

Glossary of Terms

Federal funding terms used across SBIR, STTR, and NOFO announcements, defined in plain language.

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- marks a term tied to current program status. The definition holds; confirm the status in the live solicitation.

PROGRAMS & FUNDING

SBIR

SMALL BUSINESS INNOVATION RESEARCH

Federal program that funds R&D at small businesses with commercialization potential. Awards are not procurement contracts and shouldn't be described as such.

STTR

SMALL BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

SBIR's sister program; requires a formal partnership with a research institution such as a university or federal lab.

Phase I

FEASIBILITY STAGE

A small, short SBIR/STTR award to establish technical merit and feasibility.

Phase II

DEVELOPMENT STAGE

A larger follow-on award that advances Phase I results toward a working prototype.

Phase III

COMMERCIALIZATION STAGE

Work that derives from, extends, or completes an SBIR/STTR effort, funded from any source other than SBIR/STTR dollars — agency program funds, another agency, or a prime contractor buying it into a larger program. No dollar ceiling and no time limit. The part most firms miss: a Phase III can be awarded sole-source, without further competition, and agencies are directed to make that award to the firm that developed the technology to the greatest extent practicable. SBIR data rights carry forward, which is what makes the position defensible. No follow-on is ever guaranteed — but the authority to award one without recompeting is real, and it is the commercial point of the whole program.

BAA

BROAD AGENCY ANNOUNCEMENT

A solicitation for basic and applied research in which the agency states a research interest rather than a specific requirement, and proposals are judged on scientific merit by peer review instead of on price against a spec. Two practical differences from a NOFO: a BAA usually results in a procurement contract rather than a grant, and it typically stays open for a year or more with rolling or multiple submission dates instead of a single hard deadline. Many

agencies screen a short white paper first and invite full proposals from there. The DoD SBIR/STTR solicitation is itself issued as a BAA.

FOA

FUNDING OPPORTUNITY ANNOUNCEMENT

A published federal funding opportunity, typically for grants or cooperative agreements. Largely superseded by NOFO, though many agencies still use FOA in announcement numbers — a DOE announcement numbered DE-FOA-XXXXXXX is a NOFO.

NOFO

NOTICE OF FUNDING OPPORTUNITY

The current federal term for a published grant or cooperative-agreement opportunity, replacing FOA. It sets the topic areas, eligibility, cost share, and deadlines. Read it in full before writing anything — the responsiveness rules that disqualify an application live in the NOFO, not in the topic description.

Topic Area

ALSO "TIER"

The subdivision of a NOFO. A single announcement is split into topic areas, each with its own block of funding, its own per-award ceiling, its own expected number of awards, and sometimes its own cost share. Eligibility is judged topic by topic — clearing the bar for one says nothing about the one beside it, and applying under the wrong one is a responsiveness failure, not a scoring loss.

Cost Share

COST SHARING

The non-federal portion of total project cost the applicant must contribute — commonly 20% on DOE R&D NOFOs, and calculated against total project cost, not the federal award. SBIR and STTR generally require none. Cash or allowable in-kind, never from another federal source. Most announcements require a signed commitment letter at submission; an application without one can be rejected before review.

TRL

TECHNOLOGY READINESS LEVEL

A nine-point scale measuring how far a technology has progressed from an observed basic principle to a system operating under full mission conditions. Announcements state an entry and an exit TRL, and that band is a control

gate, not a scoring factor — a technology outside it is non-responsive and is not reviewed at all. The point most applicants miss: TRL is indexed to the environment you intend to operate in, not to the technology in the abstract, so the same product can read at two very different numbers depending on the target. TRL 5 requires validation in a relevant environment, and the solicitation defines relevant — you don't. Entering too high carries its own risk: a technology already at the exit TRL invites the question of why federal research money is needed at all. See the [TRL reference](#) for levels 1 through 7.

Prime Recipient

PRIME

The organization that signs the award and carries legal and financial responsibility for it. Reviewers weigh the prime's corporate experience managing projects of similar nature and complexity — the organization's record, not an individual's résumé — so a company that has never run a project at the scale it is requesting can be screened out on management capability alone.

Subrecipient

SUBAWARD

The partner performing part of the scope under the prime's award, funded through a subaward rather than directly by the agency. For a small company whose technology fits a topic but whose project history won't carry the prime role, a subrecipient seat under a university, research institute, or larger firm is often the realistic path to the same work.

RFI

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

A notice asking industry for input, usually before a NOFO exists. No award follows and responding is voluntary — but an RFI tells you what an office is considering funding months ahead of the announcement, and a substantive response puts your capability in front of the program staff who later write the topic.

CP

CONCEPT PAPER

A short pre-application some agencies (notably DOE) require ahead of a full application. It is screened and returns an encourage or discourage response. Discouraged applicants may usually still apply — but a missed concept paper deadline disqualifies you from the cycle entirely.

LOI

LETTER OF INTENT

A short pre-proposal notice some agencies (notably DOE) require, with a deadline weeks ahead of the full application. Where it is mandatory, missing it disqualifies you from that cycle entirely — no LOI, no application, regardless of how good the proposal would have been.

TPL

TEAMING PARTNER LIST

An optional list an agency publishes alongside a NOFO so organizations can post their interest and find project partners. Completing it is voluntary and carries no weight in review — but it is often the fastest way for a small business to reach the universities, labs, and primes competing for the same announcement.

AGENCIES & DEPARTMENTS

DoD

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

The federal military department and the largest SBIR/STTR funder.

DoW

DEPARTMENT OF WAR

A secondary title the DoD has used since a September 2025 executive order (its site is now war.gov). "Department of Defense" remains the legal name pending congressional action — the two refer to the same department.

DOE

DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY

Cabinet department funding energy, science, and national-security R&D.

HHS

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

The federal health department; parent of NIH.

NIH

NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

The medical-research agency within HHS and a major SBIR funder.

NASA

NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION

The civil space agency; runs its own SBIR/STTR program.

NSF

NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

Funds basic research and education; runs a fast-clock SBIR program.

DHS

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Cabinet department for domestic security and resilience.

DOT

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Cabinet department for transportation systems and safety.

DOC

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

Cabinet department for trade, economic data, and standards; parent of NIST.

USDA

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Cabinet department for agriculture, food, and rural development.

EPA

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

Federal agency for environmental protection and regulation.

USAF

U.S. AIR FORCE

A military service branch within the DoD.

USN

U.S. NAVY

A military service branch within the DoD.

SBA**SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION**

Sets SBIR/STTR policy governmentwide and maintains the Company Registry.

USPTO**U.S. PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE**

Where patents and trademarks are filed and examined.

NIST**NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF STANDARDS AND TECHNOLOGY**

Standards agency within Commerce; author of the SP 800-series security requirements.

REGISTRATION, IDS & PORTALS**SAM****SYSTEM FOR AWARD MANAGEMENT (SAM.GOV)**

The master federal registry; your entity must be active here to receive any award.

UEI**UNIQUE ENTITY IDENTIFIER**

The 12-character ID issued in SAM.gov; replaced the older DUNS number.

EIN**EMPLOYER IDENTIFICATION NUMBER**

The IRS-issued federal tax ID for your company.

SBC**SMALL BUSINESS CONCERN**

The legal term for a qualifying small business; your SBA Company Registry entry yields an “SBC Control ID.”

DSIP**DEFENSE SBIR/STTR INNOVATION PORTAL**

The DoD's proposal submission portal.

PAMS**PORTFOLIO ANALYSIS AND MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

The DOE Office of Science submission portal.

eXCHANGE**NETL / DOE SUBMISSION PORTAL**

The DOE submission portal for NOFOs, separate from Grants.gov and from PAMS. Registration is its own step and is not covered by SAM.gov, so an applicant with an active SAM registration can still be locked out on deadline day. DOE advises submitting at least 48 hours early and will not extend for portal congestion.

Grants.gov**FEDERAL GRANTS PORTAL**

The governmentwide portal for finding and applying to federal grant opportunities.

Login.gov**FEDERAL SIGN-IN SERVICE**

The shared federal log-in used to reach many agency portals.

SPRS**SUPPLIER PERFORMANCE RISK SYSTEM**

The DoD system where you post your NIST SP 800-171 self-assessment score.

COMPLIANCE & CYBERSECURITY**• CMMC****CYBERSECURITY MATURITY MODEL CERTIFICATION**

The DoD framework verifying safeguards for FCI and CUI. “Certification” is specific — Level 1 is a self-assessment, not a third-party certification. Program requirements change; confirm the current level and assessment method in the live solicitation.

FCI**FEDERAL CONTRACT INFORMATION**

Non-public information provided or generated under a federal contract; its presence triggers CMMC Level 1.

CUI**CONTROLLED UNCLASSIFIED INFORMATION**

Sensitive unclassified information requiring safeguarding; triggers CMMC Level 2 or above.

FAR**FEDERAL ACQUISITION REGULATION**

The core rulebook for federal procurement. SBIR awards and OTAs are not FAR contracts and shouldn't be described in FAR terms.

DFARS**DEFENSE FEDERAL ACQUISITION REGULATION SUPPLEMENT**

DoD's additions to the FAR; clause 252.204-7012 drives CUI safeguarding.

• OTA**OTHER TRANSACTION AUTHORITY**

An award instrument that is not a contract, grant, or cooperative agreement, and to which the FAR does not apply. DoD uses OTs for research, for prototypes, and — after a successful prototype — for follow-on production without recompeting. The appeal is speed and negotiable terms, including intellectual property. The caution is that the familiar FAR protections and standard data-rights clauses are absent, so the agreement text itself governs. Current Department direction treats OTs as a default award approach rather than an exception.

• CSO**COMMERCIAL SOLUTIONS OPENING**

A competitive open call that lets DoD buy commercial solutions without a traditional RFP, usually with a short solution brief before any full proposal. The requirement that the item be “innovative” has been removed, so a CSO can be used for any commercial product, commercial service, or nondevelopmental item — and an award can carry straight into follow-on production, including sole source. Paired with the Department's commercial-first direction, a CSO is one of the most likely doors into DoD for a company with something already built. Note the difference from everything above: this is procurement. The government is buying something, not funding your project.

NIST SP 800-171**CUI CONTROL SET**

The NIST Special Publication defining the 110 controls that protect CUI — the basis for CMMC Level 2.

NIST SP 800-172**ENHANCED CONTROL SET**

The NIST Special Publication adding 24 enhanced controls for advanced threats — the basis for CMMC Level 3.

SP**SPECIAL PUBLICATION (NIST)**

NIST's document series (e.g., SP 800-171) that defines federal security requirements.

SSP**SYSTEM SECURITY PLAN**

The document describing how your organization meets each required security control.

POA&M**PLAN OF ACTION AND MILESTONES**

The remediation plan listing unmet controls and the schedule to close them.

IRP**INCIDENT RESPONSE PLAN**

Your documented procedure to detect, respond to, and recover from a security incident.

APT**ADVANCED PERSISTENT THREAT**

A sophisticated, well-resourced adversary that maintains long-term access; defending against APTs is the focus of the highest CMMC level.

• C3PAO**CMMC THIRD-PARTY ASSESSMENT ORGANIZATION**

An accredited firm authorized to perform CMMC Level 2 certification assessments. Whether such an assessment can be required as a condition of award depends on current program status.

DIBCAC**DEFENSE INDUSTRIAL BASE CYBERSECURITY ASSESSMENT CENTER**

The government body that conducts the highest-level (Level 3) assessments, and that performs government-led assessments generally.

BIDDING & ASSISTANCE**DIBBS****DLA INTERNET BID BOARD SYSTEM**

The Defense Logistics Agency's online board where DoD supply solicitations and requests for quote are posted and bid. A primary entry point for small businesses selling parts, components, and materiel to the department.

APEX Accelerators**GOVERNMENT-CONTRACTING ASSISTANCE OFFICES**

Regional offices, most hosted at universities, that give small businesses free hands-on help pursuing federal, state, and local contracts. Run by the DoD Office of Small Business Programs in coordination with the SBA network. APEX Accelerators replaced the Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) program in 2023 — the PTAC name is no longer in use.

PRACTITIONERS & METHOD**PI****PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR**

The person leading an award's technical work; SBIR rules limit where the PI can be primarily employed.

Agentic AI**GOAL-DIRECTED AI SYSTEMS**

An AI system that plans and executes a multi-step task against a goal — calling tools, reading and writing files, checking its own output — rather than answering one prompt at a time. It matters to federal work in two directions. As a subject, an agency wants to know which decisions the system makes without a human in the loop, and how those decisions are validated and governed. As a method, it is how a small team assembles a full application package in weeks — and also how an unsupervised one produces a compliant-looking document with fabricated citations. Reviewers score whether the work is right, not which tools produced it.

A-Z INDEX OF TERMS

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