
"Isabel. Isabel."

The hissing, insistent tone in my ear communicates the speaker's urgency. I glance at the accountant seated to my left. With 13 others at the table, engaged in what a charitable observer would call a free-form meeting, it takes all my focus to hear every discussion and to record every substantive correction to the proposal that is being submitted in a few days. Trying to get a private audience in this environment puts Buddy offside. Clearly offside. I lift my hand in the universal "Just a minute" signal, hoping to communicate my own message: Not. Now.

However, he confuses having to wait with being ignored, and speaks again in a low voice.

*"Look. It says 'trainee' here
and 'student' over here.
It's inconsistent."*

Without being voiced, the "OMG" behind this revelation is clear: What could be worse than terminological inconsistency?

What, indeed? Well, maybe submitting a proposal with substantive inconsistencies from one section to the next, so that the evaluators can't tell how we're proposing to do the work. Or submitting a proposal where the technical solution is not fully priced, so that if we do win the work, we won't be able to make a profit.

I am not, just now, much worried about whether evaluators will understand that trainees and students refer to the same folks. I mean, how hard can it be to figure that out? Buddy presses again. I hiss back.

"It's OK. They'll get it."

In that first year of my proposal career, I had a neophyte's tolerance for terminological variety, based on a touching but untested confidence in evaluators' ability to distinguish meaningful from irrelevant variation. I wasn't to know that 20 years in I would be less sure about any reader's ability to *get it* if that required navigating a maze of similar but not precisely the same terminology, used either interchangeably or with no clear map to the distinctions we intend.

I've read that Russian novels are impenetrable, at least in part, because of the multiple nicknames:

- Aleksandr has two major variants (Sasha and Shura) with five sub-variants.
- Georgiy can go by Goga, Zhorzh, Gosha.

None of these are intuitively obvious to English speakers, any more than Sandy is an obvious nickname for Alexander, or Bill for William, to a non-native speaker. So the non-initiate is left wondering who this new guy, Sasha, is and where Aleksandr went to.

Who cares about Tolstoy in Proposal Land? Well, nickname confusion can be either frustrating or charming in a Russian novel, depending on your temperament and time available, but there is no upside to this confusion in a proposal.

Reviewing with the Team

If our management structure and our quality system aren't clear, what will evaluators make of them? Who knows?

Senior managers. Executive management group. Management team. Project management team. Do all these refer to one group of people, or to subtly different elements of our management structure? Who knows?

Quality control system. Quality management system. Quality procedures. Quality plan. Quality assurance plan. Are these one thing, or many? If they are many, how are they related? Who knows?

The principles are clear: Identify the key concepts and structures in the proposal, distinguish them clearly, name them simply, and then Stick. To. Those. Names.

So, Buddy (if that really is your name): I'm sorry I blew you off. You were right. Trainee/student: we should have picked one.

After all, we weren't writing *Combat and Concord*.