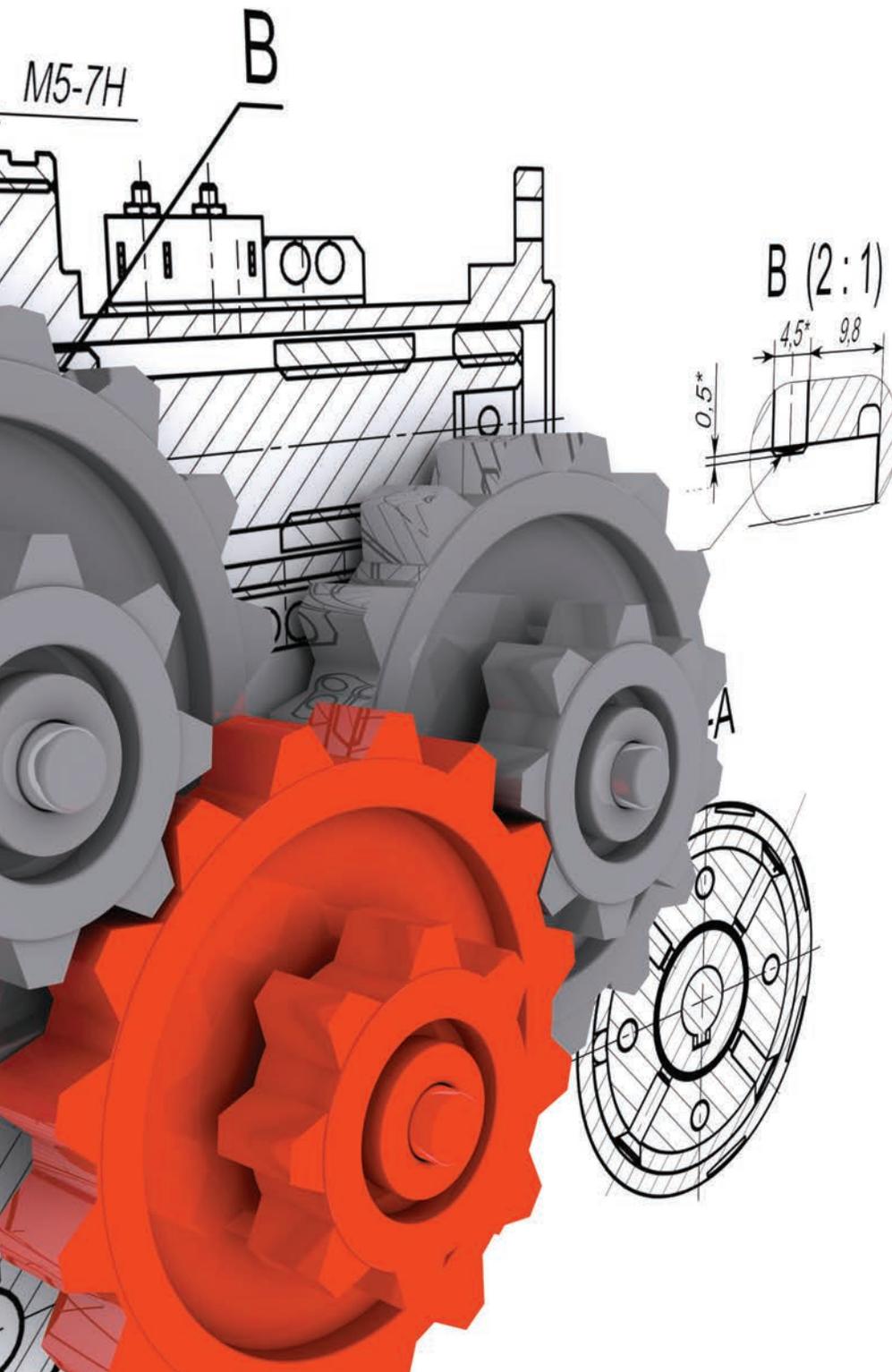# How to Write

an
Engineering Project Proposal

By Ian S. Lauder

The term "engineering" encompasses many different types of businesses these days, but there's one thing they all have in common: whether your company is automating a factory, fabricating parts for marine engines, or improving the efficiency of wind generators, you constantly need to line up new partners, secure new contracts, get projects approved, and find new customers.

Because engineering is all about details, you can't simply dash off a list of the products or services you offer and hope to finalize a deal that way. You will need to create a business proposal.

If you've just been assigned the task of writing a proposal for the very first time, you may be feeling a surge of anxiety. You know your business and you can explain your plans, but maybe you're not a writer. Don't fret—writing a proposal is not nearly as difficult as it may first seem. That's because all good business proposals follow a basic principle and share a common structure.

The basic principle is this: customize each proposal for the reader. This means always keeping the reader—your potential customer or partner—in mind when you present your information. The first question in most people's minds is, "What's in this for me?" So focus on explaining the benefits of your proposal to the reader. Also, keep in mind the reader's knowledge level. What does he or she already understand about your organization or your project? What questions and concerns will he or she have?

The most commonly used proposal structure has four parts: (1) an introduction, (2) a customer-/partner-centered section, (3) a detailed project-description section, and finally (4) a section describing your organization and its experience.

Let's look at the sections in more detail. The introduction section is brief. Simply write a cover letter that explains who you are, details why you're submitting this proposal, provides all of your contact information, and asks the reader to take the next step (call for a meeting, approve the project, etc.) after reading your proposal. Then create a title page, which simply names your proposal. Examples might be "Proposed Retooling of Cutting Machines to Improve Efficiency" or "Smith Engineering's Proposed Design for New Solar Panels." Next, if your proposal is long, you may want to include a table of contents and an executive summary (a list of your most important points), but you can come back later and insert those pieces—they're easier to create at the end.

The next section should focus on your potential customer or partner. Describe their needs and requirements. If you are responding to a formal Request for Proposal, restate the requirements specified in the RFP document; you will also want to add any other requirements that you may be aware of, such as a general need for efficiency, cost savings, or competitor capability-matching. The parts of this section will have names like Background, Problem Statement, Needs Assessment, Requirements, Limitations, Budget, Deadlines, Responsibilities, and so forth. Your goal is to describe in detail what your potential customer or partner wants and expects.

After you've described the situation from your reader's point of view, it's time to explain how you propose to meet all those needs and requirements. In the project-description section, you will include all the details of your proposal, including what it will cost. The topic pages in this section will vary widely from one organization and project to the next.

At the very least, you'll want to include subsections of the project-description section entitled Project Plan, Schedule, Cost Summary, and Benefits. If you're describing a complex

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project, you might want to include subsections entitled Specifications, Blueprints, Process Summary, Milestones, Subcontracts, or Oversight, just to name a few—the list of possible topics is long. Be sure to include all the pages required to describe precisely what you have in mind. Discussing the details shows that you are an expert who knows what it takes to carry out a big project.

The last section is your chance to brag about yourself. Include all the information available that will persuade the proposal reader that you have the expertise to deliver on your promises. You'll want a Company History or About Us page, perhaps a list of personnel or team members who will work on the project, a list of clients served or similar projects you've worked on, and descriptions of any special training or certifications that make you especially qualified to take on the project. Referrals, testimonials, awards, and achievements go a long way to convince readers that you can be trusted; outside parties' recommendations are always more credible than your own statements.

Before you send the proposal out the door, make sure the pages are free of grammatical errors, and be sure they look neat and attractive, too; you want each proposal to represent you at your professional best. You might want to use your organization's logo, incorporate special bullet points or fonts, or add a colored border around the pages—graphic touches like this can help your proposal stand out when the

competition's tough, or when you simply want to "wow" your readers.

Now you know the basic principles and common structure of a solid proposal. You don't have to start with a blank computer screen, either. A pre-designed proposal kit can speed up the writing project by offering hundreds of template pages and completed sample proposals. In a good proposal kit, each template will include instructions and examples of information to include on that page, so you won't waste time wondering what to write. Make sure to use a kit that includes samples showing you how a variety of proposals might look and what they could contain. **N**

Ian Lauder has been helping businesses write their proposals and contracts for over a decade. For more help, visit http://www.proposalkit.com.