

American Society of
Civil Engineers (ASCE)

Maine Section

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Proposal Preparation for Project Managers

- Preparing proposals may not be your top priority, but it is important for your firm.
- Well-prepared proposals can lead to new work, and that is always a top priority.
- Poorly-prepared proposals do not win, and they reflect badly on your firm.
- The insights in this presentation should help you prepare better proposals.

The main idea of this presentation...

- “I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English...it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in.”

Mark Twain

- “Learning to write in clear, concise English is not that difficult.”

Charlie Martin

Agenda

1. A brief look at words that often get mixed up.
1. Some common errors in English grammar.
1. Insights on preparing winning proposals.
4. Writing dynamic cover letters.
5. Discussion and questions...as time allows.

Writing Experience of Charlie Martin

- 20 years working for engineering and construction companies writing:
 - Statements of Qualifications (SOQ)
 - Responses to Requests for Proposals (RFP)
 - Cover Letters
 - Project Descriptions
 - Engineering Reports and Specs
 - Brochures and Newsletters
 - News Releases
 - Website Narratives

Experience, cont.

- Current business providing writing and editing services to:
 - Architects
 - Engineers
 - Contractors
 - Developers
 - Subcontractors
 - Visit www.martinwriting.com
for a list of clients and references

Agenda Item # 1.

Words That Often Get Mixed Up

- **Affect** is a verb meaning “to influence.”
The addition of chlorine affects the taste of water.
- **Effect** is usually a noun meaning “result.”
The addition of chlorine has an effect on the taste of water.
- **Effect** sometimes can be a verb meaning “to bring about” or “to cause something to happen.”
Combining chlorine and sodium effects a chemical change in which salt is formed.

- **Anymore** is an adverb meaning “now.”
Their firm is not practicing architecture anymore.
- Use “**any more**” to emphasize something extra.
I don't want any more coffee this morning.

- **All ready** means “all set.”
We are all ready to leave for the cruise.
- **Already** means something has taken place.
The boat already left the dock.
- **a lot...***We've done a lot of projects like this.*
- **alot...**Do not use. It is not a word.

- **All together** means “everyone at the same time” or “all in a group.”
We are going out to dinner all together.
- **Altogether** means “thoroughly” or “wholly” or “completely.”
That’s an altogether different problem.
- **Farther** is used for physical distance.
New York City is farther from Maine than Boston.
- **Further** means “more” or “to a greater extent.”
We are not going to discuss this any further.

- **Fewer** is used with things you can count.
Sign at check-out counter: "Fewer than ten items."
- **Less** is used with things that can't be counted.
He has less sense than his brother.
- **Less** is also used with time.
There are less than two minutes left in the game.
- **Less** is also used with the word "one."
That's one less thing we have to think about.

- **Assure** means “to give confidence to” or to “reassure.”
I assure you that all precautions have been taken.
- **Ensure** means “to make sure, safe or certain” or “to guarantee.”
The windows of the limo were bullet proof to ensure the safety of the occupants.
- **Insure** means to procure insurance.
It usually makes sense to insure your home and your automobile with the same company.

Note, however, that the dictionary shows all three of these words as synonyms in their second and third meanings.

- **its...**is a singular possessive pronoun.
A construction company usually leaves its major equipment on site.
- **it's...**is a contraction meaning “it is.”
It's normal for a construction company to leave its major equipment on site.
- **percent...**is used with a number.
About fifty percent of sales are lost because of not listening to the client.
- **percentage...**is used when there is no number.
A percentage of the proceeds will go to charity.

- **principal...**can be an **adjective** meaning “first in importance.”

The principal investigator from DEP did not want to approve the landfill closure.

- **principal...**can be a **noun** meaning “the main person or thing.”

A principal of the firm will be attending the interview.

- **principle...**is a **noun** meaning “a fundamental truth or rule.”

The principles of bridge design have been developed over a long period of time.

- **regardless / irregardless...**

Regardless of what you may think, “irregardless,” like “ain’t,” is not standard English!

- **than...**is a conjunction used in comparisons.

One firm was more qualified than the other.

- **then...**is an adverb showing time.

First we will survey the site; then we will cut down the trees.

- **their...**is a plural possessive pronoun.
Construction companies usually leave their major equipment on the job site.
- **there...**shows place.
Please put the plans over there on the conference table.
- **there...**can also be used at the beginning of a sentence.
There are a number of different approaches to the problem.
- **they're...**means “they are.”
They're one of three firms competing for this assignment.

- **to...**helps to form the infinitive form of a verb.
We hope to design and build this project.
- **too...**means “also.”
We hope to be part of the project team, too.
- **too...**can also mean “to an excessive degree.”
He put too much salt on his hamburger.
- **two...**is the number 2.

- **your...**is a possessive pronoun.
Your firm was selected.
- **you're...**means “you are.”
You're one of the finalists for this award.
- **not only...but also.** If you use one you should use the other.
- *Not only will we build your building, but we will also guarantee that it will meet your goals.*

Regarding Ending Sentences with a Preposition

There is a story that Sir Winston Churchill was once accused by a Member of Parliament of ending a sentence with a preposition. Mr. Churchill was said to have replied:

“This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put.”

• **We could just say:**

“This is the sort of nonsense I will not put up with.”

• **Or an even better version would be:**

“I will not put up with this nonsense.”

**Don't worry about ending a sentence
with a preposition if it sounds O.K.**

Agenda Item #2.

Some Common Grammar Errors

(and some other useful insights)

- **Active Voice:** The Active Voice makes sentences stronger.

The Maine Section of ASCE arranged this conference.

An architect designed this building.

- **Passive Voice:** Passive Voice is O.K., but it's used much too often, especially in engineering proposals.

This conference was arranged by the Maine Section of ASCE.

This building was designed by an architect.

A few more things about Passive Voice

- When there would be too many phrases or names in the subject, it often makes more sense to use the Passive Voice.

The team for the next project will be composed of ABC Architects, DEF Engineers, GHI Construction and several smaller specialty firms.

Beware of constantly using Passive Voice in engineering specifications.

- *All work shall be completed in accord with the contract.*
- *The work shall be coordinated with all other trades.*
- *Work can not begin until prior written permission is obtained from the owner.*
- *The cost of electricity shall be borne by the contractor.*
- *Shop drawings shall be submitted to the general contractor.*

Some Common Mistakes Using Commas

- One of the biggest mistakes seems to be using too many commas.

Whenever I edit writing, I notice that the author uses too many commas, and has trouble with spelling, and grammar.

- No commas are needed in that sentence!
- Don't go "comma crazy."

Using Commas in Compound Sentences

- Another common mistake is **omitting** the comma before the word “and” in a compound sentence. The comma is needed before the word “and” in the following compound sentence.

The Maine Section of ASCE is hosting this conference, and the Program Committee decided on the list of speakers.

- A comma is not used in a sentence with just a compound predicate.

The Maine Section of ASCE scheduled this conference and decided on the list of speakers.

Using Commas in a Series of Words or Phrases

- There is some disagreement about whether the comma is needed before the word “and” in a series or list of items.

At XYZ Construction we handle site work, design, scheduling, supervision, construction and commissioning.

- Whether you use the comma in a series, or not, be sure to be consistent throughout the document.

Some other Common Problems with Commas

- A comma is not needed after the date in the following sentence:

In 1958 ABC brothers formed ABC Construction.

- A comma is not used after the salutation of a business letter. Use a colon.

Dear Mr. Jones:

- A comma is used after the salutation of a letter to a friend.

Dear Bob,

Using Quotation Marks

- **Rule:** Periods and commas **always go inside** the quotation marks. There are no exceptions.

*The Project Manager said: “The design should be completed before construction begins.” **Correct.***

*“...before construction begins”. **Wrong.***

A Brief Look at Possessives with 's and s'

Steps for Making Words Possessive

1. Decide if the word is singular or plural.
2. If the word is singular, just add 's.
They decided to use a local printer's proposal.
3. If the word is plural ending in s, add apostrophe **after** the s'.
The three architects' offices were all in the same part of town.
4. If the word is plural **not** ending in s, add apostrophe **before** the 's.
The men's champion at our golf club always gets a special parking place. The women's champion gets one, too.

Using Hyphens (-) in Compound Modifiers

- A hyphen is used with compound modifiers that go **before** a noun:

ABC Engineering is a family-owned firm.

The speaker gave a well-prepared presentation.

The team decided on a three-phase scope of work.

Using Hyphens (-) in Compound Modifiers

Do **not** use hyphens when modifiers are used alone, i.e. without a noun.

ABC Engineering is family owned.

The speaker's presentation was well prepared.

The scope of work for the project will be three phase.

Agenda Item # 3

Preparing Winning Proposals

Architects, engineers, contractors and others often need to respond to a formal Request for Proposals (RFP) or need to prepare a formal Statement of Qualifications (SOQ) to compete for an assignment. Putting together an attractive and easy-to-read Proposal or Statement of Qualifications is an important step in beating out the competition.

Some Characteristics of Great Proposals

- Quality, not size!
- Follows RFP numbering and lettering exactly
- Straightforward answers to questions in the RFP
- A cover letter focused on benefits to the Owner
- Easy-to-read type
- Lots of bullets instead of long paragraphs
- Lots of white space in the margins

More Characteristics of Great Proposals

- Great photography and great design
- Shaded boxes with client quotes
- Team members with **relevant** experience
- Resumes that are **relevant** to the project
- Project profiles that are **relevant** to the project
- An approach that solves the problem
- One writer so that style is consistent
- Executive Summary in clear, concise English!

Gathering Information for the Proposal

Develop an Alphabetical Database of Key Info:

- Approach
- Budget Preparation
- Client Quotes
- Cost Control
- History and Overview
- Graphics
- Philosophy
- Photography
- Project Mgmt.
- References
- Resumes
- Safety Program

Putting the Proposal Together

Use a team approach involving:

- the marketing director
- a principal of the firm
- lead architect or engineer
- project manager
- project superintendent
- Estimator
- writer

But, **one** person needs to pull it all together!

Use a Simple Writing Style for Proposals

Imagine that you are writing for a **volunteer** small-town selectman or school board member who is faced with the following problem:

- He or she has worked all day at a regular job.
- They are tired, and now they have to read your proposal!
- It's a daunting task reading 10-15 big (and boring!) proposals.
- They need to cut the list down to 3 or 4 for interviews.
- They are looking for quick and easy ways to eliminate proposals.

Great Ways to Have Your Proposal Eliminated

- Poor design
- Poor graphics
- Poor photography
- No photography
- Small print
- Single spacing
- Too much information
- Spelling errors
- Grammar mistakes
- Typos
- Long paragraphs
- Boring writing
- Cheap paper
- No cover
- Same as all the others!

Some Examples of Awful Writing in Proposals

RFP Question:

Does your firm have the staff available to handle this project?

Actual Answer in a Proposal to the City of Bath:

DEF, Inc. has an internal project management system which involves weekly meetings to review scheduling requirements for the next two-week period and to assign appropriate personnel to specific projects. At points **were** (sic) the workload or project schedule intensifies, additional staff assignments are made consistent with the level of work required.

A Possible Rewrite in Simpler Language

RFP Question:

Does your firm have the staff available to handle this project?

We want to assure the City of Bath that we have the staff resources needed to complete your project on time.

Another Example of Awful Writing in a Proposal

RFP Question:

What are your plans for public involvement in this project?

Actual Answer: We recommend the stakeholders be involved early on with a presentation of the intention of the project to receive input on expectations and then a second meeting to present our alternative findings and receive feedback to see if expectations have been met and a consensus on a preferred alternative can be achieved. **(One Sentence!)**

A Possible Rewrite in Simpler Language

RFP Question:

What are your plans for public involvement in this project?

An early public hearing or meeting is one of the best ways to assure the success on any project. We propose holding a series of public meetings to explain the project. We will listen to the ideas and suggestions from those attending. At a subsequent meeting we will present several alternatives for further discussion.

Agenda Item #4

Dynamic Cover Letters that Lead to an Interview

The cover letter of a proposal is your chance to:

- Make a good impression
- Highlight your key points
- Separate yourself from the competition

**Beware of deadly cover letters that
all sound the same!**

Avoid Using Words that Everyone Uses

The following phrases were found in all of the proposals to the City of Bath:

- highly experienced staff
- highly experienced professionals
- highly qualified personnel
- highly qualified individuals
- well qualified staff

More Words and Phrases that Everyone Uses

The following phrases were found in all of the proposals to the City of Bath:

- extensive experience
- demonstrated experience
- demonstrated expertise
- broad experience
- broad knowledge

Deadly Covers Letters that All Sound the Same

Here are the opening sentences from nine proposals submitted to the City of Bath for a study of a possible walking path along the waterfront:

1. ABC Company is pleased to submit a Statement of Qualifications for your potential Waterfront Pathway in Bath, Maine.
2. We are pleased to submit the attached qualification package to provide the City of Bath with a concept plan for blah, blah, blah...
3. DEF Associates in association with GHI and JKL is pleased to submit the following qualifications for blah, blah, blah...

Deadly Cover Letters, cont.

4. MNO, Inc. is pleased to submit our qualifications to assist the City of Bath with the development of blah, blah, blah...
5. Please find the enclosed qualifications package for the above mentioned project. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. **(That was the entire cover letter!)**
6. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this Statement of Qualifications for consultant services associated with blah, blah, blah...

Deadly Cover Letters, cont.

7. Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your Request for Qualifications with regard to the blah, blah, blah...
8. It is with great enthusiasm that PQR and its planning team submits the enclosed Statement of Qualifications for the blah, blah, blah...

Do you believe this?!

Finally, a Cover Letter that Addresses the Needs of the Owner!

The Bath waterfront is at the heart of the City's history and an important asset in the Town's (sic) future. The new path under consideration has the potential to help the community achieve its goal of developing a waterfront that is a destination for a variety of uses. The new path will provide a valuable link from the waterfront to the visitor center and the downtown, increase public access, and help to enhance Bath's reputation as a truly walkable city.....WOW!!

A Final Word...

Whether you win the job or not, it is very instructive to go back and review all of the proposals submitted. This can usually be done with public agencies. The differences among proposals are amazing. Reviewing proposals gives you an understanding of what your competition is doing, and it can provide you with lots of new ideas on how to improve your own proposals.

Agenda Item #5. Discussion and Questions

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