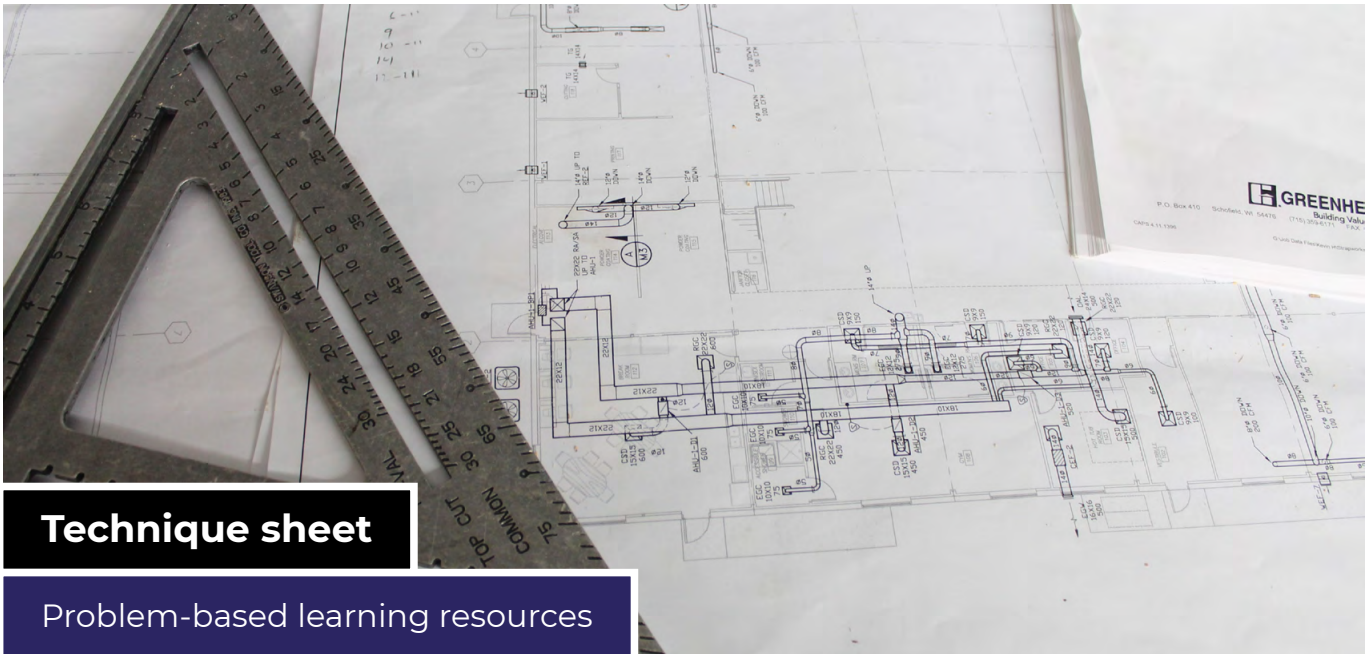


# 22

# Responding to a brief



## Technique sheet

### Problem-based learning resources

## Introduction

Engineers usually work to a brief. Sometimes the brief is very open, and the engineer is expected to make choices and suggest ways forward to the client. Sometimes the brief is very specific, and the engineer just has to use their knowledge and skills to deliver the product as requested. In both cases the brief needs to be studied carefully before you start work to make sure you can deliver the service or product.

## What is a brief?

A brief is a description of a task – this can be making something (e.g. fabricating a metal security case for a workshop storage area) or providing a service (e.g. servicing a large industrial boiler). In the simplest situations you may be given a brief by your manager or company, and it becomes part of your normal work. In some instances, only one engineer or company will be given the brief and they will do the work for an agreed price and by an agreed time. In many instances, a brief will be available to a number of companies, and they will all submit costs for doing the work and the potential client will then choose who they want to do the work. These open briefs

can sometimes be called tenders or requests for proposals (RFP).

- Make sure you study the brief in detail to understand exactly what the client wants and think about how you can deliver the services or product required.

## What does a brief contain?

A brief will specify exactly what has to be made or done. These are called outputs or deliverables. If you are making something like a security cage the brief could specify the size, any extra fittings (e.g. shelves) or mechanisms (e.g. locks/doors), the material to be used (e.g. steel bar, steel sheeting) and even the finish (e.g. painted grey). Almost no detail about the form of the eventual product is too small to leave out and for complex briefs a conversation with the person who wants the job done is often useful. A brief will almost certainly specify a timescale with a series of dates for complex projects (e.g. walls completed by March 23rd, doors and locks fitted by March 27th). After reading a brief you should know everything you need to start work.

- Make sure you know exactly what the deliverables for a brief are and when they need to be delivered by. If you are uncertain about something – ask the person who wants the job done – misunderstandings can be expensive!

## What does the brief not specify?

A brief does not usually specify how a job should be done. For example, you can make your security cage in any way you want provided the eventual deliverable matches the requested specifications. As long as it is completed on time and to specification you can have one person working for a week or five people working on it on the last day. A brief is not a set of instructions to do a job it is only a description of what the output will look like when it is finished. Your decisions about how to tackle the work will depend on your knowledge and skills, the resources available (equipment, material, and people) and how you will prepare for any risks.

- Make sure you work in a way that makes sense to you, and any colleagues, but make sure you meet the required specifications.

## Are parts of a brief negotiable?

Most briefs are not negotiable. They tend to be designed to deliver parts of a larger project and are written by experts who know exactly what they need to get the larger job done. However, sometimes an engineer with particular skills or experiences might suggest changes. These changes (e.g. using a different material or fabrication technique, adjusting the delivery date) must be agreed with the client prior to work starting. It is always good to make a note of these changes and get them agreed in writing. If you feel you need to make significant changes to a brief you may want to think about whether the work is a good fit for your knowledge, skills and experience in the first place.

- Make sure you agree any changes to a brief with the client prior to work starting and get that agreement in writing (an email confirmation is usually enough – but check the email was delivered). Do not assume a client will remember a conversation from late on a Friday afternoon at the project handover 3 months later!

## What's all this small print at the bottom?

Many companies now include summaries of their key policies on a brief. These can include when you will be paid (e.g. on the day that the project has been accepted by the client or at key points during the process), how you will be paid (e.g. bank transfer or cheque within 30 days of receiving an invoice) and any details needed to create your invoice. Sometimes contact details at the commissioning company are added which can be helpful if something goes wrong during the

job. The small print may not look like something you need to read but it is there for a purpose. At the very least, glance through it and highlight any points that are particularly important – your contract will assume that you agree to everything mentioned. Large companies will have a legal department that will also do this.

- Make sure you check any small print at the end of brief – there could be deal-breakers in there!



### Check yourself

**You should be able to answer these questions easily after reading this sheet.**

1. What is the difference between a brief and a set of instructions?
2. How might you negotiate, and agree, changes to the original agreement?
3. What does the small print in a brief typically contain and why is it important?



### Taking it further

**These activities will deepen your understanding of this topic.**

1. Write a brief for a simple task you would like done – perhaps creating a new counter to serve food from in the spare room next to the workshop? What would you need done and how would you parcel out the different jobs? Write a brief for the different tasks and share with a colleague – could they tell what was needed by reading your brief? Did you include too much, or not enough, information? How could your brief be improved?
2. Review a selection of briefs for work available online or from your supervisor. What features did they have in common? Which ones were the clearest and easiest to understand? Perhaps pick one a re-write it to make it better – you could use the best ideas from all the other briefs.
3. Create a brief for an electronic security system for a storeroom. What needs to be included and how can you make clear what the outcomes are – and when they need to be delivered? Ask a colleague or a manager to check your brief and suggest any improvements.