Transport
for NSW

How To Write A Strong Response

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About this video series

The NSW Government is committed to supporting economic participation and social outcomes, developing skills and creating jobs for NSW citizens. This means building a diverse supply base by enabling small and medium enterprises, social enterprises, disability enterprises and Aboriginal businesses to engage with procurement opportunities. Numerous policies reflect these commitments, including the *Small and Medium Enterprise and Regional Procurement Policy 2021*.

We recognise that our supply chains are complex, and opportunities are not always with the NSW Government but through our supply chains, e.g. with principal contractors.

This video series supports diverse businesses in applying for infrastructure project tenders. The guidance in the videos comes from 'real life' examples of tender documentation and minimum requirements for infrastructure procurement opportunities in NSW. This series was developed by Transport for NSW and iClick2Learn, a Dubbo-based social enterprise certified under Social Traders.

About the author

Natalie is a tender and grant writer and assessor. She has helped raise over 45 million dollars for services and product submissions while working with enterprises, small businesses and the not-for-profit sector. Natalie holds an 82.5% grant and 94.2% tender success rate. She teaches and mentors people to apply for tenders and grants and establish grant and tender businesses. Natalie is the author of 'Win the Grant' being published in May 2022 and 'Win the Tender' scheduled for late 2022.

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Contributors

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How to develop a strong response

You've analysed the client requirements and your proposed solution. Now it's time to think about how this information helps you write a strong response.

Gather your notes from previous videos:

- Response outline
- Competitive analysis
- Notes from your workshop

Go through your notes and transfer any new information into the relevant answer map. Your answer map will guide what you include in your response. Review the answer maps and how well the information flows from one response to another.

Before you start writing, do some quality checks. This takes time, but it saves you even more time and stress in the long run. If you don't perform quality checks, you'll notice errors as you're writing, and you'll have to go back to see where else this information is mentioned. Worse yet, failure to fix errors leads to contradictions that confuse the assessor and reduce their confidence in your ability to deliver.

Let's work through the responses from the first question using each of these lenses. Print them out and line them up on a wall, or across a table.

Have you factored in all the costs?

In some responses, you may need to refer to pricing, or information that helps justify the pricing. So it's important to get your pricing information in order. You may need to stop here and complete the pricing schedule before you move forward. If someone else is doing the pricing schedule, continue working through these points. Then, return to the responses with the pricing lens.

Check that you've assigned the correct prices to all aspects of the proposed solution. Do a virtual walk through of what happens at each stage. Check you've included every cost.

Reference your response outline or tender documents to make sure you're clear on the pricing instructions. Some tenders have defined pricing allowances for things like employee oncosts. You'll generally receive a pricing schedule table or spreadsheet asking for your hourly or daily rate for various staff.

Consider the competitive factor. You need to make sure your pricing is competitive and clearly details inclusions to justify the price.

Check the flow of your responses

Make sure that you don't expand on something in question 2 that you're introducing in question 5. Check how the submission flows when it's read as a whole.

Highlight prospective client benefits

Now view the answer maps from the client's perspective. Review your response outline where you identified their key messages, values and priorities. Reflect on their objectives and goals. Look at each answer map with that lens. Is there anything you should add or expand?

Demonstrate ability to fulfil requirements

There is a section in the answer map to note down how you demonstrate you can fulfil requirements. Check that you've given examples that directly relate to the question asked. Some tender responses include testimonials and case studies that are too general or showcase something that doesn't directly relate to the question. These should only be included when they strengthen your response and directly address the points the question is asking.

Check your stats and facts

One common mistake is including contradictory information, particularly related to statistics and facts. Check the answer map and the stats you're sharing. Map your statistics to the other responses to make sure they are accurate. If your stats are different in another response and there's a valid reason, be sure you explain.

Your first draft

Now that you've got your answer map and background information, it's time to start writing. You can either start writing and come back to reformat and restructure, or you can plot your approach. Analyse the question to make sure you're giving enough information, not too much. Consider how you'll structure and lay out your response. This is just a draft, so don't worry about editing or word or page limits. We'll address those things in the next video.

Analyse the question

Each question requires a certain depth of information. For example, one question might require detail while another only needs a summary. Look at these as 'action' words that indicate what your action should be. You have already done this in your answer map, and you can check it against the below example.

Recruitment Process

Detail processes for appointing new employees and/or sub-contractors. Include information about policies, procedures and your due diligence process to validate qualifications and competencies. Include information relating to your diversity and inclusion practices.

Action words relating to the question are highlighted and underlined below. To keep the example straightforward, I've focused on one theme: new employees.

- **Detail** processes for appointing new employees
- **Include information** about employment policies, and procedures
- **Include information** about your due diligence process to validate their qualification and competencies.
- **Include information** relating to your diversity and inclusion practices.

In this example, you must provide detail in the first part of the question. The detail part of the question should be clear. Detail means the client wants very specific information so they can understand each step of the process and what's included. Within that process, you should include information to address the remaining three areas.

Consider everything you've learnt about the prospective client and their key messages, values and priorities. Reflect on the evaluation criteria. If you had to provide more detail on any of the three areas, which would it be?

You can reference policies and procedures and attach copies if you are required, or able to. It is often enough to use the heading of the policy or procedure to understand why it's there. You might want to give a summary of the key objectives, but they haven't requested a detailed response.

The second relates to a few areas in evaluation criteria, such as quality, risk and capability. Expand on these areas and list the process, including ongoing validation when these licenses expire.

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The third point links to our example evaluation criteria around diversity and inclusion. If this is the only question where you can talk about diversity and inclusion, provide a bit more detail on your processes. For example, highlight what you do at each stage.

Here are some action words and what they mean:

- Describe: Give enough detail so they can understand; ‘paint a picture.’
- Demonstrate: Clearly show with evidence and proof. Give a practical example or visual.
- Explain: Provide as much detail as possible, including reasons.

Structure your response

Think about the assessors evaluating your response. They read a lot of information in a short time, which can be exhausting. This is called ‘cognitive load.’ Your goal is to provide clear information, structured in a logical way. This strategy helps assessors easily understand and quickly absorb and remember key points from your response.

You may not appreciate constraints like word or page limits, but they exist for your own benefit. Boundaries help you communicate clearly and succinctly.

There are a few options when considering how to structure your response. Some questions are best answered in the order they were asked with headings and subheadings to draw attention to that part of the response. Some are better in a table format and others are better delivered in a more academic framework.

Let’s review some examples.

Standards, goals, processes and achievements

The following format is useful because it focuses on a logical framework

- first on the high-level objective of that question you’re responding to (Standards), and then
- shares the result you expect to achieve (Goals),
- followed by how you implement processes to achieve your standards and goals,
- to the final part which is how you monitor and report on progress and achievements.

Let's look at a question about Risk Management and how you would use this structure.

Risk Management

Describe how you mitigate risks and what your risk management processes are. How do you identify key risks, monitor these and report on them?

You can use elements in this question as headings and use the structure as a logical framework. An example layout structure would be:

1. Quality risk management
   This is where you give an overview of the quality standards you have around risk management. Include examples of policy documents and quality statements. This is an introductory 'setting the scene' response, so don't use a lot of words. Establish that you have a risk management framework in place. You might refer briefly to your goals, but only raise those where you can demonstrate progress and achievement.
2. Processes
   Describe the risk management processes you have in place to meet our quality standards and goals. As the word is 'describe,' you need to provide enough information to encourage understanding, but not so much that it's detail, explanation or justification.
3. Risk identification and mitigation
   Set out 'how' you identify key risks, with examples of what you classify as a key risk. 'Describe' how you mitigate risks.
4. Risk monitoring and reporting
   Talk about your risk monitoring and reporting process. As the word 'how' is at the beginning of this part of the question, talk about the steps involved. As prospective clients like to receive reports on these areas, it can be useful to include an example of how you've worked with another client to integrate with their monitoring and reporting processes.

You could choose an alternate way to address this question, but the above makes logical sense. It also aligns to a structure that helps reduce cognitive load. It does this by setting the scene and giving a quick overview of standards and goals. Then, it describes your processes and details on the final two points.

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Think about this from your perspective and from what you understand of the tender requirements and the prospective client expectations. For example, the first point doesn't address the question and they didn't request this information. The assessor could be put off by reading background information.

However, it does add value and strengthen evaluation criteria. If you decide to include background information, keep it brief and to the point. Think about how you frame the response. You could talk about the prospective client's requirements and expectations as they relate to risk management and address how you meet these requirements.

Tables

Let's look at an example question and why a table is the best approach when developing the response.

Licensing, Certification, Accreditation, Qualifications

Demonstrate and provide evidence of current:

- Licenses
- Certification
- Accreditation
- Qualifications

Describe how you manage and update compliance to maintain these.

The question requires information on both the business and its people. If you need clarification, use the communication process outlined in the tender documents. For this example, we will assume it's both business and people related. The example includes the attachment reference because the question asks you to 'provide evidence of current...' You may choose to leave out the middle column, expiry date. The example includes it as a reminder, from the assessor's perspective and yours, to ensure you include the current version.

License, certification, accreditation, or qualification listed	Expiry date	Process to manage and update compliance

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ISO 3100: Risk Management certification (Attachment E)	(Date here)	Describe quality management review and audit processes. Include internal and external. Dot points are sufficient.
Light Rigid license (Attachment F)	4 employees with varying expiry dates from (year) to (year).	Describe process to monitor and report on validation of renewal of license. Dot points are sufficient.

Sometimes you can’t use a table because response constraints don’t allow it, or it's an online text box. If this is the case, your next option is to use headings.

Consider grouping similar processes. For example, you can group business licenses then people related licenses. If you have different processes to manage and update compliance, summarise after you list them. If your processes are the same across all areas, you would have this as the last heading in your response.

We are addressing, ‘Describe how you manage and update compliance to maintain these,’ and we have 100 words to reply.

Our drafts follow the standards, goals, processes, progress and achievements format.

Draft 1:

We recognise the importance of managing and updating these records. We take compliance very seriously and am proud of our record in complying with the requirements of all licenses; certificates; accreditation and qualifications listed above. We identify everything that needs to be met including documenting all expiry dates for these and check that they have been reissued with all of our staff and subcontractors when due and update our records. Our compliance manager trains her staff to know what to do to maintain these records and they have never missed one since we’ve been monitoring this in the last 3 years. As part of our process, we approve the team to work on projects and double-check these records are updated in case the client wants copies. When we hire subcontractors, they have to provide copies of all their current records to show that they are up to date. We *have also developed a comprehensive procedures and annual audit form. (159 words)*

If you were editing the response you'd replace or remove the words struck through below. New words and changes are in orange. For more on the why we're doing this, see video 8 handout.

Draft 2:

We recognise the importance of managing and updating these records. We take compliance ~~very~~ seriously and ~~am proud of our record in complying~~ comply with ~~the~~ requirements for ~~of all~~ licenses; certificates; accreditation and qualifications listed above.   We ~~identify everything that needs to be met including~~ document~~ing all~~ expiry dates ~~for these~~ and check ~~that they have been~~ reissued documents with ~~all of our~~ staff and subcontractors ~~when due~~ and update ~~our~~ records when due. ~~Our compliance manager trains her staff to know what to do to maintain these records. and they have never missed one since we've been monitoring this in the last~~ Our internal training program resulted in 100% compliance in the previous 3 years. ~~As part of our process, we approve the team to work on projects and double-check these records are updated in case the client wants copies. Our process is to re~~ We validate and provide updated records prior to staff working on ~~clients~~ site~~; and provide copies of these to clients. When we hire s~~ Subcontractors ~~, they have to~~ provide ~~copies of all their current~~ records to demonstrate compliance. ~~show that they are up to date~~. We have ~~also~~ developed a comprehensive procedures and annual audit form.

This is draft 2 after editing:

We recognise the importance of managing and updating these records. We take compliance seriously and comply with requirements for licenses; certificates; accreditation and qualifications listed above.   We document expiry dates and check reissued documents with staff and subcontractors and update records when due. Our compliance managers internal training program has resulted in 100% compliance in the previous 3 years. We validate and provide updated records prior to staff working on site. Subcontractors provide records to demonstrate compliance. We have also developed a comprehensive procedures and annual audit form. (88 words)

However, it can still be improved. Let's look at the final draft to this question 'Describe how you manage and update compliance to maintain these'.

Final draft:

We have a quality management system that incorporates supplier and contractor due diligence, expiry, and due date monitoring for the above-mentioned documents.

In the previous 3 years, we have met our goal of 100% compliance maintaining up-to-date records.

Our processes and monthly monitoring reports ensure a proactive approach to revalidation of these documents, prior to their expiry. We validate and provide updated records prior to staff working on site.

Our compliance manager has developed a robust training program with the compliance team to embed these practices across the organisation. (89 words)

In the above example, I've used the words 'quality management system.' If you have ISO quality management certification or similar, state this next to where the quality management system is written.

Strategic review

Strategic reviews are part of the editing process. The first is a strategic quality review, followed by a content and editing review and finishing with an independent mock assessment. All these reviews rely on you having the time. If you don't have time to do these three, you should at minimum do a content and editing review.

This review critically assesses if you have the key information that aligns to the prospective clients' key messages, priorities, and values. You'll refer to your response outline and your answer map and ask:

- Have you demonstrated that you understand their requirements?
- Have you demonstrated your experience and knowledge?
- Have you reinforced the value that your solution offers?
- Is it clear what your approach is and that you can implement the proposed solution?

Re-watch videos two and four to refresh on the importance of tender requirements.

Highlight the words that must survive edits. For example, if the prospective client consistently uses the term 'quality processes and systems,' you don't want to edit this out. By leaving this term, you aren't parroting their words. You are reinforcing that you understand their needs.

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