262 words	33	8.58%	14	15.98%	59
5. RFP 5 (UN) University of XYZ Custody Search Technical Proposal.pdf	2 documents 40237 words	29	15.52%	18	22.67%	209

Example 1 – A Response Doc (Beltway-based ISV)

Project/Document	Size	Readability	Passive Language	Average Sentence Length (words)	Long Sentences	Bad Language # Hits
RFP 1 TXZ-Corp_HSHQDC-08-R-00071.doc	2 documents 8896 words	33	6.62%	9	8.61%	47

Readability: **33** (out of 100)

Passive: **6.62%**

Long Sentence: **8.61%**

What they mean?

Readability:

‘Flesch Reading Ease’ index (look for score of at least 50).

Passive: Subject of sentence appears before the verb:

‘Quality is monitored’ vs ‘We monitor quality’, weakens

message

Long Sentence: In excess of 25 words, obscures message

Readability: 33 (out of 100) Passive: 6.62% Long Sentence: 8.61%

- Long Sentence
- Passive

“Unlike current manual processes or home-grown tools, TXZ uses proprietary algorithms and unique visualization capabilities to automatically make rapid sense of disparate global Internet data sets turning reams of data into actionable, valuable network intelligence and thus improving performance, compliance, security, monitoring, and intelligence gathering capabilities.”

“The purpose of this Software Quality Control Plan (SQCP) is to define the procedures and methodologies that **will be employed** by TXZ Network Technologies (TXZ) to assure timely deliveries of TXZ’s applications that meet specified quality standards.”



- **RED-FLAGS:** Long Sentences
Marketing Boilerplate
- **IMPACT:** Complicated. Key messages buried. Hard to digest.

“The purpose of this Software Quality Control Plan (SQCP) is to define the procedures and methodologies that **will be employed** by TXZ Network Technologies (TXZ) to assure timely deliveries of TXZ’s applications that meet specified quality standards.”

OR (better)

“This Software Quality Control Plan (SQCP) defines how TXZ Network Technologies (TXZ) meets these quality standards:

- Uptime of ...
- ISO 1234...

We will deliver applications to *agency* on a timely basis”

OR (better yet)

TXZ Network Technologies (TXZ) meets these quality standards:

- Uptime of ...
- ISO 1234...

Your agency will: *Benefit 1, Benefit 2*”

- 1.) lower word count
- 2.) directed language to agency
- 3.) specific benefits



Example 2 – Vol 2. Two parts, different authors (Top 100 Integrator)

Project/Document	Size	Readability	Passive Language	Average Sentence Length (words)	Long Sentences	Bad Language # Hits
RFP 2 (BO)	2 documents					
X-5 Vol 2 TechnicalPart1.docx	10687 words	44	6.42%	10	10.19%	57
X-5 Vol 2 TechnicalPart2.docx	9019 words	32	15.79%	19	25.89%	55

X-5 Vol 1 Technical Part 1

X-5 Vol 1 Technical Part 2

Similar size documents. Massive difference in clarity with different authors

Readability: 44 vs. 32

Passive: 6.64% vs. 15.79%

Long Sentence: 10.4% vs. 25.89%

Fail



Example 3 – Improvement during Red Team (Med. size Integrator)

Project/Document	Size	Readability	Passive Language	Average Sentence Length (words)	Long Sentences	Bad Language # Hits
RFP 3 (IN)	4 documents					
Vol I Tech XXX_TO4_v13.docx	9967 words	31	8.70%	14	18.99%	69
Vol I Tech XXX_TO4_v16.docx	12537 words	28	7.71%	14	17.41%	74
Vol I Tech XXX_TO4_v20.docx	12099 words	30	3.64%	12	7.28%	74
Vol I Tech XXX_TO4_vFINAL.docx	13186 words	35	1.72%	10	6.94%	79

Volumes v13, v16: very poor.

Volumes v20, FINAL: better.

After each scan, results were shared with Proposal Manager. This resulted in profound improvement...

Sentence length went from 18.99% to 6.92%

Passive language went from 8.7% to 1.73%

Pass



Example 4 (Gov) & 5 (Commercial RFP for Financial Services)

Project/Document	Size	Readability	Passive Language	Average Sentence Length (words)	Long Sentences	Bad Language # Hits
RFP 4 (DD)	2 documents					
Response to HC1028-08-R-2001.doc	9262 words	33	8.58%	14	15.98%	59
RFP 5 (UN)	2 documents					
University of XYZ Custody Search Technical Proposal.pdf	40237 words	29	15.52%	18	22.67%	209

	Readability	Passive	Long Sentences
RFP 4 (Gov)	33	8.58%	15.98%
RFP 5 (Commercial)	28	15.8%	23.29%

Poor Results



To remind...

'Plain Language' seeks to simplify written language; the result is clear, unambiguous and strong communication.

Government reviewers clearly understand value, feel confident in vendor's offering due to strength of language & clarity of actor.

Simple steps to better quality in your RFP responses:

1. Reduce / Eliminate Long Sentences, aim for 5%
2. Reduce / Eliminate Passive Language, aim for 2%
3. The result will improve your readability, aim for 50+

2. Bad Language

Are we credible?

Sloppy, 'waffle' or legally risky language raises questions around the document. Credibility, Liability & Delivery implications.

Credibility killers

Wishy-washy language to avoid:

- “Can provide.”
- “Might provide.”
- “May deliver.”
- “We are committed.”
- “We are pleased to.”
- “Uniquely qualified.”

Liability red flags

Terms that convey legal implications or suggest over-commitment:

- “Expert.”
- “We guarantee.”
- “Seamless.”
- “Best of breed.”
- “Best practices.”
- “State of the art.”

Delivery trap

Words and phrases that are difficult to verify or measure:

- “As appropriate.”
- “As necessary.”
- “Full service.”
- “Quality focused.”
- “Top-quality.”
- “Efficiently.”

Bad Language Analysis for 5 Bid Responses

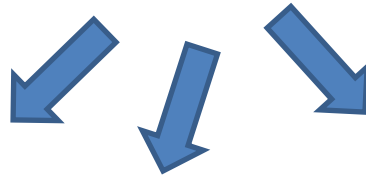
These docs were scanned

This is the no of hits we found

Using a dictionary of pre-fined words /phrases

	Project/Document	Size (Words)	Bad Language # Hits	Density of Ranking	
1.	RFP 1				
2.	TXZ-Corp_HSHQDC-08-R-00071.doc	8896	47	0.52833	2
	RFP 2 (BO)				
	X-5 Vol 2 TechnicalPart1.docx	10687	57	0.53336	3
3.	X-5 Vol 2 TechnicalPart2.docx	9019	55	0.60982	6
	RFP 3 (IN)				
	Vol I Tech XXX_TO4_v13.docx	9967	69	0.69228	9
	Vol I Tech XXX_TO4_v16.docx	12537	74	0.59025	4
4.	Vol I Tech XXX_TO4_v20.docx	12099	74	0.61162	7
	Vol I Tech XXX_TO4_vFINAL.docx	13186	79	0.59912	5
	RFP 4 (DD)				
5.	Response to HC1028-08-R-2001.doc	9262	59	0.63701	8
	RFP 5 (UN)				
	University of XYZ Custody Search Technical Proposal.pdf	40237	209	0.51942	1

Using a dictionary of pre-fined words /phrases



and this is a small sample of the

language identified...



“We **enthusiastically** look forward to leveraging our past experience implementing successful government projects and to applying technology solutions to solve business issues.”

“This initiative presents the XYZ Agency and ABC Company with a new and exciting opportunity, one that will take client service to the **next level.**”

Why Bad?

Enthusiastically

Grovelling tone damages credibility. Rephrase. Just state the facts

Next level

Really trite. Re-phrase this and state measurable evidence of what this means. If you can't state evidence simply lose the statement as it's waffle.

Fail



Beware the Claims in Resumes

“He is an experienced computer systems engineer holding several Microsoft Certifications in systems engineering and network administration. His background as a network analyst and global network security engineer is **unparalleled.**”

“He is a premier **expert** in all aspects of voice domain technology.”

Fail



Some Recommendations for your resumes:

1. Is anybody really ‘unparalleled’? Nope! Kill it
2. List the exact certifications, forget the trite phrases
3. Kill the word ‘expert’ It is a liability trap, replace with stated achievements that are defensible.

Example 3 – Over the top indefensible claims

“XYZ has designed, implemented, and supports (manages), local, regional, national, and global network solutions utilizing **best-in-class** components and software.”

“The ABC teammates are **uniquely qualified** and represent the best of industry for this work. “

Fail



Some Recommendations for your boilerplate:

1. ‘best-in-class’ is trite, Kill it
2. List the exact evidence for the claim
3. Kill ‘uniquely qualified’ and the top ten OTT phrases. Replace with short form achievements in bullet or list form.

3. Win Themes

Are we communicating our differentiation?

Example 1

This is what the stated
win themes were...



The screenshot shows an email client window with a scroll bar at the top. The email content is as follows:

Themes

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Fri 7/1/2011 1:05 PM
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: RE: Questions, Answers, and Amendments for Task Order [REDACTED]

The themes are:

- Partnership using proactive and involved task order management
- Depth of resource pool for surge support and backfilling
- Mature and repeatable processes for management
- Fully qualified key staff (all proposed staff are key, plus TP PM is key)

Example 1

Partnership with [redacted] (5 Items)

involved	2
partnership	5
partnership with [redacted]	1
proactive	5
task order management	6

Depth of resource pool for surge support and backfilling (13 Items)

back filling	<input type="checkbox"/>
back up	2 <input type="checkbox"/>
back-filling	<input type="checkbox"/>
back-up	2 <input type="checkbox"/>
backfilling	<input type="checkbox"/>
backup	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
depth	6 <input type="checkbox"/>
resource	12 <input type="checkbox"/>
resource pool	<input type="checkbox"/>
resources	9
surge	11
surge capability	1
surge support	6

Mature and repeatable processes (6 Items)

mature	
mature process	
mature processes	
repeatable	2
repeatable process	
repeatable processes	



This is what we scanned for...





Fully qualified key staff (5 Items)

experience	50
fully qualified staff	
PM	2
qualified staff	1
TP	

Example 1

[-] Partnership with [redacted] (5 Items)		
involved	2	
partnership	5	
partnership with [redacted]	1	
proactive	5	
task order management	6	
[-] Depth of resource pool for surge support and backfilling (13 Items)		
back filling		<input type="checkbox"/>
back up	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
back-filling		<input type="checkbox"/>
back-up	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
backfilling		<input type="checkbox"/>
backup	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
depth	6	<input type="checkbox"/>
resource	12	<input type="checkbox"/>
resource pool		<input type="checkbox"/>
resources	9	
surge	11	
surge capability	1	
surge support	6	

[-] Fully qualified key staff (5 Items)		
experience	50	
fully qualified staff		
PM	2	
qualified staff	1	
TP		

[-] Mature and repeatable processes (6 Items)		
mature		
mature process		
mature processes		
repeatable	2	
repeatable process		
repeatable processes		

Here is what we found

- **General Low Coverage**
- **RED-FLAG: Mature and Repeatable Process**
- **RED-FLAG: Fully Qualified Staff**



In summary

1. Plain Language

Are we clear in our response?

2. Bad Language

Are we credible?

3. Win Themes



Are we pushing our differentiation?

High score on all three dimensions positions us for a **win**



Low score on either of these dimensions positions us for **loss**



-  [Which words kill your best proposal?](#)
- Fed News Radio: [VisibleThread raises red flags in contract proposals](#)
-  [VisibleThread receives Gartner Cool Vendor Award](#)
- Fed Plain Language Website: <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/index.cfm>

Thanks

Mail fergal.mcgovern@visiblethread.com

Reference:

Bad Language Dictionary Used

Liability and Contract Risk

Unsupportable claims superlatives overly inclusive unnecessarily negative firm guarantees not required in the T&Cs. If in your enthusiasm to secure the contract you inadvertently make a promise or guarantee that you can't deliver on then you are exposed to legal action or re-negotiation at a later stage. Review all statements that may involve unprovable obligations or over the top assertions.

all encompassing
anywhere

Is this measurable? Re-phrase if so otherwise lose it.

Are you sure this applies 'anywhere'? Look at what you're saying and figure does it need re-phrasing? Are you open to attack?

as may be required

Under what conditions? Very open-ended from a legal standpoint. Re-phrase

constantly

Opens you to attack. Re-state this in measurable terms. If turnaround time state the time. If you cannot re-phrase this then lose it.

customary

Very loose need stronger definition under what circumstances

each and every

Re-state this in measurable terms. If you cannot re-phrase this then lose it. This phrase is often superfluous.

assure

This implies a contractual obligation. What are you ensuring? Are you sure you can stand over it? Re-phrase this if possible.

ensure

This implies a contractual obligation. What are you ensuring? Are you sure you can stand over it? Re-phrase this if possible.

insure

Are you insuring something? Using the phrase in the right way? Look to re-phrase if not.

everywhere

Are you sure this applies 'everywhere'? Look at what you're saying and figure does it need re-phrasing? Are you open to attack?

fastest

Is this defined in a measurable way? Who/what are you comparing with?Need to re-phrase.

fully

'Fully' can become a guarantee that you may need to stand over. Are you sure the intent of this sentence/statement is the case under all circumstances? Consider re-phrasing.

greatest

Is this defined in a measurable way? Need to re-phrase.

guarantee

This implies a contractual obligation. What are you guaranteeing? Are you sure you can stand over it? Re-phrase this if possible.

lowest

Is this defined in a measurable way? Who/what are you comparing with?Need to re-phrase.

highest

Is this defined in a measurable way? Who/what are you comparing with?Need to re-phrase.

most

Is this defined in a measurable way? Who/what are you comparing with?Need to re-phrase.

never

'Never' can become a guarantee that you may need to stand over. Are you sure the intent of this sentence/statement is the case under all circumstances? Consider re-phrasing.

reasonable and

Is this defined in a measurable way? Who's definition of reasonable? Need to re-phrase with a concrete notion and boundaries if possible.

reasonable

Is this defined in a measurable way? Who's definition of reasonable? Need to re-phrase with a concrete notion and boundaries if possible.

safest

Is this defined in a measurable way? Who/what are you comparing with?Need to re-phrase.

expert

Be careful of 'expert'. In the context of personel bios and resumes look to remove this. Re-phrase instead with evidence of expertise qualifications. It is rare that someone can be truly considered a world-expert. That person will be open to attack post bid-win in case of any issues.

expertise

Be careful of 'expertise'. In the context of personel bios and resumes look to re-phrase instead with evidence of expertise qualifications. It is rare that someone can be truly considered a world-expert and that person will be open to attack post bid-win in case of any issues.

Clichés and Professionalism

Trite statements and claims damage your professionalism. Review all statements and either put hard evidence from past bids to back up your claim or remove the superlatives.

seamless	Comes across as marketing boilerplate. Damages credibility. Look to either drop or rephrase with evidence.
seam-less	Comes across as marketing boilerplate. Damages credibility. Look to either drop or rephrase with evidence.
turnkey	Comes across as marketing boilerplate. Damages credibility. Look to either drop or rephrase with benefit statement of what it is you are really looking to communicate.
turn-key	Comes across as marketing boilerplate. Damages credibility. Look to either drop or rephrase with benefit statement of what it is you are really looking to communicate.
state of the art	Comes across as market-ese. Damages credibility. Look to either drop or rephrase with benefit statement or measurable features. Rephrase.
state-of-the-art	Comes across as market-ese. Damages credibility. Look to either drop or rephrase with benefit statement or measurable features. Rephrase.
uniquely qualified	Can you back this up? rarely is somebody uniquely qualified state the actual achievements
unique	Are you sure you are 'unique'? Why? This comes across as trite & market-ese in many cases. Remove it & state the evidence that makes you or your offering unique.
uniquely	Are you sure you are 'uniquely' doing something? Why? This comes across as trite & market-ese in many cases. Remove it & state the evidence that makes you or your offering unique.
unparalleled	Likely a trite claim & market-ese remove it otherwise state the evidence and drop the 'unparalleled' word. It simply comes across as not being credible.
unmatched	Likely a trite claim & market-ese remove it otherwise state the evidence and drop the 'unmatched' word. It simply comes across as not being credible.
enthusiastically	Groveling tone damages credibility. Rephrase. Just state the facts
best of breed	Seriously? State facts appears to reviewers as a lift form a marketing brochure. Damages the tone.
best-of-breed	Seriously? State facts appears to reviewers as a lift form a marketing brochure. Damages the tone.
best in class	Seriously? State facts appears to reviewers as a lift form a marketing brochure. Damages the tone.
best-in-class	Seriously? State facts appears to reviewers as a lift form a marketing brochure. Damages the tone.
ground breaking	Really trite. Re-phrase this and state measurable evidence of what this means. If you can't state evidence simply lose the statement as it's waffle.
next level	Really trite. Re-phrase this and state measurable evidence of what this means. If you can't state evidence simply lose the statement as it's waffle.
world class	Really trite. Re-phrase this and state measurable evidence of what this means. If you can't state evidence simply lose the statement as it's waffle.
world-class	Really trite. Re-phrase this and state measurable evidence of what this means. If you can't state evidence simply lose the statement as it's waffle.

Deliverability

Delivery Cost: Requirement statements that are not testable or measurable may result in unintended consequences to include: product/system defects components built outside acceptable tolerances systems that meet the proposal guidelines but not the intent of the SOW or RFP.

as appropriate	Under what circumstances. Very loose and non-specific. Need to re-phrase.
as necessary	Under what circumstances. Very loose and non-specific. Need to re-phrase.
countless	Most things in life are measurable. Reviewers treat this as fudge and non-specific. Re-phrase with numbers.
full service	Ensure this is defined in terms of measurable numbers. Re-phrase.
quality focussed	Rephrase so that you emphasise evidence of this.
top quality	Trite. Show evidence using numbers. Re-phrase.
efficient	What measurements to demonstrate this efficiency? Is it clear. Re-phrase if not.
such as	Is your list fully inclusive? Tighten it by including all aspects and drop 'such as' if possible.
timely	How do you measure timely? Re-phrase with numbers.

Credibility

Grovelling style statements. Frequently used incorrect English. Statements that can have very poor tone.

irregardless	Nonsense word that is often used. Use 'regardless' in the correct context
hopefully	Often either means the author is hopeful or the subject of the phrase is hopeful. Re-write this.
anxious	Implies negative sentiment use 'eager' instead eg: 'we are eager to...'
committed to	Reviewers assume you are committed to provide something. Remove it & cut your word count.
pleased to	Damages your credibility. Whether you are happy to provide something is incidental. Remove it & cut your word count.
happy to	Damages your credibility. Whether you are happy to provide something is incidental. Remove it & cut your word count.
can provide	Be definitive. Re-phrase to communicate what it is you will or will not do.
may provide	Be definitive re-phrase with measurable deliverables in certain timeframes.
might deliver	Be definitive re-phrase with measurable deliverables in certain timeframes.
bells and whistles	Market-ese of the worst type. Remove.
are confident	If you are not confident there's some serious issues! This is assumed and does nothing to help your case. Remove it and cut your word count.
delighted to	Eliminate this. It goes without saying. State what you will do.