Practitioner Perspectives

WOLF DEN ASSOCIATES, LLC

Top Ten Infuriating Color Review Comments

1. *"This sounds awful"* – Without a revision suggestion, this is just an insult, not a contribution to p(win)

2. *"More proof points"* – If the reviewer doesn't detail a suggestion then they've added no value

3. *"I don't get it"* – The reviewer has to explain the confusion; engineers don't always write to the appropriate level

4. *"Not what they want"* – If they haven't read the RFP and rely on hearsay, they aren't qualified to review

5. *"Replace this with this old proposal I wrote"* – Ignore this person; they are in the past

6. *"This graphic is too dense"* – Ignore this person; they clearly lack vision

7. *"Fix the colors"* – Take pity, they may be visually impaired

8. *"How?"* – Useless without citing specific questions or circling back after review

9. *"Too many trees!"* – Took a deep dive on a particular section; you missed the forest

10. *"Wall of text"* – Winning proposals keep evaluators interested; good reviewers identify content to move to tables and graphs

Colorblind Continuous Proposal Reviews

- After nearly 30 years, Shipley-based color reviews are tired and bloated in a world of agile and innovative proposal best practices

- Introduce an agile approach with progressive quality checks, including color reviews, into the proposal process to increase p(win)

- The earliest review should provide a clear sense of how each section ties to the win strategy, win themes, and solution

- In the second review, emulate customer evaluation and critique content, presentation, and grammar with actions to raise the score

- Final reviews ensure incorporation of prior feedback, validate homogeneity, and confirm the customer can easily evaluate the proposal

- Winning teams focus their efforts on creating and iterating anchor artifacts, not polishing internal gate review slides

A Blank Canvas

As we enter the teeth of what is already a very busy proposal season, it is a good time to reiterate the state of the art in proposal reviews. Since our September 2014 *Practitioner Perspectives*, Wolf Den's clients have had great success progressively replacing gate reviews with a series of agile capture sprints. Each of these is rigorously time-boxed, with a weekly "wall walk" taking the place of the traditional litany of internal reviews. Under this new model, focus shifts on Day One from internal briefing slides to key capture and proposal artifacts – all visible so that progress is easily assessed, messages are shared, and conversation turns into content. Progressive quality checks and "independent" reviews of the evolving proposal (including Pink, Red, and Gold) emphasize compelling capabilities and win themes that promote a section's score from green to blue.

Broad Strokes

This agile approach does not replace traditional color reviews, rather it shifts the emphasis from proposal process (which has become its own cottage industry) to content creation. This process takes compliance off the table by having a dedicated compliance assessment before each color review. Reviewers are now free to focus on a substantive review of strategy, solution, and graphics from the first review (usually Pink Team). Artifacts should articulate how sections tie to the win strategy, win themes, and solution. At this early stage, finished prose is discouraged, but there should be bulleted narratives and near-final graphics. Facilitators must steer reviewers away from grammatical comments and focus them on providing actionable strategic feedback. All comments should include recommendations for remediation, ideally mapped directly to customer needs or hot-buttons.

Pink and Red Team Metrics

	reviewers	pgs	comments	non-actionable	actionable	grammar	comments per page
Pink	4.8	30.8	48.6	37.9	9.0	1.8	1.9
Red	5.9	47.1	104.6	77.1	18.6	8.9	2.4

In a representative sample of recent large proposals across a variety of customers, the number of actionable and non-actionable comments rose proportionately – adding reviewers increased quantity, not necessarily quality, of comments.
Source: Wolf Den Associates analysis
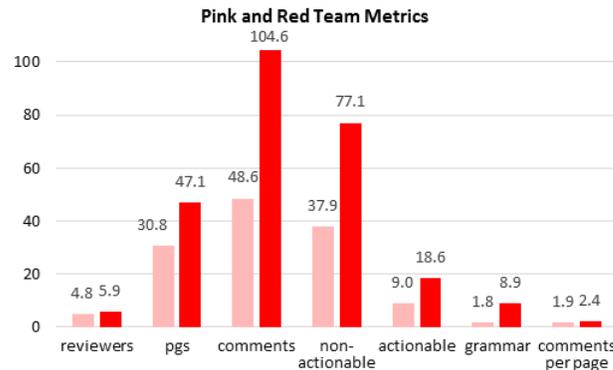
Detail Elements

After recovering from the initial review – a process enriched by having authors receive feedback directly from the actual reviewers – the goal is to create a content-complete draft. The second review (Red Team) asks reviewers to critique content, presentation, and win themes. The best idea wins: while not all good ideas conveniently arrive prior to review, an increasingly high hurdle must be used to adopt new ideas late in the game, especially those that ripple through the entire response and might compromise the ability to deliver a consistent and compliant response. On the rare occasions when a team cannot complete a Red Team draft quickly enough for both a comprehensive review and recovery, break the Red Team into a series of rolling reviews. This approach also works when the proposal is too complex to review at once.

Finishing Touches

By the last color review (Gold Team), limit the review team to a select few reviewers who ensure the final content effectively incorporates feedback from prior reviews, validate that all the sections tie together, and ensure that the customer can easily evaluate the proposal. At this stage, reviewers are only looking to make incremental changes (not "happy" to "glad") and the focus is on correcting mistakes. This review should also include the business owner, who can sign off that their team can deliver what is being proposed. A final "White Glove" review team, consisting of a core group familiar with the proposal from the beginning, conducts a page-by-page inspection to verify that everything is perfect. Using this iterative, collaborative approach, successful bidders eschew box-checking and agenda-driven reviews freeing up cycles to build responses that the customer actually finds compelling.

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