Literacy — The Four Volumes

The shape a federal proposal actually takes. Section L of the solicitation tells you the exact number of volumes and their limits; the profession's standard structure is four volumes plus a small supporting cast. This page is your map of what each volume is for, what goes inside it, and how the agency evaluates it.

A proposal is not one document; it is a set of **volumes**, each with a distinct job. The structure exists because it mirrors the way the agency has to evaluate you: on technical merit, on management capability, on demonstrated past performance, and on price. If you know the four volumes and what each one proves, you can walk into any solicitation and already know the shape of the answer.

The four volumes and their jobs

Volume	The job it does	What it must prove	The Section M factor it answers
I — Technical	Show you understand the work and can do it	Understanding, methodology, innovation, risk, security, transition	Technical approach
II — Management	Show you can run the work and the people	Organization, key personnel, staffing, communication, quality	Management approach, staffing, key personnel
III — Past Performance	Show you have done this before	Relevance, quality, schedule, cost control, business relations	Past performance confidence
IV — Pricing / Cost	Show what it costs and that the price is real	Cost buildup, labor, other costs, fee, total evaluated price	Cost realism, total price

There is one rule that governs all four volumes at once: **they must tell the same story.** If the Technical volume promises 24/7 staffing, the Management volume must show who staffs it, the Past Performance volume must show you have done it, and the Pricing volume must price it. A volume that contradicts a sibling is the fastest way to lose credibility — and it is a favorite debrief finding.

Volume I — Technical

The Technical volume is the intellectual heart of the proposal and almost always the largest, because the evaluation weight usually sits here. Its job is to demonstrate that you genuinely understand the customer's mission and have a credible, feasible way to do the work.

The standard sections, in rough order:

- **Executive summary** — the whole proposal in a page or two, leading with the customer's mission need and your discriminators.
- **Understanding of the requirement** — the problem restated in your own words, with insight beyond what the statement of work says. (Parroting the SOW is the classic amateur tell.)
- **Technical approach** — how the work will actually be performed: methodology, architecture, innovation, tools. This section is where every technical requirement from the statement of work gets answered.
- **Risk management** — the real risks and, for each, a specific mitigation.
- **Quality control** — how you will know the work is good and fix it when it is not.
- **Security** — clearances, access controls, handling of controlled information.
- **Transition plan** — how you get from the incumbent (or from startup) to full operation, and how you hand it back at the end.

The evaluator's question for every page: *does this show real understanding, and can this team actually deliver it?* Claims need evidence; methodology needs specifics; the approach needs to address every evaluation sub-factor, not just the headline.

Volume II — Management

The Management volume answers the question *who runs this, and how?* Evaluators use it to judge whether the organization behind the technical approach can actually govern the work, staff it, and keep it on schedule.

The standard sections:

- **Management approach** — governance, decision-making, communication, and how you report to the government.
- **Organizational structure** — the org chart, prime–sub relationships, and where key personnel sit.
- **Staffing plan** — the labor mix, the ramp-up to full staffing, retention, and surge.
- **Key personnel** — the named people, their qualifications mapped to the requirements, and the backup plan.
- **Subcontract management** — how partners are selected, governed, and monitored.
- **Schedule management** — the work breakdown, milestones, critical path, and schedule risk.

The key-personnel section is where the proposal gets personal: these are the named individuals the evaluators expect to see at the oral (Doctrine 10) and on the contract. Their resumes are typically an appendix; the volume's job is to map each person to the work and make the team feel real.

Volume III — Past Performance

The Past Performance volume is the evidence that you have done this before. Under the federal evaluation standard, the agency looks at each cited contract for **relevance** — how similar the work was in scope, size, complexity, and domain — and then assesses quality, schedule, cost control, and business relations, often drawing on the government's own ratings of your prior performance.

The shape of a past-performance citation:

- **Header** — the contract: number, agency, type, value, period of performance, prime or sub.
- **Relevance** — why this contract is like the one being bid: scope, size, technical, domain.
- **Performance narrative** — what you actually did, the challenges you overcame, and quantified results.
- **Reference** — a named person the agency could contact (or the standing government ratings on file).

Selection is its own discipline. A strong citation list is typically three to five contracts, recent (within the last few years, with the newest preferred), prioritized by similarity to the target: same agency, same NAICS code, similar contract type, similar value, similar complexity. Some contracts should never be cited: ones with pending claims or disputes, cure or show-cause notices, termination for default, or unresolved performance issues. One bad citation can sink the credibility of the whole volume.

The deeper truth: past performance is not a section you write at proposal time — it is a record you build over years of delivery. That is why the pipeline loops (Doctrine 03, Doctrine 07): every delivered contract is seed corn for the next proposal's Past Performance volume.

Volume IV — Pricing / Cost

The Pricing (or cost) volume says what the work costs and proves the price is real. It is built on a **cost buildup**: the labor categories and hours, the other direct costs, travel, subcontracts, and the indirect rates and fee applied on top. The structure is organized by **CLINs** (contract line item numbers), which mirror how the agency will pay you — so the pricing volume literally has to be shaped to the government's own price schedule.

Two ideas matter at this volume:

- **Cost realism vs. price.** The agency does not just ask *is the price low enough?* It asks *is the price real — can this work actually be done for this amount?* A price so low it is not credible can be rejected for that reason alone.
- **The basis of estimate (BOE).** Every meaningful cost line should be explainable: why these hours, why this rate, why this many trips. The BOE is the pricing volume's compliance spine, and it is what lets the evaluator (and your own Gold Team) check that the price is defensible.

Pricing is also a competitive position, not an afterthought (Doctrine 05): the posture — premium, parity, aggressive, or lowest-price-technically-acceptable — was set during capture, and the volume must reflect it. And it must reconcile with the Technical volume line for line.

The supporting cast

Around the four volumes sits a small set of standard sections:

- **The compliance matrix** — not a volume the agency asks for, but the internal spine of the whole effort: every requirement in the solicitation, mapped to the section and page where you answer it. The color reviews (Pink especially) live off this matrix.
- **Representations and certifications (Reps/Certs)** — the signed forms and certifications the solicitation requires.
- **The subcontracting plan** — for larger contracts, the plan for small-business participation.

These are where the "shall" requirements live — and a missing form or a missed certification is a disqualifier, no matter how strong the four volumes are.

How the volumes map to the evaluation

The reason to learn the four-volume structure is that it is your advance copy of the evaluation. Section M tells you the factors and their weights; the volumes are where you answer each factor. When you read a solicitation, do this: find Section M, note which factors carry the weight, and then allocate your best work — and your page budget — to the volumes that answer the weighted factors. A proposal that spends its best pages on a 20% factor while a 50% factor gets boilerplate has bet on the wrong horse.

The four volumes are the structure; the evaluation factors are the target; the win themes are the thread that runs through all of them (Doctrine 09). Learn the structure once and you can walk into any solicitation already knowing the shape of the answer.