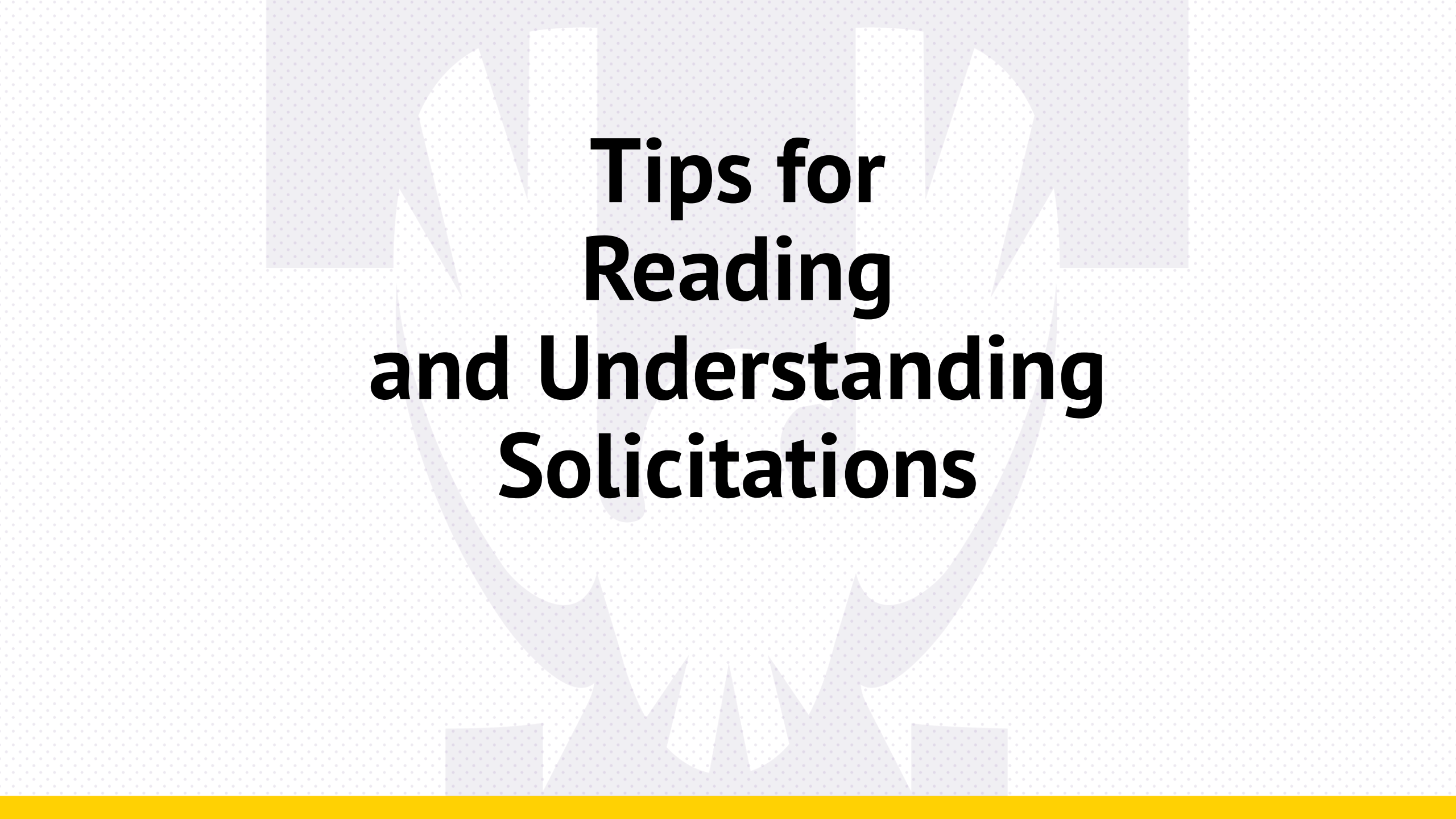




Tennessee
TECH

2025-2026 Research Workshop Series



Tips for Reading and Understanding Solicitations

Solicitations are also known as--

- **RFP** Request for Proposals
- **RFA** – Request for Applications
- **FOA** – Funding Opportunity Announcement
- **NOFO** – Notice of Funding Opportunity
- **PA** – Program Announcement
- **BAA** – Broad Agency Announcement (DoD)
- ...and more!

*While terminology varies by agency, all solicitations serve the same purpose:
to invite competitive proposals for funding.*

Why Reading and Understanding the Solicitation Matters

- Identify the funder's purpose and priorities
- Identify compliance requirements
- Understand required application structure and process
- Design your project strategically

The First Reading | Eligibility

- Organizational Requirements
 - Type of institution - Required partnerships or consortia - Limit on number of submissions from one institution - Previous or sequential funding recipient requirements - Non profit vs. Charity
- Individual Requirements
 - Career status/appointment (e.g., NSF Early-Career, NIH Early Stage Investigator) - Limit of submissions per role - Citizenship requirements - Ability to commit required FTE/effort

The First Reading | Early Decisions

- Track or Type
 - Does the solicitation offer multiple tracks based on scope or budget?
- Sequential Submission Process
 - Is a Letter of Intent (LOI) or concept paper required?
- Key Players
 - Do you need partners? Can you secure their commitment in time?

The First Reading | Deadlines

- Submission Date
 - Agency deadline for submission by Authorized Organizational Representative (Office of Research)
- Registration Deadlines
 - Register via different portals
- Internal Deadlines
 - TTU's institution's deadline (What, we have one?)
- LOI/Pre-proposal Deadlines
 - Often 30-60 days before full proposal
- Method of Submission
 - Grants.gov, Research.gov, agency-specific portals, email, etc.

The First Reading | Potential Dealbreakers

- Budget-Related
 - Cost-sharing or matching requirements - Cap on indirect costs (F&A underrecovery) - Limits on specific budget categories (equipment, travel, salary caps) - Is the award ceiling appropriate for your proposed work?
 - Unallowable costs
- Feasibility
 - Project period or earliest start date
 - Expected number of awards
 - Sufficient internal and administrative support available
 - Realistic timeline for your team

The Second (and 3rd, 4th, etc.) Reading | Purpose, Priorities, Review Criteria, etc.

- No matter how fabulous your project idea is, it MUST align with the purpose of the funder
- How does your research AND this RFP opportunity fit into the agency's broader mission?
 - Programmatic Priorities-- What are the specific priorities for this solicitation
- Keywords and Phrases
 - Identify and use the exact language from the RFP

The Second (and 3rd, 4th, etc.) Reading Review Criteria

- Review criteria are the foundation of how your proposal will be evaluated.
- Standard Agency Review Criteria Examples
 - NSF (from PAPPG): - Intellectual Merit - Broader Impacts
 - NIH (from application guide): - Significance - Investigator(s) - Innovation - Approach – Environment
 - DOE/ARPA-E: - Innovation and Impact - Technical Approach - Team Organization and Capabilities - Technology-to-Market Strategy

The Second (and 3rd, 4th, etc.) Reading Review Criteria | Close Reading

- Review criteria may include competitive preference or invitational priorities requiring specific populations, services, or activities - Some criteria are mandatory – failure to address them may result in return without review - Consider the point value or weight assigned to various components

The Second (and 3rd, 4th, etc.) Reading Review Criteria | Tips

- Structure your proposal narrative using the exact section headings, numbering, and organization specified in the RFP.
- Address each criterion explicitly. Don't make reviewers search for information – it should be immediately obvious where you've addressed each criterion.

The RFP Guides Your Proposal's Structure

Formatting Requirements

- **Font:** Most federal agencies require 11- or 12-point (Times New Roman, Arial, Palatino, etc.)
- **Margins:** Typically 1 inch on all sides
- **Spacing:** Single or double-spacing (varies by agency)
- **Page Limits:** MANDATORY limits for narrative sections
- **File Format:** Usually PDF, sometimes Word

The RFP can help ensure compliance, not just guide your proposal's structure

Structure Proposal organization and format

Compliance Conditions on which funding (or proposal review) is contingent

Key Distinction Structural issues CAN become compliance issues - Example: Page limits are informative about structure, but failure to comply results in a rejected proposal

When Reading for Compliance, Look For: - Institutional assurances and certifications - Required proposal documents and forms - Allowable vs. unallowable costs/activities - Regulatory protections (human subjects, animal use, export control)

Common Required Elements

- **Cover Sheet/Forms** (agency-specific: SF-424, NSF Cover Sheet, etc.)
- **Project Abstract/Summary** (typically 1 page, 250-1000 words)
- **Project Narrative/Description** (main technical content)
- **Bibliography/References Cited**
- **Budget and Budget Justification**

Common Required Elements Continued

- **Biographical Sketches/CVs** (format varies by agency)
- **Current and Pending Support** (Other Support for NIH)
- **Conflict of Interest Statements**
- **Mentoring Plans**
- **Facilities, Equipment, and Other Resources**
- **Letters of Support/Commitment** (if applicable)
- **Data Management Plan** (required by NSF, NIH, others)
- **Supplementary Documents** (vary widely by agency and solicitation)
 - Use caution—sometimes their inclusion can result in a proposal not being reviewed.

Reasons Proposals are Returned w/o Review

- **Missed deadline** – Even by 1 minute
- **Exceeded page limits** – Even by 1 line
- **Wrong format/font** – Not complying with specifications
- **Missing required documents** – Incomplete application package
- **Ineligible applicant** – Not checking eligibility requirements
- **Incomplete budget** – Missing required budget forms or justification
- **Missing certifications** – Institutional assurances not completed
- **Wrong submission method** – Using incorrect portal or system
- **File naming errors** – Not following specified naming conventions
- **Regulatory approvals missing** – IRB, IACUC not indicated when required

Conclusion

- **The RFP can guide your proposal writing**
- **Use the RFP to create a checklist**
- **Scan the RFP for ‘required’, ‘must’, ‘returned’, ‘rejected’**
- **Contact our office early--- we can assist in highlighting these areas**



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