RFP REVIEW GUIDELINES

for Government Proposals

How to read, assess, and qualify a government solicitation

1. First Pass

Consider some administrative concerns before you engage with content. These are basic filters that determine whether the opportunity is worth a full read.

- **Mechanism type.** Is this an SBIR/STTR topic, a BAA, a CSO, or something else? Each has distinct structure, evaluation norms, and phase logic. Each places different demands on a proposal writer.
- **Issuing agency and office.** Who is the customer? DOD, DOE, NASA, NSF, and DARPA each have distinct cultures, TRL expectations, and definitions of transition. Knowing the agency (and ideally the specific office) allows you to align your proposal to their mission and assess if it is a good fit for your work.
- **Open/close dates.** Is there time to write a solid response? A rushed proposal is stressful and has a lower probability of winning. If the window is under three weeks, assess carefully before committing.
- **Award size and phase structure.** What is the funding ceiling? SBIRs are fairly consistent across agencies, but BAA awards vary widely. The scale of the budget will inform the scope of work.
- **Eligibility.** For SBIR: must be a U.S. small business (500 employees), majority U.S.-owned and controlled, principal investigator must be primarily employed by the firm. For STTR: requires a formal subcontract with a research institution. Confirm before investing time. SBIR rules are well established but some BAA's or other solicitations may restrict who can bid i.e., non-profits only.

2. Read the Evaluation Criteria

Evaluation criteria set expectations and shape a proposal response. This is like working a maze backwards to make the path clear. The evaluation criteria define how your proposal will be scored. Everything else in the solicitation should be read through that lens. Common criteria across SBIR and BAA include:

- **Technical merit / soundness of approach:** Is the science or engineering credible? Is the approach well-reasoned and feasible?
- **Innovation / novelty:** Is this a genuine advance beyond the state of the art?
- **Relevance to the solicitation / mission fit:** Does the work address what the agency actually needs?
- **Commercialization potential (SBIR-specific):** Is there a credible path to market adoption or transition to a program of record?
- **Team qualifications:** Does the team have the capability to execute?
- **Cost realism:** Is the budget appropriate for the proposed scope?

Every section of your proposal should be traceable to at least one of these criteria. If something doesn't map to a criterion, question whether it belongs. Also, it helps to tell the reviewer when you are meeting the criteria. For example, if a BAA stresses innovative solutions, e.g., DARPA, including an innovative claims table will be advantageous.

3. Understand What the Agency Is Asking For

These instructions refer to reading an RFP, but ideally there will be PM contact that provides deeper context to make this activity more valuable as solicitations have stated requirements and unstated preferences. With that said, SBIR topic titles are often broad, so the description beneath them, particularly the "Description" and "Phase I Deliverables" sections, expresses what the program manager actually wants to fund. Read those sections carefully and look for:

- Operational use cases and desired end users
- Specific performance metrics, thresholds, or TRL targets

- Preferred technical approaches (even if framed as examples)
- Defined approaches, technologies, or problem framings they are not interested in (exclusions)
- A specific program of record, a platform, an operational capability (transition)

RFPs, particularly any background sections, aim to communicate context and priority. Look for references to known threats, technology gaps to address, and desired new capabilities. This information will define how to frame the proposal's narrative. Notice also what is not said. If a specific technology you think is relevant is not mentioned, that's information. This highlights the value in talking to a PM as such an absence can mean it is not relevant or an opportunity to reframe.

4. Map Your Technology to the Solicitation

This is the go/no-go decision point, and these questions can help assess your technology relative to the solicitation:

1. Problem fit. Does your technology address the core problem the agency has articulated. Make sure you focus on what was published, not a related problem nor a problem you wish they had mentioned.

2. TRL fit. What TRL does the solicitation expect at the start of the period of performance, and what TRL does it expect at the end? SBIR Phase I typically expects TRL 2-3 in and TRL 4-5 out, while BAAs vary. If your technology is significantly ahead of or behind the expected range, either your framing needs adjustment or the opportunity is not the right fit.

3. Differentiation. What makes your approach meaningfully different from what a reviewer has already seen proposed for this topic? "We use AI" is not differentiation. Name the specific insight, mechanism, or capability that sets your approach apart.

4. Evidence. What preliminary results, proof-of-concept data, or prior work can you point to? Agencies funding Phase I want to see that the approach is plausible, not just interesting. Zero evidence is a significant weakness.

5. Team fit. Does your team have the specific expertise this work requires? Missing capability you plan to hire or subcontract for is manageable; but a capability gap you pretend doesn't exist will surface in review.

If you can answer positively across all five with confidence, proceed. Struggling with more than one should give you pause to further assess if this is the right opportunity. You can submit without five yeses but ensure that there are enough strengths to be competitive.

5. Assess the Compliance Requirements

Often referred to as a compliance matrix, these are the core instructions for response. Like IKEA furniture, follow the instructions explicitly for best results. Work through the solicitation and build a compliance checklist covering:

- **Format and length limits.** Page limits are hard limits. Font size, margin, and spacing requirements are enforced. Some agencies use automated compliance checks before human review begins.
- **Required sections.** Most solicitations specify required sections explicitly. Note any that require narrative, any that require attachments (letters of support, data management plans, facilities statements, biosketches), and any that have their own page or word limits.
- **Submission portal and format.** SBIR submissions go through SBIR.gov (DoD), Research.gov (NSF), or agency-specific portals. BAA submissions vary. Some require email, some require portal submission, some have two-step processes (white paper first, then full proposal by invitation). Confirm the submission path early.
- **Registration requirements.** SAM.gov registration must be active at time of submission and award. SBIR.gov registration is required for DoD SBIRs. These take time to establish or renew.
- **Certifications and representations.** Many solicitations require specific certifications at time of submission and some certifications have legal implications (small business size, domestic ownership, conflicts of interest).
- **Cost and budget format.** Some solicitations require a specific budget template or format. Others require a cost narrative of a defined length. Confirm what is required and whether indirect cost rates need to be documented.

6. Identify Latent Signals

This is a skill that gets better with experience but provides a real opportunity for proposal teams to separate themselves. Every solicitation contains signals beyond its explicit requirements. The following are sources to identify these signals.

- **Topic manager / point of contact.** As mentioned, it is always better to engage a PM prior to a proposal submission. Most SBIR topics and many BAAs list a technical point of contact, so if pre-submission communication is allowed ask brief, targeted questions to yield significant intelligence about what they're looking for, what's already been funded, and whether your approach is in the right space.
- **Prior awards.** For SBIR topics, USASpending.gov and SBIR.gov's award search allow you to look up what has been funded under this topic or related topics in prior years. If the same company has won the same topic three cycles in a row, that's a signal. If no one has ever won this topic, that's a different signal.
- **Topic history.** Is this topic new or has it appeared in prior solicitations? New topics often indicate an emerging priority with less incumbent competition. Recurring topics may have established relationships or preferred approaches.
- **Borrowed language.** Sometimes BAA language is drawn almost verbatim from a program plan, a roadmap, or a Congressional mandate. Identifying the source document gives you additional context about the customer's actual intent.
- **What's missing.** If a topic that has been recurring for several cycles suddenly disappears, or if a BAA reappears with significantly different scope, that tells you something about program priorities and budget realities.

7. SBIR-Specific Considerations

These apply specifically to SBIR/STTR solicitations and reflect norms that differ from BAAs.

- Phase I is a feasibility study, not a development contract. Reviewers expect you to demonstrate that your approach is technically viable and that you can execute. Overclaiming on current status can backfire.

- The commercialization section carries more weight than most founders expect. For DoD SBIR in particular, reviewers are evaluating whether the technology will transition beyond the award. A credible commercialization narrative names specific transition partners, programs of record, or market pathways.
- Phase I deliverables define Phase II. Read the Phase I deliverable requirements carefully. The strongest Phase I proposals show a direct line from the proposed Phase I deliverables to a logical Phase II scope. If you can sketch a Phase II concept while writing Phase I, that's a sign you understand the program logic.
- STTR requires a formal subcontract with a research institution. If you're considering STTR, confirm your university or lab partner is prepared to execute a subcontract, has cleared any IP/licensing issues, and can meet the timeline. This is often where STTR proposals run into trouble.
- The principal investigator employment requirement is a hard rule. For SBIR, the PI must be primarily employed by the small business (generally more than 50% of their working time) at the time of award and during the period of performance. This is commonly misunderstood and enforced.

8. BAA-Specific Considerations

Not all BAAs have funding available. Using DARPA as an example, each office will publish an annual "Office Wide BAA" that list overall goals and interests for research and development. While each office has funding to support seedlings and program development, it is not explicitly tied to the BAA. A PM who is interested in your work, may ask you to submit a white paper against the BAA and the BAA serves as a contract mechanism to fund you. Alternatively, a DARPA PM that works through the internal processes to start a new program will issue a BAA to solicit proposals for that work. In that case, there is an established budget to be deployed in executing this program and proposals are targeted to those dollars. In the case of the former, responses will be continuously evaluated against program needs. There is no single deadline and no ranked competition; proposals are evaluated against the solicitation's stated criteria and funded if they meet the bar and budget is available. The latter is a more traditional solicitation with a fixed due date and selection process. As such, it is important to know what you are bidding on and the best way to do that is talk to the PM. Beyond that high level differentiation, other BAA considerations include:

- **White Papers.** Many BAAs encourage (or require) a white paper before a full proposal. Treat the white paper seriously. This is a screening mechanism that protects both parties' time, and a strong white paper invitation to submit a full proposal is a meaningful signal of interest.
- **Technical volume quality is paramount.** BAA reviewers are typically technical subject matter experts. The depth and rigor of your technical approach matters more in a BAA than in most SBIR contexts. Vague claims of novelty will not survive review by domain experts.
- **There is usually no defined award size.** BAAs specify a range or leave it open. Your proposed budget should be justified by your scope of work, not reverse-engineered from a ceiling. Cost realism is evaluated seriously.
- **Relationship context matters more in BAAs.** Program managers issuing BAAs often have a clearer vision of what they're looking for than an SBIR topic statement conveys. If you have a relationship with the relevant PM or can establish one before submitting, use it to calibrate your proposal scope and framing.