

Literacy — How Color Teams Work

The structured review sequence that audits a proposal as it matures. Each color simulates a different reader of your proposal — and the discipline is in the sequence, not any single review.

Color teams are the quality gates of proposal production (Doctrine 03, stage 6 — *audit*). They exist because the people who write a proposal cannot see it the way an evaluator will. Each color forces the proposal to be read through a different, deliberately chosen lens, so that by the time it ships, every important reader has already looked at it and been answered.

The sequence at a glance

The profession's standard cadence runs in a fixed order, each color building on the one before. The core sequence is **Pink** → **Red** → **Gold** → **White-Glove**, with two supporting colors around it: **Blue** (optional, before Pink) and **Black-Hat** (final, after White-Glove).

Color	When it runs	The reader it simulates	What it protects	Exit criterion
Blue (optional)	Before Pink, when the win strategy carries technical risk	A customer-side architect judging whether the solution is credible	Solution architecture and teaming credibility	Disposition: proceed / proceed-with-revisions / withdraw
Pink	After the outline and first drafts (60–80% done)	A Section L / M reference-checker	Compliance and outline integrity: does every requirement have a home?	Every requirement mapped to a section; critical findings resolved
Red	After the full draft (80–90% done)	A government evaluator scoring against Section M	Persuasiveness and competitive position, factor by factor	No Red rating on a critical factor; cost–technical reconciliation clean
Gold	After Red revisions and pricing	An executive deciding whether to submit	Strategic fit, pricing posture, and residual risk	A recorded submit / revise / withdraw disposition

Color	When it runs	The reader it simulates	What it protects	Exit criterion
White-Glove	24–48 hours before deadline	A production editor	Formatting, assembly, forms, portal readiness	Zero defects on the final checklist
Black-Hat	Last, before the audit report is composed	A hostile evaluator and a rival capture manager, together	Score credibility — guarding against over-optimistic scoring	Score pulled back to a defensible estimate; final findings logged

What each color is really doing

- **Blue Team** is a *solution-shaping* review, run only when the win strategy depends on a technical claim that is not yet proven — a novel architecture, an unproven teaming arrangement, a discriminator whose credibility hinges on the design. It checks that the storyboards and early drafts are technically coherent *before* expensive writing starts. Running Blue when there is no technical risk is optional; skipping it when the architecture is genuinely risky is how a proposal wins on paper and collapses in review.
- **Pink Team** is the *compliance and completeness* pass. Reviewers check the proposal against Section L (the instructions) and Section M (the evaluation factors) literally: is every requirement identified, mapped to a section, and assigned? Pink does not judge whether the writing is good — it judges whether the proposal has left anything out. It is where the compliance matrix earns its keep.
- **Red Team** is the *substantive* review. Independent reviewers put on the government evaluator persona and read the proposal as someone who will rate it, factor by factor, against Section M. They score each evaluation area, test whether discriminators land and whether baselines are being dressed up as differentiators, and reconcile the technical story with the cost story. Red is the closest thing the process has to a rehearsal of the actual evaluation.
- **Gold Team** is the *executive submission decision*. The reviewers are not writing or editing — they are deciding whether this proposal should represent the organization at all. The disposition is a real decision: **submit, revise, or withdraw**. Gold is the last gate that can still stop a bad submission with the whole organization’s authority behind the call.
- **White-Glove** is *production polish*: page counts, fonts, headers, file naming, forms signed, attachments present, portal requirements met. It is deliberately mechanical, and by rule it makes **no content changes** —

if someone is editing substance during White-Glove, the sequence was skipped somewhere earlier.

- **Black-Hat** is the *final adversarial pass*. It runs after everything else, and its job is to protect against over-optimistic scoring: it asks, from the perspective of a hostile evaluator and a rival capture manager, what would still pull this proposal's score down — and whether the score the team has convinced itself of is actually defensible against the historical range of funded proposals. It cannot delete or override other colors' findings; it can only sharpen them and add its own. Its existence is the discipline's admission that every prior review tends to be too kind.

Rating semantics: how Red Team scores

Red Team (and the audit chain generally) uses a four-level rating scale, internally named by color and mapped to the words evaluators actually use:

Rating	Label	What it means	Disposition impact
Blue	Outstanding	Exceeds requirements; innovative; compelling discriminators; no weaknesses	Proceed
Green	Acceptable	Meets requirements; adequate understanding; minor weaknesses that do not sink the rating	Proceed
Yellow	Marginal	Partially addresses requirements; significant weaknesses	Must be resolved
Red	Unacceptable	Fails to address requirements; non-compliant or fundamentally misunderstanding the work	Blocks submission

The disposition rules are deliberately blunt: **any Red rating on a critical**

evaluation area means the proposal cannot be submitted as-is. More than roughly one in five factors rated Marginal means the proposal needs significant revision, not spot fixes. A proposal with all Green and Blue ratings is ready for the pricing and executive review. The bluntness is the point: the rating semantics exist so the review produces a *decision*, not a vibe.

The facilitation discipline

Color teams only work if they are run honestly, and honesty is engineered, not hoped for. The facilitation rules the profession relies on:

- **Reviewers are independent of writers.** No reviewer evaluates a section they drafted. If the reviewers are the writers, the review is a peer-check — it will not see the proposal the way an evaluator will.
- **The roster is locked early and carried through.** The reviewer team is fixed at Pink and stays the same through Gold, so each color builds on a consistent set of eyes. Mid-cycle substitutions are allowed only with an independence check.
- **Findings must be specific.** A finding has to name three things: the specific evaluation factor or requirement at issue, the specific evidence that is missing or weak, and the specific revision required. “*Section X is weak*” is not a finding; it is an opinion. Vague findings produce vague revisions, so they are sent back to the reviewer.
- **The sequence is forward-only and unskippable.** Pink before Red, Red before Gold, Gold before White-Glove — always. You may not skip a color, and you may not substitute a single combined review for the sequence. Each color has a job only it does.

Common failure modes

- **The friendly review** — reviewers who cannot bring themselves to be harsh. The proposal ships confident and loses quietly.
- **The writer-reviewer** — someone reviewing their own section, seeing only what they meant, not what they wrote.
- **Vague findings** — the review produces “strengthen this” with no factor, no evidence, and no revision named. The writers guess; the proposal stays weak.
- **A skipped color** — usually White-Glove (it feels optional). Then a formatting miss, a missing form, or a page-count violation surfaces at the deadline — the easiest flaw for an evaluator to find, and the one that disqualifies.
- **Too-late Red** — running Red when the draft is already finished and the calendar is frozen, so its findings cannot be acted on. Red must run while there is still time to revise.

One practice loop

1. Take a draft section of any proposal (or a classmate's).
2. Do a five-minute **Pink pass**: list every requirement the section must answer and check each is present.
3. Do a ten-minute **Red pass**: score it as an evaluator on a single factor, Blue to Red, and write one finding that names factor, evidence, and revision.
4. Swap sections with a partner and repeat — then compare what each of you saw that the writer could not.

You are now running the discipline, not just reading about it.