



AIA Best Practices: Submittal Triage

By Bill Schmalz, FAIA

Summary

Architects can use the WWI concept of triage to facilitate submittal review. By treating submittals as though they are wounded soldiers, you can better manage your resources and prevent delays in the project's schedule.

The word triage (from a French word meaning “sorting” or “selecting”) was used by the French military during World War I to describe the process of quickly evaluating wounded soldiers and prioritizing their treatment. Field doctors sorted the wounded into three categories: (1) those who weren’t likely to live—no matter what care they received, (2) those who were likely to live—even if they did not receive immediate care, and (3) those who might live but only with immediate care.

The doctors then focused their attention on the third group, where immediate care could make the difference between life and death. This concept is now routinely applied in emergency departments, where triage nurses evaluate incoming patients to determine if they need immediate attention.

Although submittals are rarely matters of life or death (no matter what contractors may say), architects can use the triage concept to facilitate submittal review. Within a day of receiving a submittal, you should give it a quick, cursory review to determine the following:

- **Is the submittal required?** You want to see only the submittals called for in the contract documents. Immediately return all other submittals to the contractor, noting them as “not reviewed.”
- **Is the submittal in the right sequence?** Do you remember the submittal schedule you reviewed at the start of construction? That tells you and the contractor the proper order in which submittals are to be reviewed. If the submittal you just received is out of sequence, that may be grounds for returning it “not reviewed.”
- **Is the submittal describing a project that is recognizably yours?** If not, immediately stamp it “rejected” and return it.
- **Is the submittal merely a reissue of your contract documents?** If so, return the submittal as “not reviewed.” Contractors shouldn’t use your drawings as CAD or BIM backgrounds without your approval.

- **Is the submittal complete?** Unless you and the contractor have agreed on partial submittals, return incomplete submittals as “not reviewed.”
- **Do consultants need to review the submittal?** If so, make sure to send the submittal to them, with a deadline that allows you time to review it yourself and return it to the contractor on time. Make sure you know what your owner-architect agreement says about how much time you have to review submittals.
- **Is the contractor asking for an expedited review?** If the contractor didn’t request a fast turnaround in advance, you’re not obliged to provide one.
- **Is the submittal a substitution request in disguise?** A cursory review may not catch this, but it’s worth watching for.
- **Has the contractor reviewed the submittal?** If the contractor’s review stamp is missing or unsigned, return the submittal as “not reviewed.”

In most cases, returning submittals is better than holding on to them while the contractor makes corrections. If you don’t return the submittal, the contractor’s review time clock is probably still ticking, and the time you’re holding the submittal will count as review time.

You should also triage submittals returned by your consultants. Look for the following:

- **Are the consultant’s comments clouded, readable, and understandable?** If you can’t find, read, and understand the comments, the contractor probably can’t either.
- **Has the consultant given a review action?** If not, send it back to the consultant.
- **Are the consultant’s comments consistent with the contract documents?** Your consultants shouldn’t ask for more than the contract documents ask for.
- **Has the consultant made comments such as “Architect to verify”?** It may be outside your scope to make such verifications.

Triage helps avoid delays by quickly informing the contractor of major submittal problems. When used consistently, submittal triage will help you schedule your reviews and coordinate your consultants’ reviews. By treating submittals as though they are wounded soldiers, you can better manage your resources and prevent delays in the project’s schedule.

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This article corresponds to:

Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice, 15th edition Unit 1 – The Profession
Chapter 10 – Design Project Management
Section 09 – Construction Phase Services