# SBIR Proposal Writing Basics: The Many (& Changing) Faces of DoD

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In the good old days, if you wanted to submit a Phase I proposal to some component of the Dept of Defense, you pretty much just followed a standard DoD format. But, as Dylan says in his song, the Times They Are a Changing…

Today, the 12 different DoD components have increased their differences regarding expectations and requirements on your Phase I submission. Those differences are getting more pronounced all the time, including in the current FY18.3 and FY18.C solicitations. This month, we want to highlight a few of them so that you don’t mess up on your submission.

**Options.** Several years ago, some of the DoD components began requiring options on both Phase I and II proposals. An option basically is a set of tasks that the component will ask you to pursue “at its option”—meaning it is up to the DoD component to decide if it wants you to do that work. Because this is “optional” work, you should NEVER require that it be done to prove the feasibility of your innovation in Phase I—typically, the DoD component will only exercise the Phase I option once you have proven your innovation is feasible and they have decided to continue with you into Phase II. In the current solicitation, out of 7 DoD components that are participating, only 2 are requesting (requiring) that you include an option in your Phase I proposal. But note the two are B-I-G components, namely Navy and Army, and note that the size of the Phase I base project and option are very different (Navy is a $125k/6-month base and $100k/6-month option, while Army is a $100k/6-month base and $50k/4-month option). Note if your component wants an option in your project, you MUST give them a scope of work and budget—it is not “optional” for you to propose an option effort.

**Award size**. This follows from our comment on Options: the DoD components now put budget limits on Phase I proposals that range from $75k to $225k. Obviously, if your component limits proposals to $75k, and you propose $150k, then your proposal is going to be tossed out as noncompliant. Maybe less obvious is that, if your component allows $225k, and you only bid a $150k project, then you will have an inferior (smaller) project than your competitors, and the component reviewers will wonder if you read the instructions, know what you are doing, want to aggressively solve their problem, etc.

**Use of Volume 5**. You may be scratching your head, wondering “Volume 5? What is Volume 5? DoD organizes their proposals into 4 volumes.” Well, welcome to the new world of DoD SBIR/STTR, in which they have added a Volume 5. This new volume is basically where you are expected to stick attachments to your proposal, ranging from letters of support to lifecycle certifications (the latter has nothing to do with your mid-life crisis—it pertains to the things you are saying you will do and continue to do during the entire life of the SBIR/STTR project). But 3 components, namely Navy, Army and SOCOM have said that they “will not be using any of the information in Volume 5… during the proposal evaluation.” So, with proposals you’re sending to any of those components, do not include anything in Volume 5 that you want the reviewers to consider in deciding whether they should fund you rather one of your competitors, like support letters from potential customers, funders or licensees.

**Use of Volume 6**. But wait, there’s more—just when you were trying to understand when to use Volume 5 and what (and equally important, what not) to include in it, DoD comes along with yet another addition to its traditional 4 volume format. The new Volume 6 is where you are to attach your certificate showing you have completed DoD’s online Fraud, Waste and Abuse Training. Contrary to the title, this is not where you learn how to perform fraud, waste and abuse, but instead is where you learn what constitutes fraud, waste and abuse and how you should avoid these horrible things and the legal consequences if you fall into any of them on your DoD proposal or project. In FY18.3/18.C., the only DoD components requiring this certification as part of your submission process are USAF and Defense Logistics Agency (DLA). Is this a trend in the future and other components will require this certification? We don’t know. Is it a sign that DoD is going to fall into the unfortunate effort of aggressively pursuing SBIR/STTR applicants with fraud, waste and abuse charges like we’ve seen at NSF and NASA? Don’t know that either, but we are clear that you need to understand the definition of fraud, waste and abuse and make sure you stay squeaky clean when it comes to these illegal actions, even if your DoD component isn’t one that requires this Volume 6 certification.

**USAF’s special twists**. If we were to point to one DoD component that is pushing the envelope and making the most changes to the “standard” DoD approach to SBIR/STTR, it would have to be the Air Force. For years now, USAF has required that you include, in the Volume 2 technical proposal, a “work plan outline” which they will use to create your statement of work if they award you a Phase I contract. Note that it must fit in the 20-page limit of Volume 2, so other sections of the technical proposal will have to be condensed to accommodate it. USAF also piloted in FY18.2 some “special topics” that were smaller than typical Phase I’s ($50k, 2 month) and included an open ended “got any ideas for other things we ought to be considering?” topic. In FY18.3, USAF is continuing the special topics pilot, but now they are $75k/2-month Phase I’s—and there are a few new boundaries on them (including the open ended one). USAF also is on board with the new Volumes 5 and 6 per the above discussion. We’re confident that USAF will continue to push outside the DoD norms, so stay tuned…

So, you’re probably finishing reading this article after getting some aspirin (or something stronger) to sooth the headache brought on by all these changes and inconsistencies across the DoD components. Sorry, but at least you now know that the components are all doing their own thing these days. Let us close by restating the obvious: you need to be up to speed on the changes and idiosyncrasies of the DoD component to which you are submitting your FY18.3/18.C proposal, or you risk being noncompliant with the component’s requirements and having your proposal tossed into the trash can. How do you avoid this horrible fate? FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS. It is that simple. The DoD and its components tell you what they want in your proposal, but you must set aside your preconceived notions and thoughts about what DoD has always wanted, and FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS in the current solicitation/BAA. And note that the table appearing on page 10 of the FY18.3 instructions give a valuable summary of some of the component differences we’ve been discussing. And don’t just read the subsection labeled “Phase I instructions” because changes and nuances may be found in other parts of the DOD solicitation/BAA preface file.

Got it? Good! But, a little more advice: FOLLOW **ALL** OF THE INSTRUCTIONS. Sure, you are looking at the general DoD instructions and other text found in the overall DoD solicitation/BAA, but it is important to note that each component includes supplemental instructions at the beginning of its portion of the solicitation. Now that you know the components vary in their requirements, we urge you to always carefully read the text that begins each component’s portion, so you don’t miss some important instructions.