Transport
for NSW

Strengthen Your Response

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NSW GOVERNMENT

Contents

About this video series

The NSW Government is committed to supporting economic participation and social outcomes, developing skills and creating jobs for NSW citizens. This means building a diverse supply base by enabling small and medium enterprises, social enterprises, disability enterprises and Aboriginal businesses to engage with procurement opportunities. Numerous policies reflect these commitments, including the *Small and Medium Enterprise and Regional Procurement Policy 2021*.

We recognise that our supply chains are complex, and opportunities are not always with the NSW Government but through our supply chains, e.g. with principal contractors.

This video series supports diverse businesses in applying for infrastructure project tenders. The guidance in the videos comes from 'real life' examples of tender documentation and minimum requirements for infrastructure procurement opportunities in NSW. This series was developed by Transport for NSW and iClick2Learn, a Dubbo-based social enterprise certified under Social Traders.

About the author

Natalie is a tender and grant writer and assessor. She has helped raise over 45 million dollars for services and product submissions while working with enterprises, small businesses and the not-for-profit sector. Natalie holds an 82.5% grant and 94.2% tender success rate. She teaches and mentors people to apply for tenders and grants and establish grant and tender businesses. Natalie is the author of 'Win the Grant' being published in May 2022 and 'Win the Tender' scheduled for late 2022.

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Contributors

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Strengthen your response

The final part of preparing your responses is editing your drafts and compiling your documents for an independent review.

At this point, you will go through the document to identify your strengths, your weaknesses and any missed opportunities where you can add value.

It's helpful to read your tender response and absorb the information with focus. Ask experienced team members to review the sections that match their skills. For example, if your accountant drafted the budget, have your internal finance person look at the budget or vice versa.

Remember, assessors are under pressure. They have limited time to assess documents, so they must read, absorb and understand your information as effectively and efficiently as possible. Luckily, there are steps you can take to help assessors find the information they need easily and quickly.

The following three-step approach helps you critically assess your tender response. It's not a checklist, but rather a way of reading through while focusing on specific points.

Step 1: Strategic quality review

If you're following the video series, recall the strategic review you did in video 7. The information below was given in that handout and is listed here again as a reminder. If you haven't undertaken the strategic review, do that now.

Part of the editing process is to undertake three strategic reviews. The first of is a strategic quality review, followed by a content and editing review and finishing with an independent mock assessment. All these reviews rely on you having the time. If you don't have time to do all three, you should at minimum do a content and editing review.

This review critically assesses if you have the key information that aligns to the prospective client's core messages, priorities and values. Refer to your response outline and answer map to ask:

- Have you demonstrated that you understand their requirements?
- Have you demonstrated your experience and knowledge?

- Have you reinforced the value that your solution offers?
- Is it clear what your approach is and that you can implement the proposed solution?

Re-watch video 2 and 4 in this series to refresh on the importance of tender requirements.

Highlight the words that must survive edits. For example, if the prospective client consistently uses the term ‘quality processes and systems,’ don’t edit this out. You’re not parroting the client’s words. You’re reinforcing that you understand what they want.

Step 2: Content and editing review

Below is a good checklist for you to complete before an independent person critiques your submission. Double check it before you submit the tender response as you will adjust your response along the way.

As you go through this list, you can make changes as you go, or keep a list of changes to make. Either way, it’s advisable to keep notes of changes made. For example, if you’re using track changes, you’ll have a history of the changes and comments. Now, you have a quick way to look through the changes to identify if you did or didn’t make that change.

Response format

Many tender documents provide a template, generally called ‘tender forms and schedules,’ which is generally a Microsoft Word document. You may also find a budget template as a separate document, generally a Microsoft Excel template.

If you’re responding to a tender where there is no defined template, carefully consider how you will layout the response.

- Present the information visually
- Break-up the tender requirements

Designing the layout is called proposal storyboarding. The simplest way to do this would be using A4 pages and handwriting the main points and what will be on each page. You can then blu-tac these to the wall and analyse how the information flows. For example, it would make sense to talk about workplace health and safety practices after you introduced your client solution scope of works.

Cross-referencing

Check the appendix/attachment numbering and referencing if the document is correct. Go through each mentioned of an appendix or attachment and the reference number, e.g. Appendix A. Check that this is the correct reference.

If you provided relevant references in one question, make sure you've covered it in the related question. An example would be if you've mentioned your safe working method statements in a response to a question about the technical solution. Check that in the workplace health and safety question you've mentioned safe working method statements in that response.

Contradictions and missing information

Check that you haven't contradicted yourself. For example, you've stated in a response that you have identified a risk and you give an overview of the mitigation strategy. Now, check your risk management plan to make sure what you've said in your response matches the plan.

Check every mention of a number or statistic. Make sure the additional information you're providing doesn't contradict this, or that you haven't used a different number for the same thing. For example, you've stated 15 staff in one response, then in another response you stated 12 staff. It might be that you have 12 on-ground staff because the other 3 are management staff, but was that made clear, or does it appear to be a contradiction?

Look at your tables and supporting visuals. They should support the response, not be the response. Check that you've talked about them in your response and that what you've said matches what's in the table or visual.

Visuals

Visuals help break up long bodies of text. Visuals include images, graphs, diagrams and photos. They give the brain time to rest. You're giving your assessors a lot of information at once. A tip here is to plan your visuals as soon as you can because they will take time to develop.

The key to your visual is to be clear about what the message. For example, if your key message is to demonstrate time saving, then check. How does the visual do this? Does it make it clear what the time saving is?

If you're not using a graphic design to help with visual design of your proposal, research universal design and proposal design. There are quite a few good resources out there.

Top tip is to make sure you balance visuals in your response. Visuals should only be used to visually represent information or reinforce an important message. They are not replacements for explanations or details. One way to assess this is to put your document in multiple view screen and zoom out. If all you're seeing are walls of text, think about how you can break this up. Use process diagrams to show processes, steps or stage.

Critically assess the visuals and the value, or lack of value they add to your response.

- Are your visuals appropriately captioned so I know what it represents and why I should look at it?
- Do the visuals add context and help absorb complex information?
- Are they high enough resolution to read in and zoom in if the assessor wants to?
- Do the 'blink test'. You blink every 3 to 5 seconds. This is a test that's used by web designers as a challenge to see if the website conveys the key message in 3 to 5 seconds. Let's try it. Close your eyes, open them look at the image for 3-5 seconds, or by the time you've blinked and then look away. Write down what you recall and go back to the image. Does it convey your key messages? Is there anything that's distracting the viewer? See if you can make it clearer and make changes to 'pass the blink-test'.

Logical flow

Check your responses are structured logically. Think of it as a series of steps. Are they in the right order? For example, you wouldn't talk about your risk management practices and how your cleaning staff undertake a site induction as the last point on a list of ways that you will work with the client to ensure health safe working practices are implemented. Site inductions would be one of the first things on the list.

Review the way the questions are asked, and the additional tips provided.

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Headings and subheadings

Take note of how the prospective client numbers their document. Use the same style format. A lot of businesses have a branding style manual. If you have one, you can follow it. In some cases, you must. However, consider this: if the assessor reading your submission is familiar with the client's numbering system, would it be easier for them to find the information, read it and absorb it in the familiar format? Generally, when people are familiar with something it helps reduce their cognitive load to navigate the document. This means they'll focus their brain power on your responses, not how to find information. So, consider adopting the same numbering sequence the prospective client uses in their tender documents.

If you're developing and designing a document, rather than using your prospective client's forms, do not make your document look like the prospective client's. It needs to stand out as your distinct work by using your logo and colour scheme. This is just about replicating the structure so it's easier from a referencing and orienting perspective.

Consistency of terminology, style and grammar

Check the words you regularly use. For example, some might use the word 'tenderer.' However, in this video and resource series, we've chosen 'prospective client.' If the tender documents use a word like 'performance indicators' but you're used to saying, 'success measures,' check you have used their term consistently.

Also check words you've caught yourself capitalising. Look at how you've referenced testimonials, is it bold and italic, or just italic?

Have you used correct spelling of the tender and prospective client's name? Have you mentioned another organization because you cut and pasted from another tender?

Punctuation is important. That's why it's useful to read the response out loud. Where you choose to use a comma, or a semi-colon can impact your message.

Write for the readers

The person reading it isn't you. They don't have the same depth of knowledge and information about the business. Unfortunately, many writers make assumptions about who is reading the tender and they fall short of providing the level of detail that's needed. Other times, they use terminology that the assessors and prospective client finds unfamiliar. Check your response outline and the terminology documented. Is this the terminology you're using? If you're sharing technical information, how might a non-technical person understand this better?

You should expect a variety of people to assess your tender. The more complex and bigger the requirements, the more diverse the expertise will be. You'll likely have the client's procurement manager reading your submission as well as people who have specific expertise in the areas identified in the evaluation criteria. Keep your response to what the question is asking. Reference benefits or the things you do but save the detail for the relevant question. For example, don't expand on your environmental quality assurance processes in a question about your capability. If it's relevant, give enough information to give a picture and then expand on this in the environmental question.

People often feel they are repeating themselves in tenders. Usually, that's because they're providing too much information in the wrong areas. When questions are scored against the question scoring matrix, it's important the information is directly relevant to the question, not just closely related.

The power of 'so what?'

As you read your responses, ask, 'so what? What does this mean? How does this help the client? Asking 'so what?' will help ensure you're not sharing information without contextualizing and demonstrating the result.

Stats and stories support statements

This is a statement I developed to reinforce the importance of evidence via stats and the demonstration of your approach through testimonials or case studies. Otherwise, the statements you make are just your opinions.

Statistics demonstrate results while case studies demonstrate how you implemented, modified or improved work through a similar contract.

Ask yourself:

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- Have you included sufficient statistics, so your statement has value?
- Have you chosen a relevant case study that supports the key messages your client is seeking, and the key message you need to address the question?
- Have you only included relevant information? Remember they don't need the history or background. Keep it brief and on-message.

Sentence length

Try to keep your sentences to an average of 15 words. The more complex the information, the shorter the sentences. Short sentences increase readability and reduce filler words. This increases the brain's ability to absorb new information and reduces your word count.

For sentences longer than 15 words, critically assess if you can shorten or break into two sentences. Sometimes you'll need a longer sentence. But by assessing, you're more likely to deliver a clearer response.

If you're listing more than 3 things, use dot points. This works if you're restricted by words but may not work if you have one page as the response constraint. Dot points also increase negative space which gives the assessor's brain time to pause and absorb.

Paragraph length

Long paragraphs don't give the brain time to stop and absorb. For submissions, paragraphs between 50 – 100 words are easier to read. The more complex the information, the easier you need to make it for the brain to absorb. Check your paragraphs: is there a mix of short and long sentences? If there is a series of long sentences, can you break them up to improve readability?

Where possible, keep paragraphs to one idea or theme. You can bridge between one paragraph and the next by showing the link between the two. For example, at the end of a paragraph you could say, 'now, we'll move onto step 2.' However, if you were going to talk about Step 1 and Step 2 in the one paragraph, it might be too much information for the assessor to absorb. It makes logical sense to list all the steps and descriptions of those steps in different paragraphs with headings.

If you want a message to stand out, adopt a copywriting approach. Place the one to two short sentences in their own a paragraph.

Review how you open and close paragraphs. Do your openings make statements, followed by more information, and then come to a summary or a bridge to the next paragraph? These approaches help information flow.

Strip out filler words

If you've reviewed your responses and kept to shorter sentences, you'll start to see regular filler words. Words like 'that' are common. I originally included filler words 'very' and 'actually' which I removed during my first read-through edit. It takes practice, but you will pick up on filler words when you're more conscious. Most software systems identify filler words you can remove to increase clarity.

Words like 'aim' and 'want' weaken your response. Don't say 'we aim.' Say 'we will' or 'our plan demonstrates.'

Search for words that end in i-n-g. Reframe them to use active language. For example:

'We're focused on strengthening the departments' change to...'

'This approach strengthens your ...'

Will

Should

Wish

Actually

We

Really

Very

Are

Want

Aim

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That

Believe

There / There is

There are

Currently

Search for these words and see if you can remove them:

of

in

to

for

was

ing

e.g. In order to … becomes To… That's 2 words and 9 characters saved.

Be specific

Check if your language is specific enough. There are words we use that generalise our statements and dilute the strength of our message. For example, sentences like 'We've done inductions a few times.' This statement is subjective. As an assessor, it doesn't give me confidence that you know what you're doing. However, saying 'We have used this induction process consistently across six different projects', gives me better insight. It's more specific and gives me more confidence in your experience.

Spelling and grammar

STOP. Don't scan over this. I know this is something you'd expect to see in a writing tip list, but don't assume you won't make this mistake. I've seen substantial errors made that change the context of the response. One memorable example was when someone wrote in response to a workplace health and safety question that they were 'complacent'. I'm sure they meant to say compliant, but they didn't score well in that question. When something like this happens in a tender response, you generally find additional errors throughout.

A top tip I have is to ask someone to sit in front of you, close their eyes, and listen closely to your words. Read your responses. You'll pick up more errors this way than just by reading. You can also ask the listener to stop you when something is confusing. Highlight that area to review. If you're reading aloud alone, record yourself and then go for a walk while listening.

Lists: numbers or bullet points?

When you see something in a numbered list, your brain tells you that there is an order. Either it's a sequential order or priority order. Consider using a maximum of five to seven items on a list. If you want to increase the assessor's ability to remember, have a maximum of three.

When you use dot points, you are identifying that these items have a collective purpose, but there is no order. You can also use different dot point styles. For example, if you want to reinforce benefits, you could use ticks to list all the benefits the client receives by selecting your solution.

Choose the right approach for your lists.

Budget

Are all the formulas correct? Do the figures have explanation notes, if required? If there's a financial table, do those figures match? Do the figures in your budget match the figures discussed in your response?

Appendices/attachments

Check your cross-referencing. Make sure the right numbered appendices/attachments correspond with the numbering you've used in your tender submission. If you have an attachment that supports a specific question, it can be helpful to give it an extended document name with the corresponding question number and name.

If your appendices/attachments are considerable, add a table of contents page that lists all the documents and their corresponding questions.

Step 3: Independent critical analysis

Ideally, you would have a few people critically reviewing your tender response. It's helpful to use the evaluation criteria and ask them to rank you on those factors.

Ask them to read the document and note:

Any areas they may have been confused

Information that was hard to absorb

Moments when they thought 'what does that mean?'

Terminology they didn't understand

To write down the main one or two things they took away from the response

Reflect on their notes and your approach. This isn't about saying you should change things. Perhaps there's a very clear reason the reviewer doesn't understand the terminology, but the client will. This is about reflecting on feedback and asking yourself if something needs to be improved. For example, perhaps the reviewer was confused because your sentences were too long.

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