

Figure IV-29 Using the Seven Golden Style Guidelines eliminates around 80% of typical stylistic errors in proposal documents.

- Rule ① Create active, not passive sentences!
- Rule ② Always be specific! Data, facts and figures!
- Rule ③ Avoid academic language!
- Rule ④ Use your name and your customer's name!
- Rule ⑤ Write short and concise sentences!
- Rule ⑥ Don't use unnecessary jargon!
- Rule ⑦ Only use superlatives when they're actually true!

Source: CSK Management

The rules are explained in more detail below. A negative and a positive example are provided for each to help you better understand the style guidelines.

➤ 1. Create Active, Not Passive Sentences!

We probably all learned a little about this at school. When we need to write something formal, we somehow always fall back on the passive. Unfortunately, passive sentences also sound very distanced and uninvolved, and therefore not compelling. Because passive sentences don't have a subject, the reader can't associate any advantages or benefits with a subject. And because the subject is usually the bidder, we're missing a clear opportunity here.

Passive sentences are often longer and can read as clunky and forced.

Sadly, many proposal documents are dominated by passive formulations. Active sentences dramatically improve the reader's experience.

	
<i>'After the end of the project, the following documents will be handed over: [...]</i>	<i>'Roxaco shall provide Customex's team with the following documents once the project is complete: [...]</i>
<i>'For service purposes, a separate 220V voltage will be provided at the feeding point.'</i>	<i>'Roxaco shall provide a separate 220V voltage at the feeding point for service purposes.'</i>
<i>'Any disruptions will be rectified on site.'</i>	<i>'Our technicians will rectify any disruptions on site.'</i>

There are some cases where using the passive does make sense:

- In a negative context, where you don't want to directly associate the context with you as the bidder.
- When the subject isn't clear (e.g. if you're still not sure who will take on a certain task).
- If repeating the subject would be stylistically unattractive.

2. Always Be Specific! Data, Facts and Figures!

The more specific you are, the easier it is for the reader to understand and evaluate your document. Make your statements as precise as possible. This also makes you come across as credible and transparent.

As a writer, you often know what you mean by 'fast', but the reader might have no idea or even completely the wrong idea. By supplying a specific value, you're setting the benchmark for the competition. So, always be as specific as possible!

	
<i>'All team members have extensive years of experience.'</i>	<i>'All team members have at least ten years of experience.'</i>
<i>'The Roxaco solution can help Customex make significant savings.'</i>	<i>'The Roxaco solution can help Customex save up to 20% on material costs.'</i>
<i>'Roxaco can significantly decrease the churn rate.'</i>	<i>'In similar projects, Roxaco has decreased the churn rate to under 5% per year.'</i>
<i>'The software is simple to install.'</i>	<i>'The software takes less than 10 minutes to install.'</i>

You might now say that you can't provide exact information as it depends on too many external factors. And the legal-minded among you might argue that you shouldn't make any promises that you're not completely sure you can keep. Both assertions are completely justified. But there are some simple yet effective tricks you can use:

- *The 'up to' trick:*
Advertising often relies on this trick. You'll already be familiar with this old sales slogan, where a shop claims you can get 'up to 60% off'. The addition of those two little words 'up' and 'to' means 'between 0% and 60%'. But what sticks in your mind is 60%.
Of course, any value you give should be realistic. Or it would be unethical. This trick is just a nice way of avoiding any potential legal issues. You haven't made any promises. So, if you tell a customer that they can save 'up to 20%', then 20% should actually be attainable. The customer can use this to form a specific expectation.
- *The assumption trick:*
When you make a value proposition that's linked to a number, you can clearly state the assumptions you made in your calculations. This means that the customer can review your assumptions and adjust the calculation as needed.
- *The trick of referencing other projects:*
If you're uncomfortable specifying a benefit for the proposed service, simply refer to another similar project where you're easily able to outline the benefit. 'In similar projects, we have achieved savings between 15% and 25%.' This means you haven't made any promises yet still provided specific, tangible figures.

➤ **3. Avoid Academic Language!**

Many proposal writers try to sound as intelligent as they possibly can. The result is academic formulations that may sound clever but that deviate from the actual message. Try to stay as 'down to earth' as possible so you don't lose any type of reader.



'The software's user experience is excellent.'	'The software is extremely easy to use.'
'The solution will significantly increase your processing efficiency.'	'The solution will save you considerable time and effort.'
'The operational mortality rate is reduced by half.'	'The number of work-related deaths will be halved.'

➤ **4. Use Your Name and Your Customer's Name!**

Of course, many RFPs refer to a 'supplier' or 'bidder' as the customer doesn't want to go through the additional effort of personalising each RFP. Similarly, many parts of an RFP can have a contractual feel about them. Contractual documents are mostly based on contract templates that contain a lot of formal terms. That's why customers will often refer to themselves as the 'contracting party'.

Nevertheless, you should stay away from these formal pronouns in your proposal where possible. Call your client by their name and don't refer to 'the customer' or 'the client'. You've probably noticed that good salespeople use your name here and there. We like to hear it! Refer to yourself by name as well.

It's important that you always use the same name all the way through. So, if your business consultancy firm is called 'Arthur D Little', decide early on whether you'll call your business 'Arthur D Little', 'Arthur D Little Inc.' or 'ADL' in your text.



'The supplier shall create a detailed project plan for the client.'	'Roxaco will provide Customex with a detailed project plan.'
'Afterwards, the client will be debriefed.'	'Project manager Ronald Bart will carry out a final debriefing with Customex team members involved in the project.'

And make sure that you spell your client's name correctly. I have heard that telecommunications giant Vodafone regularly receives proposals for 'Vodaphone'. Ouch!

5. Write Short Sentences!

Short sentences are easier to understand. That much is clear. As writers, we tend to go back and add information into existing sentences or try to make our statements more precise. This makes sentences grow longer and lose their readability, meaning we should sometimes separate them up to create several simpler sentences. Two short sentences are better than one long one! At the same time, we can also check our text for unnecessary filler words such as 'just', 'indeed', 'really' and so on.

You can actually verify the readability of your text with the Flesch-Kincaid readability tests. In the Flesch reading-ease test, higher scores indicate mean that that the text is easier to read. Lower numbers mark passages that are more difficult to read. Microsoft Word® can calculate your readability scores right within the software. After checking the spelling and grammar, you can choose to display information about the reading level of the document, including the Flesch readability scores.



<i>Although there were actually a few technical issues to begin with, such as deviations in the quality of raw materials for example, which had to be overcome, the mass production of the propeller shaft can still begin in accordance with our plan, so we are now able to confirm a binding delivery window of calendar week 51.</i>	<i>We are aware of the challenges, such as quality deviations affecting the raw materials. However, we can still begin mass production of the propeller shaft on schedule. We can now confirm calendar week 51 as our binding delivery window.</i>
<i>'While the electrohydraulic brake features a hydraulic fallback level, the purely brake-by-wire brake exclusively processes sensory interpretations of signal input during deceleration.'</i>	<i>'The electrohydraulic brake features hydraulic safety (fallback level). The instruction to brake is exclusively electronic for the brake-by-wire brake.'</i>

➤ **6. Don't Use Unnecessary Jargon!**

Avoid unnecessary jargon⁴⁵:

- Explain each technical term the first time you use it in each larger section. It's better to explain one time too many than one time too few, as not every reader will know all the terms you use every day as an expert in your field. Consider that non-experts will look at your text as well.
- Identify the customer's key terms and use these instead of your own internal versions.



The pixel architecture on the COLOREX DISPLAY reduces colour interference.



The colours on the COLOREX display are significantly cleaner than on conventional displays.

➤ **7. Only Use Superlatives When They're Actually True!**

In general, readers are suspicious of superlatives as they reek of exaggeration. In German-speaking countries especially, people are generally critical of unfounded superlatives. Superlatives are fine if you can provide evidence that someone or something is actually the best. In the English-speaking world, superlatives are less frowned upon. You should, however, still avoid them.



'OptiPac is the perfect software for Customex and will achieve maximum performance.'



'OptiPac software is an excellent choice for Customex as it reduces the error rate by 80% compared with the existing solution.'

4.2.4 Stay Positive!

If you want to leave the customer with a positive impression, you should try to always use positive formulations wherever possible.

You might have heard this before: if I were to tell you not to think about pink elephants, you'd do exactly that. You're thinking about pink elephants!

The same thing happens when a proposal text focuses on problems. Especially when it's not crystal clear that you're the one bidder that can get rid of all these problems. So, try to avoid negative formulations and keep your content positive. You'll find two classic examples below.

⁴⁵ Many people also use the term 'gobbledygook'.

Example 1:

Typical proposal text:

'Communication via the data interface requires a high level of interface programming.'

Better:

'In order to master the challenges of interface programming, Roxaco uses XY.'

Example 2:

Typical proposal text:

'Reviewing the quality of the database is not part of this proposal.'

Better:

'If required, Roxaco would be happy to submit an additional offer concerning database quality reviews.'

4.2.5 Ghosting

Ghosting is an elegant way of hinting at the competition's weaknesses without calling them by their names.

Most readers don't like to see you use the competition's name. It's especially unpleasant when the reader has some kind of direct connection or identifies with the competition for some reason. It may even make the reader feel directly attacked. It's also not a great idea to bring your competitor's name into the game, as it'll encourage the reader to think about the competition between you. Naming your competitor may increase direct comparison, which you probably don't want. You want to come across as though you're in a different league than the competition altogether.



There's an elegant trick to hint at the competition's weaknesses without naming them outright: ghosting.

The trick is comparing a certain aspect of your offer with a certain aspect of the competition's offer, and providing an evaluation that places you on top. You haven't named the specific competitor but the reader will automatically allocate the negative evaluation of this aspect to the competitor's offer.

A good example of ghosting comes from Jura, a Swiss manufacturer of high-quality coffee machines that contain grinders to freshly grind beans. Their main competitor is the Nespresso® capsule. So, most of Jura's advertising concentrates on ghosting the capsules system, directly comparing the freshness and value of freshly ground coffee with capsules.

Figure IV-30 Excellent example of ghosting: without naming the competition, Jura (with support from Swiss tennis star Roger Federer) touts the benefits of freshly ground coffee while highlighting the excessive cost of capsules.

Source: Jura’s US advertising campaign 2016

Another example: let’s say you’re submitting a bid for the three-phase commissioning of machinery over a period of six weeks. You know that the competition is offering the commissioning of all machinery within one week, changing over all equipment in one go in a kind of ‘big bang’ approach. Their idea is faster and cheaper than your six-week plan. But the advantage of your approach is that a slow, step-by-step process over six weeks eliminates a lot of risks. With a little clever ghosting, you can expose the risks of a ‘big bang’ project, casting the competition in a negative light without naming them.

Typical proposal text without ghosting:

‘We will put the new machinery into commission in three phases over a period of six weeks without disrupting operation.’

Proposal text with ghosting:

‘After assessing our options, we decided to rule out a ‘big bang’ approach in favour of the proposed three-phase commissioning. The risks that come with a ‘big bang’ approach are significant, and Roxaco believes that these would be untenable to Customex despite certain short-term cost benefits. For this reason, Roxaco has decided to implement commissioning for Customex in three phases.’

If you put yourself in the customer’s shoes, how do you think you’d now feel when reading the competitor’s bid offering a fast, cheap deal?

4.2.6 Repeat Your Messages: Little Strokes Fell Big Oaks

Repetition creates truth. Repeated messages increase credibility.

It's often an unavoidable fact that topics within an offer will overlap. So, an IT proposal may dedicate a whole chapter to 'data security' but this topic will inevitably pop up again in chapters about 'databases', 'data transfer' and 'access rights'. When we include the relevant elements of our proposal wherever they're relevant, repetitions are unavoidable. But it doesn't matter!

We just have to remember that the customer has an evaluation team: if the various aspects are analysed by different people in the customer's team, chances are that it won't feel like a repetition at all.

And even if your reader reads your messages more than once: that doesn't matter either. Quite the opposite! In advertising, they say *repetition creates truth*. You will have noticed this in TV advertising. They keep delivering the same message, again and again. For example, washing powder adverts always focus on the same things (stain removal, brilliant colours etc.). And even though we don't expect anything else from washing powder, this repetitive communication of the same content creates a certain level of credibility. If someone is constantly talking about something, it must be important to them. Repetition creates truth. Again, one time too many is better than one time too few.

Of course, you should try and avoid parroting the same or similar messages word for word. But you might want to establish certain terms with the client, which they will then almost automatically associate with you as a bidder.

Told a Story?

As far as the written part is concerned, yes. You've identified the buying centre's needs, or the hot buttons, and developed suitable key messages that cover these needs with benefit-orientated arguments. You then positioned your key messages in the right places throughout the document, adding in any missing messages or details as needed. And finally, you supported your messages with compelling text and suitable images to achieve the necessary credibility.

To make your messages stick, you'll now have to communicate your story via other channels where possible