



BESPOKE**BIDS**

# Seven Ways to Lose a Tender

'OFF THE RECORD'  
PROCUREMENT LEADERS  
REVEAL WHY BIDS FAIL



# How we created this guide

**“ You get some amazing bids.  
Great to read. Real sense of passion.  
Can't fault them.**

Commissioner for Local Authority



We're not talking about faultless submissions here. This is the definitive guide to bad bids.

We wanted to find out what really sets submissions, rather than suppliers, apart. So we spoke to commissioners and experienced bidding experts in the public and private sectors, with the assurance they remain anonymous to ensure maximum candour.

It turns out even the best suppliers can write bad bids.

In hushed tones (or barely contained exasperation) these incognito insiders revealed the all-too-common errors that could be spoiling your chances of success.

Here are seven ways to lose a tender 

# 1. Not Following Instructions

**The single most common reason for ending up in the 'reject' pile.**

Most failing bids lose out because they don't answer the question being asked. Everyone we spoke to threw their hands up at some point in disbelief at the sheer number of applicants unable or unwilling to follow basic instructions.



“



**JUST FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS.**

99% of bidders will get something wrong because they didn't read the instructions, or simply ignored them.

“



When writing an RFP, we have to write for children because you'd be amazed how many people can't read and follow simple instructions.

“



This is especially important for public sector bids. You can't go back for clarification once you submit.

“



Even organisations that have the resources and should know better, like the big four accountancy firms, get it wrong.

“



Sometimes it's clear that the bidder has simply chosen to ignore the criteria. For example, deliberately going with their own pricing table or structures.

# 2. Bad Writing and Formatting

## Spell check, anyone?

Commissioners read a lot of submissions. No one would officially say that bad writing and formatting impact bid success but virtually everyone indicated that dull, repetitive and hard to read text doesn't help anyone, especially when it's a close call in other criteria.



### I. Spelling and grammar

“ Basic spelling and grammar errors are a common problem for large and small suppliers alike.

“ **You'd be amazed how many spelling mistakes we get in submissions.**



### II. Waffling

“ Be concise. It would be enjoyable to go on at great length about how much waffle I've had to wade through but I'll take my own advice and stop talking!

“ Remember, we're reading piles of these every day. Keep it as simple and short as possible.

“ If the word count says 500, I'll only read the first 500 words. If you haven't answered the question in the first 500 words, it's not a compliant bid.



### III. Leaden prose

“ For every ten bids, there are one or two suppliers that could technically provide the service but the bids just don't read well.

**“ When you write poorly, you're risking lumping yourself in the same bracket as inferior suppliers.**

“ Bad writing isn't a red line per se, but it immediately puts you on the back foot.



### IV. Stock phrases

“ 'Experts by experience' is a phrase that came in 10 years ago. We got a bit bored seeing it, to be honest.



### V. Poor or over-creative formatting

#### Using poor layout or making it difficult to navigate

“ A lot of tenders are quite restrictive in the formats they want. However where there's scope for creativity, that can spell problems if the bid hasn't been worked on by a proper creative.

#### Including diagrams where not supposed to

“ I don't care how pretty it is. If we said no diagrams, you're not doing yourself any favours.

#### Using the wrong sized font (usually in an effort to cram more words in)

“ If we say no more than one side of A4 then don't use 6pt Arial!

“ Some suppliers remove the spaces between words to squeeze more in. And we're supposed to read that?!

# 3. No Substance

**If you've got the capability to deliver, you could be in with a good chance of winning that next tender.**

Unless of course, you don't prove it. Or rely too much on other people's arguments to make you sound like you know what you're talking about. Or burn your word count talking about something else entirely...



## I. Not answering the question

“ I can only give 50% marks if you've only answered 50% of the question.

**“ Answer the question!**

“ Sometimes I know the supplier. I know they do good work. But they haven't told me on the submission, and that's what counts. It's sad, really.





## II. Not providing evidence

Being overly technical or theoretical, instead of specific and practical:

“ Use an appropriate amount of technical language. Don't try to impress or confuse.

“ Don't become too theoretical. Anyone can cite best practice. You need to evidence what you have done specifically.

**Citing third-party research as a crux:**

“ Don't regurgitate the fashionable texts back to me. Show where you've done it before. Or how you'll do it now.



## III. Trying to shoehorn something in

“ If it's not relevant, don't include it.

“ How would you include something outside scope? You'd ask a clarification on the portal. But if it's not in the tender, it won't be scored. It's rare a tender will be revised. You can't rewrite the rule book. No commissioner likes to be told they've done anything wrong. Get on with it.

“ If you think it's important, make sure it's really important before asking!

# 4. Poor Organisation

**If you can't manage your time to produce a compliant bid, chances are you might struggle to deliver the service on time as well.**

At least that's what the commissioners will be thinking. You might be brilliant at everything apart from writing bids, but how do they know?



## I. Leaving it to the last minute

- “ You need to take time, especially to source evidence and review for accuracy.
- “ Don't forget the workshops. Bidders will arrive at a workshop and ask, 'What's the plan?' It's right there in the RFP!
- “ If you're scrambling around a few days before the deadline you might as well not have bothered. You should know when the tender is coming out and when it's due. You should have been to the bidding event. It should be part of your strategy.
- “ Start getting evidence together first so by the time you're writing the bid you have it all to hand, and you're tweaking rather than tearing to pieces.

**“ Timescales are too tight now to muck around, especially for Local Authority bids.**







## II. Failing to seek help when you need it

“ Some larger organisations are very slick and experienced in bidding for tenders. That puts the pressure on if you’re a smaller organisation. Preparation is key. If you only have a few people, find partners early.



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# 5. Low Energy

**Sometimes bids meet the criteria but fail to impress because they were ‘by the numbers’.**

Remember that the people reviewing your submission are not cold, calculating penny pinchers. In most cases, they have a palpable sense of duty and enthusiasm for the services they are procuring. This is particularly true in the public sector or any contract that involves health and community support.

**If you can’t match their passion, it might not matter that you can match any price.**



## I. Not putting the effort in

“ Bid properly. That extra 20% effort might get you those last few, all-important marks. Put the effort in.

“ **We’d be lying if we said a bit of flair doesn’t make a difference.**





## II. Having no passion

- “ Clunky writing isn't really excusable when it comes from a big organisation. However, with some grassroots organisations, you get people who've come through their own struggles with addiction, etc. In these cases, such authenticity means we're more forgiving of colloquial language.

**“ A lot of bids are polished but lack heart. You want the passion to shine through.**



## III. Using templates/stock answers/filler text

- “ So many copy and paste answers. People even forget to change the place they're bidding for!
- “ We've seen the placeholder text '[INSERT BRIEF DETAIL]' on too many submissions to count.

**“ It's ok to use the same text for submissions. It saves time and helps your team to remain consistent. But make sure it's actually tailored to the bid.**



# 6. Arrogance

The supplier-client relationship starts at the tender process. You can easily sour the mood by creating the wrong first impression.

Arrogance takes many forms, some more subtle than others. Suppliers can be anywhere from “a touch self-indulgent to downright difficult”. It won't hurt the commissioners' feelings, just your chances.



## I. Trying to bend the process to your schedule

Being awkward

“ Oh, we can't turn up on that day

Asking for unreasonable extensions

“ No. You've got the same time as everyone else.



## II. Being over confident

“ I can't stand it when suppliers say: 'I trust this meets your requirements'. That's for me to decide!



## III. Being lazy

“ Don't ask us how you embed files. Google it!



#### IV. Leading the commissioner on

“ Some bidders lead you on. They say they’re going to bid then pull out at the last minute.



#### V. Including too many headshots

“ Some bidders can fall in love with themselves, wasting pages on flashy bios rather than answering the question.



#### VI. Ignoring the human element

“ What’s the chemistry like? Some bidders are just plain difficult in the room.



#### VII. Bringing either too many or useless people to the presentation

“ Make sure whoever you bring is actually there to contribute something. We’re not impressed by extra bodies for the sake of it.”

# 7. 'Should Have Known Better'

This section could have been titled 'Miscellaneous Mistakes'.

Everything up to now may have made you laugh at the competition. However, be under no illusion that with the possible exception of point number one, everyone can (and will) make some of these silly mistakes.

All that hard work, only to fall at the final hurdle...



## I. Entering bids you can't win

“ At least 20% of bidders for each tender shouldn't have bothered. Don't kid yourself.



## II. Forgetting attachments

“ Attach all the attachments! Especially with big submissions where you may have anything like 30 attachments. Set up your folders clearly and please include copies of all plans.





### III. Uploading the wrong draft

“ We were one of the providers in a partnership bid. The other partner uploaded a previous final draft. I was livid.



### IV. Asking stupid questions

“ Many people don't realise they're being assessed. It's a competitive process. Don't reveal yourself to be an idiot.



### V. Uploading with tracked changes

“ You'd be amazed how many submissions we've seen with tracked changes and comments still in place. If nothing else, it makes for rather entertaining reading!



# You now have seven ways to fail your next bid submission.

**Now if you don't want to lose your tenders...**



At the end of the day, all you have to do is answer the questions. And submit on time. In English. With the right attachments.

Easy, right?

Based on the numerous complaints above, obviously not. Even then, that's just the bare minimum. You may have differentiated yourself from low-level suppliers (or overconfident big players), but increasingly suppliers are up against a host of competent competitors, many of whom have ultra-slick bidding teams and cash to burn.



There's an art to forming a persuasive argument and conveying passion within the rigid framework of an RFP, as two of our insiders acknowledge:

“ Some people get lost in a tender. If you're not used to doing it, it can be a really difficult process.

“ If you haven't got a critical friend, you're really missing a trick. Someone to critique it for you. I've been on both sides. Even I miss things.

### It's ok to ask for help.

A professional bid writer can provide clarity while negotiating the complexities of the tender process. They can ensure your business communicates value in a way that resonates with the decision makers.

Win more and better business from private or public sector clients with help from Bespoke Bids. Whether you're an international corporation, an SME or a micro-business, we'll help you triumph in tenders.

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