

## Literacy — How to Read an RFP

*The federal contract solicitation is the most standardized document in this discipline. Once you can map one RFP, you can map them all. This page is your section-by-section map — keep it open the first few times you read a real one.*

### Before you start

Take a breath. An RFP is long, dense, and written by committee. Nobody reads it front-to-back once. Professionals read it in three passes:

1. **The 15-minute scan** — What is being bought? What is the deadline? What are the evaluation criteria? Am I eligible? (Decision: bid or no-bid?)
2. **The compliance pass** — A checklist of every “shall,” page limit, and required format. This becomes your compliance matrix.
3. **The strategy pass** — What does the agency actually care about? Where are the evaluation weights? What story must the proposal tell?

### The standard anatomy (Sections A–M)

Most federal contract RFPs follow the **uniform contract format**: Sections A through M. Agencies adapt it, but the skeleton is dependable. The two sections to know by heart are **L** (the instructions) and **M** (the evaluation factors).

| Section  | What it holds                                    | Your job here                                              |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>A</b> | Solicitation/contract form                       | Confirm this is an RFP (not an RFI or RFQ).                |
| <b>B</b> | Supplies or services and prices                  | The pricing structure and schedule.                        |
| <b>C</b> | Description / specifications / statement of work | <b>What is actually being bought.</b> Read this one fully. |
| <b>D</b> | Packaging and marking                            | Only matters for physical deliveries.                      |
| <b>E</b> | Inspection and acceptance                        | How the agency will judge delivery.                        |
| <b>F</b> | Deliveries or performance                        | Where and when the work happens.                           |
| <b>G</b> | Contract administration data                     | Points of contact, invoicing, administration.              |
| <b>H</b> | Special contract requirements                    | Any unusual requirements.                                  |
| <b>I</b> | Contract clauses                                 | The legal terms that will apply.                           |

| Section  | What it holds                                     | Your job here                                                                   |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>J</b> | List of attachments                               | The documents that are part of the solicitation.                                |
| <b>K</b> | Representations, certifications, and statements   | Forms you must sign and certify.                                                |
| <b>L</b> | Instructions, conditions, and notices to offerors | <b>Exactly how to respond:</b> structure, page limits, format, where to submit. |
| <b>M</b> | Evaluation factors for award                      | <b>Exactly how you will be judged:</b> the factors and their weights.           |

## Section L: the rules of the game

Section L is the instructions. It tells you, with bureaucratic precision, the shape of the response:

- **The volumes** — often Technical, Management, Past Performance, and Pricing (sometimes combined, sometimes separate).
- **Page limits** — and how pages are counted (front sides? each side? what is excluded?).
- **Format rules** — font, spacing, margins, file names, file formats.
- **Required content** — what each volume must address, in what order.
- **Submission mechanics** — the portal, the naming convention, the deadline in what time zone, and how to acknowledge amendments.

**The rule for Section L: comply literally.** Every page-limit or formatting miss is a visible, disqualifying flaw — and it is the easiest kind of flaw for an evaluator to find. A perfect technical approach cannot save a response that violated the format rules.

## Section M: the secret that is not secret

Section M is the evaluation plan — the agency telling you, in advance, how it will choose the winner. It names the factors, gives them relative weights, and describes what “excellent” looks like. This is the single most valuable section of the RFP, because it is the rubric your proposal is graded against.

Read Section M twice. First for the factors. Second for the *emphasis* — which factor has the highest weight, what adjectives the agency uses for “excellent,” what the price factor is (lowest-price or best-value). Your proposal’s structure should mirror the evaluation factors in the order the agency weighted them. If technical approach is 50% and past performance is 20%, a proposal that spends its best pages on past performance is a proposal that bet on the wrong horse.

## The supporting cast

- **Statement of Work (Section C)** — The actual work. Read this in full, more than once. Every proposal volume answers something in here.
- **Compliance matrix** — Your own tool, not the agency’s: a table of every requirement (cite the page) and where your proposal satisfies it (cite your page). Built during the compliance pass, it is the backbone of the review gates (the “pink team” starts here).
- **Amendments** — Check for them constantly between release and submission. They change requirements and deadlines, and answering an RFP on a stale version is a classic way to lose.
- **The questions deadline** — Ask your clarifying questions before this date. After it, the agency answers everyone through amendments; you cannot ask privately.

## The common failure modes

- **Reading for the story and missing the rules.** Great proposal, wrong format. Fail.
- **Answering the last version.** Requirements moved in an amendment you did not read. Fail.
- **Writing to what you want to say, not what Section M rewards.** Brilliant but irrelevant. Fail.
- **Aiming at the deadline, not before it.** Submitted at 4:59 p.m. with a portal that closes at 5:00 — and the file fails to upload. This is why internal deadlines exist.

## One practice loop

1. Take any real RFP from SAM.gov.
2. In 15 minutes: find the SOW, the deadline, Section M, and the eligibility. Write a one-paragraph bid/no-bid recommendation.
3. Build the compliance matrix: every “shall” you can find, with its page.
4. Write the strategy pass: in one page, what story must the proposal tell to maximize the Section M weights?
5. Compare with a peer. You are now reading RFPs like a professional.