



County Technical Assistance Service  
INSTITUTE for PUBLIC SERVICE

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# Purchasing Specifications and Standards

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Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other CTAS website material.

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# Purchasing Specifications and Standards

Reference Number: CTAS-194

## Why Specifications are so Important

Specifications are used throughout our lives, in ways you probably never thought about. A recipe for a cake or a cookie is a form of specification. All well written specifications are the product of concentrated group effort and are worth preserving. They represent the fruits of lengthy deliberation and study, combined with past experiences, and are essential to any efficient purchasing program.<sup>1</sup>

Specification Definition—A specification (part of an ITB/IFB or RFP solicitation) is a concise description of a good or service that an entity seeks to buy, and the requirements the vendor must meet in order to be considered for the award. A specification may include requirements for testing, inspection or preparing an item for delivery, or preparing or installing it for use, requirements for samples, descriptive literature, warranty, and packaging. *The specification is the total description of the purchase.*<sup>2</sup>

Specification Purpose—The purpose of any specification is to provide purchasing personnel with clear guidelines to purchasing, and to provide vendors with firm criteria of minimum product or service acceptability.<sup>3</sup> Success of the purchasing activity relies on the specification being a true and accurate statement of the buyer's requirements.<sup>4</sup>

Characteristics of a Good Specification—A good specification has four (4) characteristics:

1. *It should set the minimum acceptability of the good or service.* The vendor must know the minimum standard to determine what to provide. A standard which is too high means tax dollars may be wasted. Conversely, a standard which is too low means the goods or services will not meet the expectations of the user.
2. *It should promote competitive bidding.* The maximum number of responsive vendors should be able to bid to the specification. Restrictive specifications decrease competition.
3. *It should contain provisions for reasonable tests and inspections for acceptability for the good or service.* The specification should permit tendered goods or services to be evaluated against defined criteria by examination, trial, test or documentation. The methods and timing of testing and inspecting must be indicated in the specification.
4. *It should provide for an equitable award to the lowest responsive bidder.* The buyer obtains goods or services that will perform to expectations, and the vendor is able to provide the goods or services at an equitable agreed upon price.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Williamson County, Texas, *Purchasing Manual Policies*, (Revised 2001), 51.

<sup>2</sup>ibid, 51.

<sup>3</sup>ibid, 51.

<sup>4</sup>Bryan Kalms, *Developing Specifications for Purchasing*, Queensland Government, Department of Public Works, July 2003, 3.

<sup>5</sup>*Purchasing Manual Policies*, 51

## Types of Purchasing Specifications

Reference Number: CTAS-929

There are several of types of specifications that are commonly used. The following are some of the most common forms:

- **Performance Specification**—A type of specification in which the goods and/or services are described in terms of required performance. They may include such details as required power, strength of material, test methods, and standards of acceptability and recommended practices.<sup>1</sup> Performance specifications define the task or desired result by focusing on what is to be achieved (e.g., truck or airplane).<sup>2</sup>
- **Design Specification**—These are detailed descriptions of a good or service, including such things as details of construction or production, dimensions, chemical composition, physical properties, materials, ingredients and other details needed for the provider to produce an item of minimum acceptability. Design specifications are usually required for construction

projects and custom produced items and for many services.<sup>3</sup> Architects and engineers typically prepare design specifications for construction and manufactured products (e.g., buildings, highways, or other public works projects).

- Combination Specification—This type of specification includes elements of both design and performance specifications.<sup>4</sup>
- Brand Name or Equal—This type of specification is used to describe a commodity of a fairly common nature. It states a detailed description and a manufacturer and catalog or model number which meets the description and has been determined to be acceptable.<sup>5</sup> Competition among brands is usually attained by specifying “brand A or equal” in the specification.<sup>6</sup>
- Industry Standard—In this type of specification, all goods made to an industry standard are identical, regardless of manufacturer, and will result in acquisition of goods of uniform quality. An example is the UIL standard for electrical products.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Williamson County, Texas, *Purchasing Manual Policies*, (Revised 2001), 52.

<sup>2</sup>Bryan Kalms, *Developing Specifications for Purchasing*, Queensland Government, Department of Public Works, July 2003, 4.

<sup>3</sup>*Purchasing Manual Policies*, 52.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, 52.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, 52.

<sup>6</sup>Jim Pregler, C.P.M., *Specification Development: An Overview*, NIGP Technical Bulletin, (July 2003), 4.

<sup>7</sup>*Welcome to County Procurement*, Texas Purchasing Association, January 2004, 10.

## Purchasing Specification Development

Reference Number: CTAS-930

In the article entitled “*Guide to Specification Writing*”, the author (Kalms) describes a sample process (steps) to develop the specification. The process consists of two phases: a *development phase* and a *post development phase*. Within these two phases, Kalms outlined seven steps in developing the specification. Here are the seven steps:

### Developmental Phase

Step 1: Planning and Analysis Foundation of a good specification.

Step 2: Consultation and Information Gathering Valuable information and advice may be obtained through discussions with other departments, agencies, or governments (federal, state, and local), companies, purchasing officers, finance officers, other users of the goods and services, and associations. The more complex the project, the greater the need for additional expertise.

Step 3: Writing the Specification Some writing tips:

- Use simple, clear language.
- Define terms, symbols and acronyms (include a glossary of terms).
- Be concise.
- Do not explain the same requirement in more than one section.
- Adopt a user friendly format.
- Number the sections and paragraphs.
- Discuss the draft and refine it.

Step 4: Vetting the Specification and Obtaining Approvals After writing the specification, ask a colleague who is unfamiliar with the requirement to critique it from a potential supplier’s view.

### Post Development Phase

Step 5: Issuing the Specification Distribute to potential offerors.

Step 6: Managing Amendments to the Specification Should a need arise to amend the specification

during the "ITB or RFP" process, the amendment should be authorized by the person authorized to approve the amendment. The amended specification should be noted in the project files and all offerors or potential offerors must be given reasonable opportunity to offer to the new specification.

Step 7: Revising and Storing the Specification The specification should be reviewed at the end of the purchasing activity to ensure that it effectively defined the goods or services that were actually bought. If areas for improvement are identified, revise the specification with the benefit of hindsight.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bryan Kalms, *Developing Specifications for Purchasing*, Queensland Government, Department of Public Works, July 2003, 7-10.

## Organization of the ITB/IFB/RFP (Specification)

Reference Number: CTAS-931

In the article "A Syllabus for Development of Specifications and Boilerplates", the author (McCurdy) maintains that the ITB/RFP *may* be organized and consist of the following:<sup>1</sup>

Part I: Invitation/Request Cover Sheet (Title Page)—This part is a *title page* noting the bidding authority, general classification/description of the goods or service and any other introductory cover information.<sup>2</sup>

Part II: Bidder's Profile (Business Vital Statistics)—This part of the ITB/RFP lists the goods/service to be bid, the bid file number, the bid opening date, address and time, department contact and phone number, and where the vendor is to mail/deliver bids. Also to be included is the name, mailing and physical address, phone and officials of firm submitting bid. Likewise, information asking the vendor where orders are to be placed and where the county is to send payments should be included.<sup>3</sup>

Part III: Contractual Requirements/General Instructions & Conditions (Boilerplate)—This clause of the ITB/RFP is designed primarily for contractual clauses, general conditions and instructions (boilerplate). These clauses or general conditions and instructions provide the potential bidder with the necessary information to complete and submit the bid, and understand the shipping, delivery, performance, and other legal positions needed to minimize the liability of the unit of government and spell out the rights and remedies under the contract for the government as well as the contractor.<sup>4</sup> The author (McCurdy) states that if you (or a designee) cannot monitor, supervise, or evaluate the performance and/or compliance to a specific clause/requirement in the "Boilerplate," do not use it.

Part IV: Special Instructions & Conditions (relative only to this item)—This section of the ITB/RFP is designed to inform the bidder of what information shall be submitted with the bid/proposal, and any and all special instructions and conditions relative only to the competitive process for the particular invitation/request. No requirements related to the technical specification or the general conditions should be included in this component.<sup>5</sup>

Part V: Evaluation & Award (Objective Evaluation & Award Criteria)—This part of the ITB/RFP is designed to inform the bidder of the specific qualifications and criteria used to evaluate the bid and the bidder, as well as, the specific qualifications and identified criteria used in making the award.<sup>6</sup>

Part VI: Contract Administration (Who's Responsible for What)—This section of the ITB/RFP is designed to identify the individuals responsible for addressing any questions as to the bid and the contact for administration of awarded contract. This component also clarifies the administrative qualifications of the awarded contract.<sup>7</sup>

Part VII: Technical Specifications (The Meat & Potatoes-or-What Makes it Tick)—This component of the specification is the technical description of the goods or services. This part ensures that the specification issued is qualified, quantified, and/or structured to secure the best economic advantage or value (identifies the minimum needs of the department required to accomplish its objectives without any drawbacks or additional cost). The requirements are clearly stated and measurable by recognized standards or reproducible test methods. Technical specifications should be contractually sound, unbiased, non-prejudicial towards the bidders, and should foster maximum open competition while providing for an equitable award at the lowest possible cost.<sup>8</sup>

Part VIII: Exhibits & Attachments, if applicable (Schedules, Tables, Charts, List)—This part of the ITB/RFP is used to incorporate information and requirements related to technical specification and may include

schematics, installation site plan, layouts, statistical data standards, and test/scientific certifications.<sup>9</sup>

Part IX: Bid/Proposal Form (The How Much It Costs Sheet)—This part of the ITB/RFP is designed for the convenience of the bidder, and especially for the unit of government by establishing a universal pricing format (everybody sings from the same sheet of music, and ease of calculation). This form includes all tangible and measurable cost-related bid items/proposal functions.<sup>10</sup>

Part X: Check List (And Don't Forget)—This is an optional component of the ITB/RFP packets. This section is to act as a guide for the bidding firm through the various components they must complete. It also acts as a guide for additional data they must submit, and/or address specific sections to ensure their bid will be considered responsive and responsible.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Charles S. McCurdy, CPPO, *A Syllabus for Development of Specifications and Boilerplates*, Mississippi Public Service Commission, 1-5.

<sup>2</sup>McCurdy, 1.

<sup>3</sup>ibid, 1.

<sup>4</sup>ibid, 1.

<sup>5</sup>ibid, 2.

<sup>6</sup>ibid, 2.

<sup>7</sup>ibid, 2.

<sup>8</sup>ibid, 2.

<sup>9</sup>ibid, 3.

<sup>10</sup>ibid, 4.

<sup>11</sup>ibid, 4.

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