

# Proposal Writing and the Eight-Second Attention Span

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## YOUR PRESENTER:

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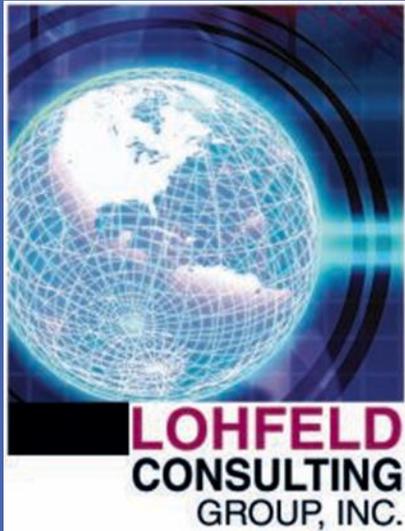
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# About Lohfeld Consulting Group

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As the premier capture and proposal services consulting firm focused exclusively on government markets, we provide expert assistance to government contractors in Go-To-Market Planning, Capture Planning and Strategy, Proposal Management and Development, Capture and Proposal Process and Infrastructure, and Training.

# Agenda

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- Purpose
- Digital Distraction
- Bad Writing Impacts
- Three Strategies for the Digital Age
- Conclusions

# Purpose

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- Purpose: to grab and hold the evaluators' attention with great writing that clearly explains and validates our value proposition
- Result: better proposal quality and more proposal wins



# Digital Distraction

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- Average attention span for the notoriously unfocused goldfish = 9 seconds
- Average attention span for humans
  - 2015 = 8 seconds
  - 2000 = 12 seconds



# Digital Distractions - Generational Differences

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- Millennials and younger scan and process information more quickly
  - They skip dense text to get to the point
  - They are more responsive to visual content
  - They prefer a more conversational tone

# Digital Distractions – Snap Impressions

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- Internet users judge the aesthetic value of a website as quickly as 1/50 of a second
- According to [Millennial Marketing](#), Millennials reject quality content if the visual effect is poor



# Bad Writing Impacts

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- Harvard Business Review (HBR) 2016 Study
  - An average of 25.5 hours per week is spent reading for work (about 1/3 is email)
  - 81% agree poorly written material decreases productivity for 3 reasons:
    - Must be rewritten, wasting time
    - Is misunderstood, so reader takes wrong action
    - Decreases trust



# Bad Writing Shows Gaps in Thinking

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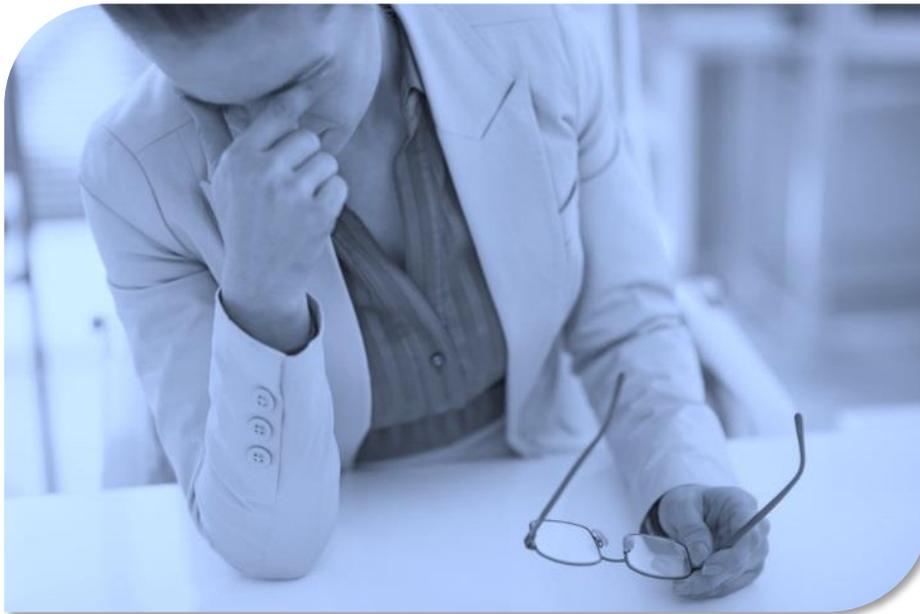
- Fuzzy writing equates to fuzzy thinking
- Well-organized, active-voice sentences explain what is happening, what ought to happen, and what people need to do



# A Key Takeaway

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Studies of Government source selection boards found that a typical board member normally **does not** understand 75 percent of what he or she reads in a proposal.



From “Using Red Teams”  
Dave Herndon

# Clear Writing Builds Trust

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## HBR recommends:

### Do:

- Plan out what you will say to make your writing more direct and effective.
- Use words sparingly and keep sentences short and to the point.
- Avoid jargon and “fancy” words. Strive for clarity instead.

### Don't:

- Argue that you simply can't write. Anyone can become a better writer with practice.
- Pretend that your first draft is perfect, or even passable. Every document can be improved.
- Bury your argument. Present your main idea as soon as possible.

# Disengagement\*

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- Workers typically attend to a task for **3 minutes** before moving to something else (usually a digital distraction)
- It takes about 20 minutes to return to the previous task...



\*University of California Study

# Digital Distraction + Bad Writing

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With shorter and shorter attention spans, evaluators won't spend time trying to decipher your message



# Three Strategies for the Digital Age

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- Calls to Action
- Exceeding Expectations
- Clearly Relevant Writing



# Calls to Action (CTAs)

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- Used extensively in digital marketing
  - Put the right message in front of the right people at the right time



# Know Which CTAs to Use

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- 2 CTAs to avoid:
  - Weak CTA: we assume evaluators know what to do, so we forget the call to action
  - Too strong a CTA: we try high pressure, forcing compliance
- Best CTA to use:
  - Benefits oriented and personal (know the customer)



# CTA Examples

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- **Weak CTA:**
  - As the incumbent, we are best positioned for low risk transition.
- **Too strong CTA:**
  - Unless you choose our incumbent team, the program will fail miserably.
- **Best CTA:**
  - To meet your objective of zero service disruption, CUSTOMER needs to select the team that offers 100% of the incumbents day one.

# Fun Fact

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- Studies show that we believe something that we read 3 times
  - Introduce
  - Restate
  - Summarize

**FUN  
FACT!**



# Exceeding Expectations

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- Exceeding expectations is an attention grabber
- It's all about Strengths: features you propose with proven associated benefits that exceed requirements



# How Do You Achieve a Strength?

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- A Strength:
  - Exceeds a contract requirement in a way beneficial to the customer (they would be willing to pay for it)
  - Increases the likelihood of successful contract performance (technical, schedule, cost, quality)
  - Increases the likelihood of successful mission accomplishment (agency mission, safety, lethality, etc.)
  - Mitigates mission or contract risk
  - Ideally is not neutralized by other bidders, i.e., becomes a discriminator for your bid

# Value Proposition

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Clear, concise messaging of your  
discriminating Strengths = Value Proposition



# Strength Example

CUSTOMER

BENEFIT

FEATURE

The Department of Defense will decrease the risk of disruption with our proven **incumbent capture plan** that reduces the required transition time **by 35 percent and captures 95% of incumbents as proven in our last 12 transitions.**

QUANTIFIED with  
PROOF

*Is this win theme a Strength?*

# Exceeding Expectations Surprises the Evaluator

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- Avoid usual “patterns”
  - Evaluators expect to be bored with dull writing, unsubstantiated bragging and hyperbole
- They expect to have to hunt for Strengths
  - They need to justify the award decision, but often cannot find a clear value proposition
- What if you wrote clearly and succinctly?
- What if Strengths popped off the page?

# Exceed Expectations with Attention Grabbers

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- You are not a writer – you are a sales person using the medium of writing
- Use attention grabbers to illustrate customer understanding



# Attention Grabbers Examples

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- Unique definition
- Little known fact
- Customer quote
- Statements intended to challenge
- Anecdotes
- Questions
- Distinctive graphics
- Icons



# Attention Grabbers Make the Hunt for Strengths Easy

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- Evaluators, and Millennials in particular, scan for information rather than reading content
- Structure your proposal so main points can be gleaned from TOC/LOE, headers/subheaders, graphics/action captions
- Don't let the evaluator infer or conclude; tell them!

# Examples

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## Highest Performance in a Small Package

Bold Statement



Powerful Icons

Evaluators have an 8-second attention span.

Little known fact

*Do you want to decrease server deployment time from 4 weeks to 1.5 hours?*

Question

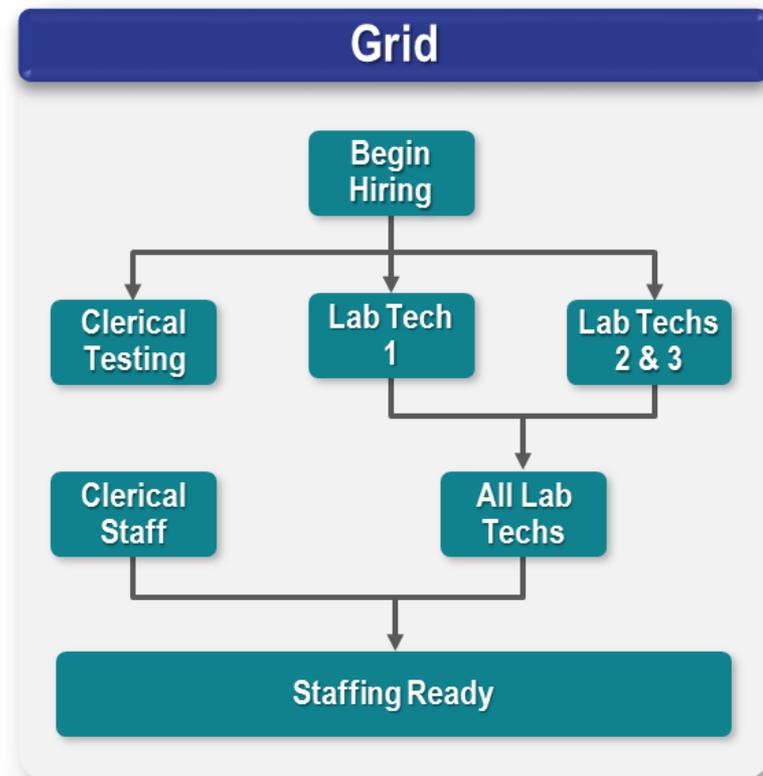
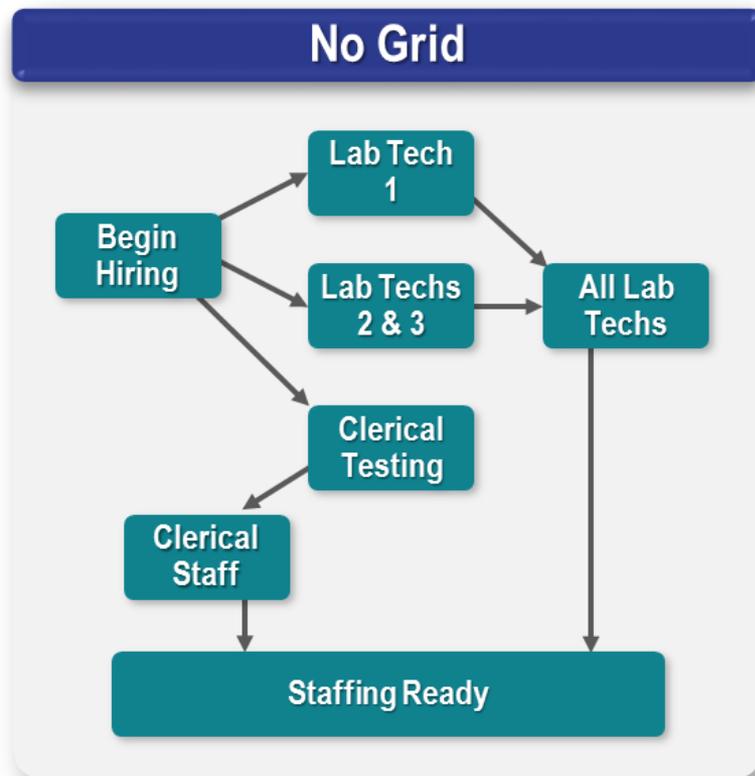
**You write boring, old-fashioned proposals.**

Statement intended to challenge

**“Excellent customer service by your team. Without your efforts to go above and beyond, we would have experienced disruptions which cost valuable time and money.”**

Customer Quote

# Which graphic do you understand in 10 seconds or less?



***Sometimes simple changes make all the difference.***

# Clearly Relevant Writing

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- Writing clearly and concisely is not sufficient
  - Avoid background details and/or embellishments that aren't relevant and/or dilute your message
  - Keep your focus on the customer

# Example of Irrelevance

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We appreciate the opportunity to submit our bid for continued service under the contract. We feel grateful to have served as the contractor since 2009 and look forward to continuing our unique partnership which is based on multiple successes in increasing program enrollment. Our CEO has expressed a firm commitment to this program as a top corporate priority. As a result, we believe the solution that we describe in the following sections of our Technical Proposal keeps our history and experience in mind, while continuing to build upon on our efforts to address the Department's current and future needs.

# Irrelevance Made Relevant

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CUSTOMER has a complex mission critical program with multiple competing stakeholders statewide. Awarding to a new contractor will cause program disruption as building trusted relationships can take years. In the proposal that follows, we present our high quality approach, proven over the past eight years, to continued program success with zero risk of disruption.

**Thank you!**

# Avoid irrelevant “crutch” words

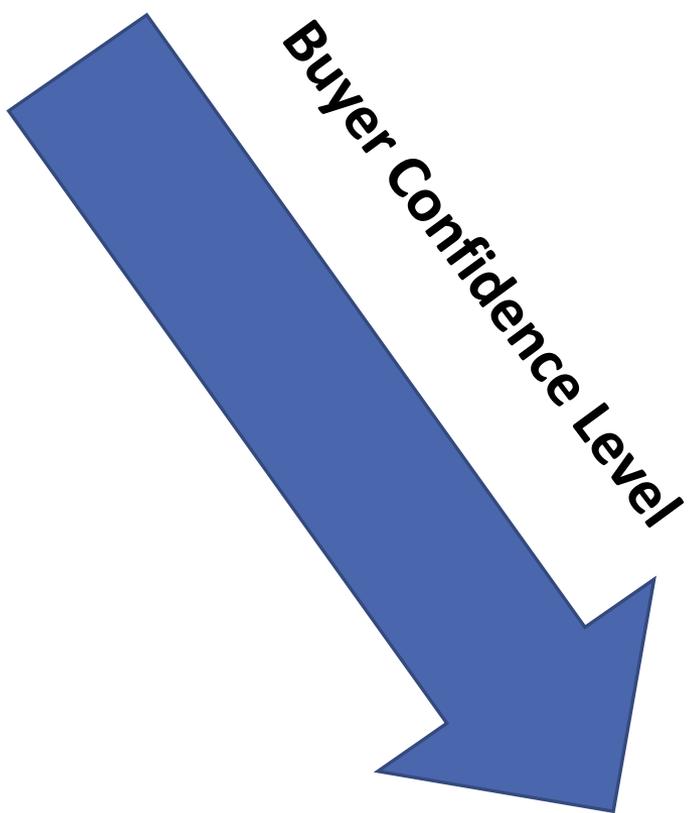
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We understand

We appreciate

We believe

We feel



Buyer Confidence Level

***These words actually weaken the impact of your writing.***



# Avoid irrelevant “bragging” phrases

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Best-of-breed

State-of-the-art

Uniquely qualified

Thought leaders

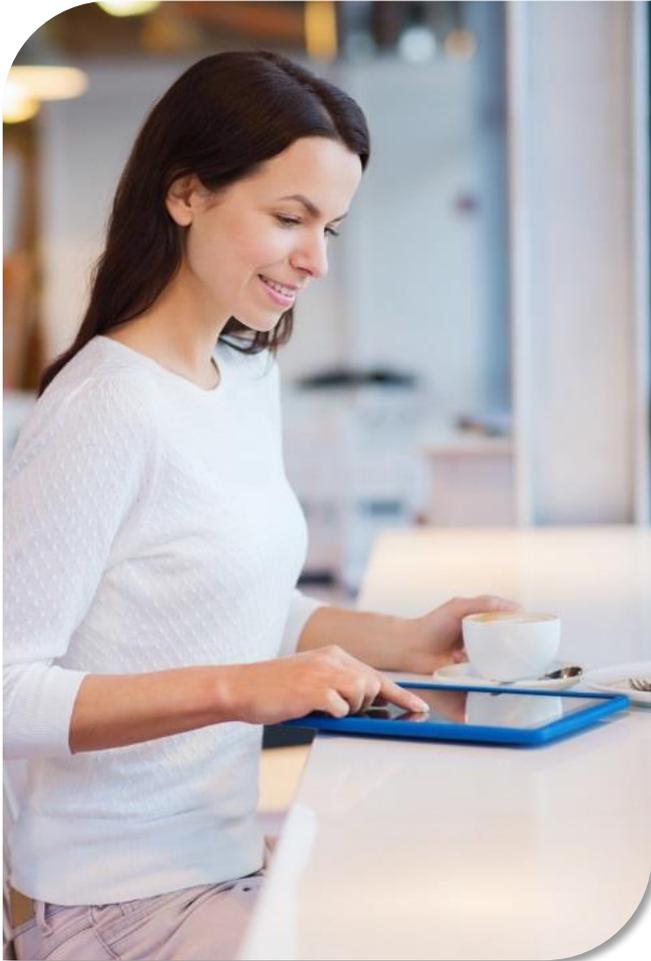


Buyer Confidence Level

*...unless you can show benefits and provide substantiation...*

# Conclusions

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- Modernize your proposals to win in the digital age
- Your customers are changing the way they read; you must change the way you write

# Questions?

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