



100 words that kill your proposals

By Bob Lohfeld

Inexperienced proposal writers seem to use words that should be avoided when writing proposals. These inappropriate words and phrases can weaken a proposal, annoy evaluators, and even undermine the bidder's credibility.

To help you write better proposals, we have compiled a list of the most frequently used words that should be avoided when writing proposals. Some of these came from Carl Dickson at CapturePlanning.com, while others came from lists that have circulated around the proposal industry for so long that the identity of the original authors has been lost.

Our list doesn't cover every word that should be avoided, and there are certainly exceptions to the usage rules, but our list does provide guidance and suggests alternative words that will strengthen your proposal. (The full list is actually about 200 words.)

Here's a brief discussion of the kinds of words you should avoid.

Crutch words

When writers don't know what to say, they often use crutch words to make the reader think they know what they are writing about. For example, when a proposal writer says, "We understand your requirements," then fails to demonstrate any understanding, the writer is using the word *understand* as a crutch.

The proposal would be much stronger if the writer demonstrated an understanding of the requirements by discussing how features of their proposal fulfill customer requirements. Avoid using the word *understand* in your proposal. It will most certainly be a crutch that replaces what should be a discussion of your understanding.

Boasting words

Boasting words cause a proposal to lose credibility and undermine the integrity of the bidder. I know every 10-person company feels compelled to say they are *world class*, *uniquely qualified*, *use best-of-breed tools*, *have industry-standard processes*, *have state-of-the-art technology*, and are *thought leaders in their market*.

I can assure you no proposal evaluator has ever based an award decision on this kind of puffery. Remove boasting words from your proposal, and focus your proposal on what

you are going to do for the customer, instead of trying to make your firm sound so important. Interestingly, the bigger and more successful companies are, the more humble they seem to be about their credentials.

Vague, useless words

No proposal evaluator has ever been moved by a proposal that said we are pleased to submit this proposal, enthusiastic about performing this work, committed to top quality, or we place our customers first. These are just useless words in a proposal. You will do better if you strip these from your proposal, and write about what matters—which is how you are going to do the work.

Weak, timid words

We believe, think, feel, strive, attempt, intend, etc. are all words that contemplate failure to perform as an acceptable outcome. Say what you intend to do, and don't couch it in timid terms.

Redundant words

In page-limited proposals, concise writing is mandatory. Let's make it a practice to replace redundant words with precise words. For example, replace *actual experience* with *experience*, *advanced planning* with *planning*, *close proximity* with *proximity*, *consensus of opinion* with *consensus*, and so on.

Unnecessary qualifiers

We are absolutely certain, it goes without saying, now and again, comparatively, thoroughly, needless to say, etc. are unnecessary qualifiers. While these words and many similar words may have a place in proposals, most writers use them as unnecessary qualifiers. Remove them to make your writing more concise.

Needlessly long words

Normally, you wouldn't use unnecessarily long words in conversation, so there's no need to use them in a proposal. Replace *ascertain* with *learn*, *encompass* with *include*, *enumerate* with *list*, *illustrate* with *show*, *initiate* with *start*, and so on.

Slang

We are hitting the ground running and rolling out the red carpet with seasoned managers... You might say this in conversation and it would be fine, but in a proposal, it just sounds odd. Proposals are more formal and may even end up being part of the contract, so write without using slang.

Words to avoid in proposals

Crutch words – used when writers don’t understand what to say

We understand...	Never use the word “understand” in a proposal, other than in a section heading. To say “we understand your requirements” obfuscates any understanding and is, by definition, an unsubstantiated claim. On the other hand, if you say something insightful about how you will fulfill the requirements, the reader will see that the bidder understands the requirements. Understanding should be demonstrated, not claimed.
Leverage our experience...	“Leverage” is a word that some writers use when they know there is an advantage to be gained, but they don’t know how to do it. Explain “how” rather than infer. Do not use “leverage” in proposals unless you are talking about a mechanical lever and fulcrum.
Thank you for the opportunity...	Means, “We are desperate for your business and don’t really belong in the market.”
We look forward to...	Just provide a call to action. If the RFP allows it, simply state when you will contact them to schedule an oral or finalist presentation. Make sure to follow the timeline addressed in the RFP.

Boasting words – these exaggerate or overstate facts, causing loss of credibility

state-of-the-art	This is overused and is probably not credible.
the right choice	Prove it.
uniquely qualified, unique, very unique	Prove it.
best of breed/class	Prove it.
premier, world-class, world-renowned	Can’t be proven. Using it is wasting the evaluators’ attention.

Words to avoid in proposals

industry best practices, industry standard	Overused, unless recognized as such by an independent 3rd party.
leading company, leading edge, leading provider, industry leader, pioneers, cutting edge, etc.	Overused and not believable. Don't damage your credibility by using it.
Vague, useless words – these provide little value to the reader	
we are committed	Customers don't want your commitment, they want results.
we are quality focused	This is another way of stating your intentions. Instead of focusing on quality, deliver it.
we value	Instead of valuing it, deliver it.
our mission is to	This is just another way of stating your intention.
dedicated to	Your dedication is not relevant to whether you have delivered or not.
top-quality	Is there any other kind?
full service	What exactly does that mean and is it credible?
comprehensive	As opposed to?
fastest growing	Your ability to grow rapidly may not be a selling point to your customer.
trustworthy	I don't know about you, but when I hear that, I tend to run the other way.
customer first	This is not believable. Everyone knows there are limits to what you will do for your customers. Don't strain your credibility.
maximize	What exactly does that mean? Be specific.
minimize	What exactly does that mean? Be specific.
optimize	What exactly does that mean? Be specific.

Words to avoid in proposals

holistic	What exactly does that mean? Be specific.
synergistic	What exactly does that mean? Be specific.
robust	What exactly does that mean? Be specific.
Weak words – these weaken the bidder’s argument and cause doubt in the minds of evaluators	
Don’t use	Use
we believe, think, or feel	Who cares? The customer doesn’t care what you think. Take whatever you were about to say, turn it into a positive action, and state the benefits to the customer.
we will strive, try, or attempt	Customers don’t want you to try, they want you to deliver.
we would be honored	This is just another way of saying how you feel and talking about yourself instead of making it about the customer.
we are pleased to submit	Of course you are! Does that phrase do anything other than waste the evaluators’ time and attention?
we are committed	Customers don’t want your commitment, they want results.
our highest priority	This is like saying it’s your greatest intention.
we can provide	Either you provide it, or you don’t.
we are involved in	Too vague. State what you are doing.
our mission is to	This is just another way of stating your intention.
we desire your business	Of course you do! But, your proposal should not be about your needs, it should be about the customer’s needs.
we intend to	Either you do it, or you don’t. Who cares what your intentions are.

Words to avoid in proposals

we are devoted to	This is just another way of saying you intend to.
we hope	That's like saying you intend to, but you're not sure you'll be able to.
Phrases with hidden verbs – replace with action verbs	
Don't use	Use
arrived at the conclusion came to an agreement	concluded agreed
gave a demonstration gave an explanation	demonstrated explained
has a requirement for	requires
has a need for	needs
held a meeting	met
made a payment	paid
performed an analysis of	analyzed
Redundant Words – simplify to write concisely	
Don't use	Use
6-month period	6 months
a number of	several
able to	can
accordingly	so
acquainted with	know
acted as	was
actual experience	experience
advance planning	planning
advance reservations	reservations
advance warning	warning
along the lines of	like, similar to
any and all	all, any, every (or leave out)
as to	about
basic fundamentals	basic or fundamentals

Words to avoid in proposals

capable of	can
close proximity	proximity
combined experience	This is a faux metric. Use <i>average number of years' experience</i> .
consensus of opinion	consensus
consequently	so
deteriorate in quality	deteriorate
discontinue	stop
each and every	each
end result	result
estimated roughly at	estimated at
exact same	same
filled to capacity	filled
first and foremost	first, foremost
for backup purposes	for backup
for the purpose of	for, to
functioned as	was
furthermore	then
give an affirmative answer to	say yes to, agree to
good advantage	advantage
if and when	if
in a teaching situation	in teaching
in accordance with	by
in addition	also
in an effort to	to
in as much as	since, because
in favor of	for, to
in order to	to
in the case of	if
in the event that	if
in the nature of	like

Words to avoid in proposals

in the neighborhood of	about
in this day and age	today
issue a reminder	remind
join together	join
in order to [verb]	to [verb]
new innovation	innovation
on a [daily, weekly, monthly] basis	daily, weekly, monthly
on the basis of	by
on the grounds that	because, since
past experience	experience
past history	history
plan ahead	plan
prior to	before
reason is because	reason is
regular routine	routine
responsible for managing	managed, manages
suddenly exploded	exploded
throng of people	throng
twelve noon	noon
utilize	use
with a view to	to
with reference to	about (or leave out)
with regard to	about (or leave out)
with the result that	so that
Unnecessary qualifiers – avoid these or if used, substantiate your assertions	
actually	now and again
all	obviously
always	occasionally
best	of course

Words to avoid in proposals

certainly	quite
comparatively	rather
definitely	relatively
exactly	respectively
finest	sharpest
heaviest	some
I am absolutely certain	sometimes
I guess/know/think	somewhat
it goes without saying	sort of
kind of	specific
lowest/highest cost/risk/confidence	thoroughly
maybe	totally
more or less	usually
most	utterly
needless to say	very
never	wholly
none	Worst

If I've missed some of your favorite words to avoid, let me know and I'll add them to the long list on our website.

This article was originally published July 20, 2012 in WashingtonTechnology.com.