

GSA eOffer presents a challenge: You now must enter chapters as “plain text”

by

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Are you writing a proposal for a GSA Schedule contract? Parts of the pitch, such as project descriptions, will include long text passages. For most Schedules you will now have to enter these sections into text boxes within eOffer, in “plain text”—in some ways, the electronic equivalent of using an Underwood typewriter.

“Plain text” presents challenges. Proposal writers will have to prepare text sections without the use of underlines, bold text, italics, and hanging indents—the very types of formatting tools that we commonly employ to make documents look good and to improve their readability. While it is possible to use bullet points within “plain text,” they have severe limitations that reduce their effectiveness. Tables and graphics are out of the question. They are not available within a “plain text” environment.

The dilemma: A key goal of any proposal is to present your content in an easy-to-read, pleasing manner. When you write proposal sections using Microsoft Word® (or other word processing software), you rely on dozens of tools that are second nature—e.g., leading (vertical spacing) between paragraphs; judicious use of bolding to set off subheads; tables; columns; and graphics. In the “plain text” environment, none of these tools will be available to you. The simplest chores—for example, listing items using bullet points, or creating a distinctive subhead—become tedious.

This article has two main purposes:

- To describe the mechanics of placing text in GSA eOffer text boxes, while avoiding common mistakes that can make a mess of it.
- To offer ideas on how you can maximize the readability of long text portions of your proposal within the constraints of “plain text.”

How has eOffer changed?

The old days. In prehistoric times (read: when I was younger), GSA proposals were submitted on paper, typically in three ring binders with tabs separating the major sections.

The rise of eOffer. As the GSA Schedule program grew in popularity, GSA was deluged with proposals. The avalanche of paper was overwhelming. To cope with the situation, GSA developed “eOffer”—an innovative, robust electronic portal that firms could use to submit proposals. After a shakedown period, GSA made it mandatory for offerors to use eOffer to submit proposals, and with exceedingly rare exceptions, GSA no longer accepted paper-based offers.

To submit a proposal using eOffer, a proposal writer would enter some data directly into eOffer. For example, proposal writers would:

- Indicate whether a firm was proposing to participate in the Disaster Recovery program by checking a “yes” or “no” radio button.
- Enter the names, e-mail addresses, titles, and telephone numbers of authorized negotiators into text boxes.

For the parts of a proposal that required relatively lengthy text-based responses (e.g., “Corporate Experience”; Project Descriptions), proposal writers would prepare the material in a word processing program and uploaded these files to eOffer as stand-alone documents.

This enabled proposal writers to prepare visually interesting, cohesive documents, combining text and graphics. For example, in a Project Description a proposal writer could:

- Use contrasting typography (e.g., Arial for subheads, and a serif typeface for text).
- Use visually pleasing leading (vertical spacing between paragraphs).

- Judiciously use bullet points, indenting, bolding, italicizing, em dashes, and other typographical devices.
- Insert graphics (e.g., bar charts to illustrate numeric information; photographs to help bring dry technical discussions to life).
- Include tables and matrices to help illustrate key points in the text.
- Easily append a copy of the contractual statement of work (SOW), as a cohesive part of the file.

A common approach was to prepare the project description in Word; convert the Word document into a PDF; and then combine it with a separate PDF that contained the contractual SOW. The end result: a cohesive, single PDF file.

As a final step, the proposal writer would upload the PDF file to eOffer, using eOffer’s excellent document uploading module.

The here and now. GSA now requires proposal writers to enter lengthy text portions of the proposal directly into text boxes within

eOffer. This approach is required for:

- Corporate experience. There is one of these chapters in each proposal. For this part of the proposal, eOffer presents seven individual text boxes, corresponding to each of the mandatory subsections specified in the RFP. Exhibit 1 presents some examples of these text boxes.
- Project descriptions. Depending on the scope of a firm’s proposal, this can include descriptions of a dozen or more individual projects. For each Project Description, eOffer presents about a dozen text boxes, corresponding to each of the subsections in the RFP.
- Quality control. There also is one of these chapters in each proposal. eOffer features a series of six text boxes corresponding to each of the mandatory subsections specified in the RFP.

How to enter text into GSA eOffer text boxes.

To illustrate the process of entering text into GSA’s text boxes, let’s use the “Corporate

Technical Proposal: Corporate Experience

***Required**

Briefly Address Each Element Below. (Note: Offerors are required to have a minimum of two years corporate experience in order to meet the Corporate Experience requirements. Offers that do not demonstrate two years of corporate experience will be rejected.)

The maximum permissible limit, across all the sections below is 10,000 characters (max 2 pages).

***(A)** The number of years of corporate experience in providing the products/services described under this Schedule, regardless of the specific products/services being proposed - a minimum of two (2) years of corporate experience is required

***(B)** Organization’s number of employees, experience in the field, and resources available to enable it to fulfill requirements

Characters: 0

Exhibit 1. This screenshot shows two of the seven text boxes in the “Corporate Experience” section of GSA eOffer. The text boxes accommodate “plain text” only.

Experience” chapter of the proposal as an example.

I will assume that you have already written this piece using standard word processing software. For simplicity, let’s assume that is Microsoft Word. As a good proposal writer, you have organized the response into the seven mandatory subsections specified in the RFP. You have circulated the draft among other members of the proposal team, and you have made corrections and have done a final editorial polish.

In the “old days,” you would have uploaded the Word file (or PDF) using GSA eOffer’s “Upload Documents” module.

But under the new rules, you will now have to enter the “Corporate Experience” text directly into text boxes within GSA eOffer. Here’s how:

A. Navigate to the eOffer text boxes for “Corporate Experience”

After you have signed on to eOffer, take a look at the main menu: the vertical list of main sections of eOffer, in the upper left-hand corner of the first page. Click on “Solicitation Provisions” (not the similarly worded “Solicitation Clauses”).

This will bring you to a page titled “Solicitation Provisions.” That page includes a table that lists various chapters of the technical proposal, with each listed on a separate row.

Take a look at the row for “Corporate Experience.” On the right-most column for that row, click on the action item titled “Respond.”

This will bring you to a page titled “Corporate Experience.” That page contains seven text boxes, corresponding to each of this chapter’s mandatory subsections. A partial screenshot of that page, displaying several of these text boxes, is shown in Exhibit 1.

You now have to enter text into each of these boxes.

B.1 Option #1: Re-type the “Corporate Experience” text directly into eOffer.

You already have written the text for the “Corporate Experience” chapter, and that text currently resides in a Word file. You can now

simply re-type the text directly into the various text boxes within eOffer, within the limitations of “plain text.”

You will not be able to replicate underlining, italics, bolding, or almost any other special feature of the text from the Word file. For example, your writing style might include the use of bolding and hanging indents for subheads. You might want to consider the use of ALL CAPS for subheads. But use this sparingly. ALL CAPS can be jarring if overused.

You can insert certain special characters, such as bullets—but do so sparingly. When you enter text into a text box in eOffer, you can insert bullet points and other special characters. But keep in mind that you cannot specify hanging text. Therefore, if you must use bullet points, try to keep the text of each exceedingly brief.

Here’s how to enter a bullet point into a text box:

- a. Place the cursor where you want the bullet point to appear.
- b. Hold down the “Alt” key.
- c. Tap on the number 7, while the “Alt” key is still depressed. (Note: Use the number 7 from your numeric keypad, not from the number keys at the top of the keyboard.)
- d. Let up on the “Alt” key.
- e. The result: A bullet point will be inserted where the cursor was.

There are other types of special characters you can insert within an eOffer text box, by using numbers other than “7” in step “c,” above. Examples of special characters and their corresponding number codes include:

•	7	≥	242
■	254	≤	243
§	21	≈	247
«	174	™	0153
»	175	®	0174
±	241		

You will not be able to use the “tab” key to indent paragraphs. Your normal writing style might include a first line indent for paragraphs. You will need to use the space bar to accomplish indents. Be sure to come up with a standard (e.g., 4 taps on the space bar), to maintain a consistent look for your paragraphs.

You will not be able to enter tables. If your writing style includes the use of tables with more than one column, find a way to adapt to a one-column presentation approach; or avoid the use of tables altogether.

You will not be able to insert graphics directly into text box. In some cases, a photo, statistical graph, or other illustration might be central to your discussion. You might want to consider the following approach:

- a. Place the relevant graphic in a separate document (e.g., a Word or PDF file). Format it with a caption, and display an Exhibit number and title in the caption. (E.g., “Exhibit 1. Acme Corp.’s growth in the last decade”).
- b. Give the file a meaningful name (e.g., “Exhibits for the Corp Exp chapter”).
- c. Upload that file using eOffer’s “Document Upload” module.
- d. Within the eOffer text box, refer to the graphic, and tell the reader how to find it. For example:
- e. “As shown in Exhibit 1, Acme Corp. has grown steadily throughout the last decade. (Note to reader: All exhibits for the Corporate Experience chapter can be found the file titled “Exhibits for the Corp Exp chapter,” uploaded separately via eOffer.)

You will not be able to enter tables. Any attempt to substitute evenly spaced columns (by using the space bar) will be disastrous.

Automatic leading between paragraphs simply does not exist. You will need to hit the “enter” key twice between each paragraph if you want to clearly show vertical spacing between the paragraphs.

B.2 Option #2: Copy from Word, paste into eOffer, and clean up text within eOffer

A second option is to use “copy and paste” to transfer text from each subsection of the Word file into the corresponding eOffer text box.

But if you simply copy from a Word file and paste the copied text directly into an eOffer text box, you are probably in for a surprise. You will find that some types of formatting will be lost or garbled in in the process. For example:

- In the Word file, you might have used bullet points featuring hanging text. If you simply copy this from the Word file and paste it into an eOffer text box, you will see either a blank space or an asterisk where the bullet point was supposed to be, and the “hanging text” indentations will be lost.
- In the Word file, you might have used leading (vertical spacing) between paragraphs, using the “spacing before” or “spacing after” paragraph formatting feature in Word. For example, you might have specified “6 pts.” of spacing after each paragraph. If you simply copy text from the Word file and paste it into an eOffer text box, that leading (vertical spacing) between paragraphs will be gone, and it might be visually impossible to see where one paragraph ends and the other starts.
- In the Word file, you might have used bold text or italics to create subheads within the text. When you copy this material and paste it into an eOffer text box, all of this special formatting will be absent. The bolded subheads that give the reader excellent visual cues within a Word file can look amateurish and disorganized when pasted into an eOffer text box.

- In the Word file, you might have used a table to illustrate certain points. If you copy the table and simply paste it into an eOffer text box, you be startled by seeing the garbled mess that this creates within eOffer.
 - Did you use hyphenation in the Word file? Hyphens get garbled when pasted into a “plain text” environment. In particular, an odd-looking symbol is substituted for the hyphen—and that symbol has no properties of a hyphen. The moral: do not use hyphenation when creating the chapter in the Word file. But if you did, just be sure to weed out the odd-looking substitute symbols in the “plain text” version.
- d. Copy the entire file, and then close it.
 - e. Make the Notepad file active, by placing your cursor inside of it.
 - f. Paste the text into the Notepad file by using the Ctrl-v command.
 - g. Save the Notepad file. (The filename will be given a “.txt” suffix.)
 - h. You now have a complete copy of the “Corporate Experience” chapter in a Notepad file, and you can begin to edit it.¹

You now have a complete copy of the “Corporate Experience” chapter in a Notepad file, which is a “plain text” environment. This is more or less what it will look like in eOffer.

You might have many edits to make.

For example, if you have used bullet points in the Word file:

- They might not appear in the Notepad file. In this case, if you want to retain a bullet point, insert one using the alternative character insertion technique described above. (E.g., hold down the Alt key and press the number 7; then let up on the Alt key. Or for a different look, enter the number 175 instead of 7.)
- The bullet points might appear in Notepad but as strange-looking open squares. In this case, backspace over the first open square (to delete it) and then insert a bullet point using the “Alt/number key” technique. Repeat this for each such bullet point.

As another example, you might have specified paragraph leading in the Word file

So, if you do take this approach—copying a Word file and pasting it directly into an eOffer text box—be prepared for lots of follow-up. You will need to edit the resulting text within the eOffer text box, using the rudimentary tools available to you to edit text within in eOffer text boxes.

B.3 Option #3: Multi-step copy and paste.

Under a third option, you can copy the chapter from a Word file into a new Notepad® file. Edit the text within Notepad, which is a “plain text” environment. Then, copy the edited text from Notepad and paste it into the appropriate text boxes within eOffer.

Here are the basic steps for the first part of this option (copy from Word, paste into Notepad):

- a. Start with the “Corporate Experience” chapter by writing it within Word.
- b. After you are done editing the chapter within Word, create a new, blank document within Notepad. Name the file something like: “Corp Experience – Notepad version.” (Notepad is a plain text editor available on virtually all Windows machines.) Keep this file open.
- c. Open the Word file, and use the “select all” command (Ctrl-a).

¹ You can skip steps “b” through “f” by simply doing a “save as” of the Word version of the chapter, and selecting “.txt” as the file format. This will create a “plain text” version of the chapter, which you can edit within Notepad. But the resultant “plain text” file might have unanticipated oddities. It in part depends on the version of Word you are using, the font you selected, and other factors. In addition, during the “save as” dialog, be sure that the “insert line breaks” option is not selected. Be sure to review the resultant “.txt” file carefully.

(e.g., 6 pts. after each paragraph). This leading will not be carried over to the Notepad version of the chapter. All of the paragraphs will be squished together vertically. To fix this, insert the cursor before the first character of a paragraph, and hit the “Enter” key. This will create a vertical space. Repeat this for each paragraph.

In sum, after copying the Word version of the chapter and pasting it into a Notepad file, you might have quite a bit of editing to perform. But you can do this editing with the tools provided within the Notepad environment. These tools are not terribly versatile, but if you don’t do the editing here, you will have to do it within each text box within eOffer, which is much harder to do.

After you are done making the edits within the Notepad file, you are now ready to paste the text (which is in “plain text” format) into eOffer text boxes. Keep in mind that you will need to do a total of seven copy and pastes, because eOffer has separate text boxes for each of the seven subsections of this chapter. After you are done pasting into eOffer text boxes, carefully review the text within those boxes. You might have a final bit of cleaning up to do.

How to handle Statements of Work

For each Project Description in a GSA proposal, it is mandatory to include the corresponding contractual Statement of Work (SOW). In most cases, GSA Contracting Officers want to see not only the SOW itself, but also the first page and signature page of the corresponding contract.

In the “old days,” it was typical to append the SOW material to the end of the file that contained the Project Description. But now this is essentially impossible, because each Project Description is presented in a series of text boxes within eOffer. The final text box for each Project Description is dedicated to the contractual SOW. But it is impossible to paste an SOW (with signatures, etc.) into this box.

The only solution is to place the SOW material in a separate Word file (or PDF); and to label that file appropriately. Upload that file using GSA eOffer’s “Upload Document”

module. Place a cross reference to that uploaded file in the corresponding text box in the Project Description area of eOffer.

Some general advice: first do no harm.

Now that we are required to present lengthy text passages in GSA proposals in a “plain text” environment, we have to grapple with a fundamental truth. No matter how careful we are, and no matter how adept we are at using special characters within a “plain text” environment, the resulting chapters will never be as visually pleasing as they would have been in a rich text environment (such as Word).

No matter how you populate the text boxes (see the options above), your very first goal is to make sure that you carefully review the material and make whatever changes are necessary to make sure that there are no flubs in the way that the “plain text” material is presented. If you are lackadaisical about reviewing the text boxes, you can easily miss instances where the transition from a Word file to the “plain text” box gets garbled in the transition. It can be easy to miss a case where two paragraphs are melded together, or a stray hyphenation (that you forgot to get rid of in the first place) ends up introducing a nonsense character into the “plain text” version.

Your second important goal as a proposal writer is to make the “plain text” chapters as simple and straightforward as possible. If your normal writing style is to rely heavily on bullet points, tables, graphics, multiple columns, and so forth, you have only one practical alternative: adopt a less complicated style. Within a plain text environment, your best bet is to:

Use relatively short paragraphs. And take extra care to use strong topic sentences, and artful transition sentences. You can use subheads within eOffer text boxes, but they will never be artful. Try to minimize subheads, and make each paragraph stand on its own, and logically flow from the one that precedes it.

Minimize use of bullet points. And make sure that the list entries are succinct. If the text of a bullet point is more than a few words long, it will not look good in eOffer’s plain text environment, because there are no hanging

indents. The text will wrap right back to the left-hand margin, starting directly below the bullet point. This virtually destroys the purpose of bullet points (to visually accentuate a list; to clearly show that the list is hierarchically “below” the preceding sentence(s) in the paragraph in which the bullet points reside.

As an alternative to bullet points, you might want to consider the use of a serial list that uses parenthetical letters, such as this: (a) the first item in the list; (b) the second item in the list; (c) the third item in the list; and (d) the last item. In a “plain text” environment, it is far easier to make a list like this look sharp and properly formatted compared to a list of bullet points, especially if some or all of the listed items are lengthy and cannot be confined to less than the width of the text box.

Pay close attention to vertical spacing between paragraphs. The best written material can look monotonous and inelegant in a plain text environment. In my opinion, if there are no vertical spaces between paragraphs, the text looks even more monotonous, and it is harder for the eye to distinguish between paragraphs.

Get 99% of your editing done in a “rich text” environment, such as Word. You’ll have enough wrestling to do when you are

substituting individual characters and fixing mechanical issues when you transfer your writing into a “plain text” environment (e.g., when you transfer it to Notepad as an intermediate step before transferring the text to eOffer).

Keep a character count. There are character limits within GSA eOffer. Every character counts, including spaces between words, and spaces between paragraphs (assuming that you will hit the “enter” key to create vertical spacing). The “Corporate Experience” and “Quality Control” chapters are each limited to 10,000 characters, and each project description is limited to 20,000 characters.

About the author:

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