

## Writing food specifications for school food service

A specification is a concise statement of a set of requirements to be satisfied by a product, material, and or process. Write a clear specification. The clearer the specification, the more likely you will receive the anticipated product. Specifications are used by school food authorities to identify a specific product in the procurement process and as a key component in the award criteria of the procurement.

### What is included in a specification?

<b>Name of Product</b>	Use common language of the industry Example: chicken, tender or corn. When available the Standard of Identify should be used.
<b>Description</b>	Describe the product, weight, portion size (raw or pre-cooked), shape, and main ingredients. In some cases, manufacturer's name, product code and pack size may be included. If specifying manufacturer and product code respondents may quote on brand name or preapproved equal products to insure maximum open competition.
<b>Main ingredients</b>	Describe the main and secondary ingredients desired in the product in as much detail as possible such as whole chicken breast meat or once frozen pollack.
<b>Case and pack weight.</b>	How should the item be packaged, and how big are the cases? Example: 6/#10 cans, or 4/5# loaves, or case not to exceed 25#, Items individually wrapped, 48count, cases not to exceed 30 pounds.
<b>Meal pattern contribution</b>	What is the desired meal pattern contribution from the product? CN label preference.
<b>Minimum and Maximum size pieces</b>	What is the minimum size of the product? What is the maximum size of the product?
<b>Prohibited ingredients.</b>	When creating a specification indicate what ingredients are prohibited in the product such as food additives, artificial colors and flavors, hydrogenated fat, monosodium glutamate (MSG), and assorted allergens.
<b>Desired or required nutritional standards.</b>	What are the nutritional standards for the product? Minimum or maximum nutrient or ingredient requirements or limitations. Example: Product must meet NSLP specific meal pattern requirements, or sodium, or sugar content per serving.

<p><b>Unit on which award is made</b></p>	<p>How will the SFA team determine which company is offering the best price for an acceptable product? How will the unit price be determined for an acceptable product? Some possible descriptions may include by the case, by the serving size, or per pound.</p>
<p><b>Quality Indicators</b></p>	<p><b>Standards of Identity (SOI)</b> for foods are federal requirements that define what a food product is. SOIs protect consumers by ensuring labels accurately describe the products contained within the package.</p> <p><b>Grade standards</b> are USDA quality standards and are based on measurable attributes that describe the value and utility of the products. U.S. Grade Standards provide a uniform language for describing the quality and condition for meat, poultry, fresh fruits and vegetables, and processed fruits and vegetables. More information about quality indicators is available on the <a href="#">USDA website</a>.</p>

**Example specifications**

**Corn, whole kernel**, frozen, IQF, domestic, 2.9 oz# suggested portion or amount to meet ½ cup veg, starchy subgroup, suggested pack: 20#, Grade A, delivered frozen, heat and serve, packaged bulk, less than 10% calorie from sat. fat, less than 50 mg sodium per ½ cup serving.

**Pizza Cheese:** Whole grain rich crust, topped with part-skim mozzarella cheese, frozen. Total sodium not to exceed 500mg per portion and 35% or less calories from fat. no added trans-fats. Must be CN labeled or product specifications required. One portion must contribute 2 M/MA and 2 grain equivalents.

**How are specifications used?**

**Specifications are used by manufacturers** to consistently produce products with the same size, ingredients, nutritional quality, meal components, color, texture, and any other characteristics that are deemed important to product performance. Without a properly written specification, manufacturers cannot produce the same product every time.

When responding to school food authority request for proposal, specifications are used to determine if the item the manufacturer produces will meet the requirements. Many times, manufacturers make multiple items of a particular type, such as: beef patty, taco filling, mac and cheese or cheese sauce and some will qualify, while others will not due to fat, sodium, size, pack, and flavor. A good specification will help you get exactly what you are looking for.

**Specifications** included in a school district bid or RFP **are used by distributors** to determine the specific item(s) that a school is requesting to procure. These specifications are a critically important aspect of the solicitation, ensuring the buying and selling parties are in agreement about the product that is being requested. Distributors need to know as much information as possible about the products the district is wishing to procure PLUS, approximate annual projected case usage. The distributor sends the RFP/IFB to the broker/vendor community for them to review and offer their best price. It is helpful to notate if the item is a hard spec or not.

Distributors receive pricing and multiple substitutes for the items listed because other vendors want to sell their brands as an alternate to the brands requested. If you are bidding through the distributor they need to know if you want to see information and pricing for alternate items.

**Produce specifications** should include Pack/Size and Grade. Information about produce grade and size can be found in [USDA AMS grades and standards](#). School districts should work with a produce distributor to identify the appropriate grade and size of fruits for schools. For example, if a district replaces 113ct fancy oranges for 138ct choice grade oranges they could save thousands of dollars (or more) annually. Districts should utilize the expertise of the produce vendor to learn about produce and how to write school appropriate specifications.

**Specifications are used by school districts** to communicate the specific product and product qualities desired in an RFP or IFB document in a manner mutually understandable to the buyer and potential sellers. Specifications must be included in bid evaluation criteria and award documents.

### **Resources**

- [Procurement in the 21st Century](#)
- School Food and Nutrition Management for the 21st Century, Dorothy Pannell-Martin and Julie Boettger.
- [USDA Agricultural Marketing Service Grades](#)
- [USDA Agricultural Marketing Commercial Item Description](#)
- [USDA Produce Food Safety](#)