Doctrine 02 — RFPs, NOFOs, and Solicitations

One durable concept: the solicitation is a conversation, and the agency wrote its questions in advance.

A **solicitation** is the official document an agency publishes to say, "We want to buy something, or fund something, and here is exactly how to respond." Everything else in this course hangs off your ability to read one. This doctrine gives you the mental frame; the *literacy* folder gives you the section-by-section maps.

Why the document exists

The government is not allowed to just pick a favorite vendor. By law, federal money must be spent through fair, open, competitive processes. The solicitation is the instrument of that fairness: it announces the need, states the rules, and commits the agency to evaluate every compliant response on the same criteria. When you read a solicitation, you are reading a contract of trust between the government and the public.

There are several shapes of solicitation, and the name tells you the game:

Shape	Full name	The game
RFI	Request for Information	The agency is shopping. No bids yet — it wants market intelligence. Low effort, high intelligence value.
RFQ	Request for Quote	Usually for simpler, off-the-shelf buys. Price-led.
RFP	Request for Proposal	The big one. The agency wants a full technical and management proposal, evaluated on stated criteria.
NOFO	Notice of Funding Opportunity	The grants-world sibling of the RFP. Same game — a proposal — different rulebook and vocabulary.
IDIQ / task orders	Indefinite-Delivery/Indefinite-Quantity	A standing competition already won; now the agency places individual orders against the award.

Do not memorize these as jargon. Memorize them as *posture*: RFI means "intelligence," RFP means "full pursuit," NOFO means "grant pursuit," task order means "you already won a doorway."

The anatomy of a solicitation

Every serious solicitation answers the same six questions. Train yourself to find them, and you can read any document in any agency's style:

1. **What** is the agency buying or funding? *(the scope, the statement of work or program description)*
2. **Who** is eligible? *(small business? any size? any institution?)*
3. **How** will we be judged? *(the evaluation criteria — the single most important section)*
4. **When** are the milestones? *(release date, questions deadline, proposal deadline)*
5. **How** must the response be structured? *(page limits, volume organization, formatting)*
6. **Where** must it go, and how? *(submission portal, format, signatures)*

The evaluation criteria deserve special attention. The agency must state, in advance, the factors it will use to choose a winner — technical approach, management approach, past performance, price, and their relative weights. **A proposal is a document written to the evaluation criteria.** Everything else is decoration.

Reading for compliance vs. reading for strategy

There are two ways to read a solicitation, and professionals do both in sequence:

- **Compliance reading** — "What is required?" This is mechanical and unforgiving. Missing a required page or a signature can kill a compliant proposal instantly, regardless of quality. This is the reading that produces the *compliance matrix* — a checklist of every "shall" in the document.
- **Strategy reading** — "What does the evaluator actually care about?" Between the "shall" statements is the agency's real intent: the problem it is trying to solve, the risk it fears most, the outcome it wants. Winning proposals answer the intent, not just the letter.

Beginners read only for compliance and produce compliant, mediocre proposals. Professionals read for both.

Deadlines and the "two-deadline" trap

Every solicitation has at least two deadlines:

- A **questions deadline** — after this, the agency stops taking questions and issues answers as an amendment.

- A **submission deadline** — after this, the portal closes. Late is rejected. No exceptions, as a rule.

There is a third, invisible deadline that trips everyone: **your internal proposal deadline**, which must be days before the real one to leave room for review, fixes, and the mechanical act of submitting. This is the first place the *gate* concept (Doctrine 04) shows up: a pursuit is not ready because the calendar says so; it is ready because the review gates say so.

Amendments and forecasts

Solicitations are living documents. Between release and submission, agencies publish **amendments** that change requirements, extend deadlines, or answer questions. A pursuit that watches the original document but not the amendments is flying blind.

And before the solicitation even exists, the market gives you a heads-up: **agency forecasts** (like the DoD and GSA procurement forecasts) list what agencies plan to buy months in advance. The professionals who win are often the ones who saw the opportunity *before* the document existed, used the RFI window to shape it, and arrived at the RFP already prepared.

What this means for your career

The ability to read a solicitation is the most transferable skill in this course. It works for federal contracts, state and local procurement, foundation grants, and even corporate proposals — every competitive process publishes its rules in advance, and the winners are the people who read the rules like strategy rather than like homework.

The MBA student reads a solicitation as a market document: who competes here, what is the pricing pressure, how do we position a differentiator. The MPA student reads it as a governance document: how was this written, what does it protect, how is fairness enforced. The Strategic Initiative student reads it as a systems document: how does this opportunity fit the organization's long-term posture. Same document, three lenses — and this course teaches all three.

Self-check

1. What are the six questions every solicitation answers, and which one is the most important to a winning proposal?
2. What is the difference between a compliance reading and a strategy reading of an RFP?
3. Why is the "two-deadline" trap a risk, and what invisible third deadline does it hide?