

Concrete estimating that shows how it got there

TopOut builds concrete bid packages for commercial subcontractors. This document explains the method: what the takeoff reads, what it counts, what it refuses to guess at, and how every number on the page can be traced back to the sheet it was measured on.

We are going to make an unusual argument for an estimating service. We are not going to tell you how accurate we are.

Every outsourced estimator quotes a percentage. The number is unfalsifiable, it is quoted without the sample size behind it, and it tells you nothing about the one job in front of you. What is worth knowing is how the number was built, because that you can check yourself in about a minute. So that is what this document is about.

What arrives

A concrete package is five files, all editable, carrying your logo and your rates.

File	Format	What it is
Takeoff workbook	<code>.xlsx</code>	Every quantity, by element and by operation, each row naming its sheet and stating how it was derived
Priced proposal	<code>.docx</code> + PDF	Your letterhead, your lump sum, the scope you carry and the scope you do not
Marked-up plan set	PDF	The counted sheets, so the quantity and the drawing stay in one place
RFI list	<code>.docx</code> + PDF	Every question the drawings raised, written to send as-is
PM task list	<code>.xlsx</code>	What your PM runs the job from once it is awarded

Nothing is locked. Change any number you disagree with, because it is your bid and your name is on it.

What we take off

The takeoff carries two independent facts about every line. The **element** is the physical thing. The **operation** is what gets done to it. Most takeoffs collapse those into one, which is how formwork ends up as a percentage of concrete volume instead of a measured contact area.

ELEMENTS

10 families

Footings, grade beams, pile caps and pits. Slab on grade and thickened slabs. Elevated decks and mat pours. Columns. Shear walls. Perimeter and retaining walls. Drop caps. Stairs. Topping slabs. Reinforcing.

OPERATIONS

6 axes

Formwork by contact area. Reinforcing by weight. Placement by volume. Finish by surface. Prep. Joints by length. Each carried separately against every element it applies to.

UNITS

CY SF LF LB TON EA

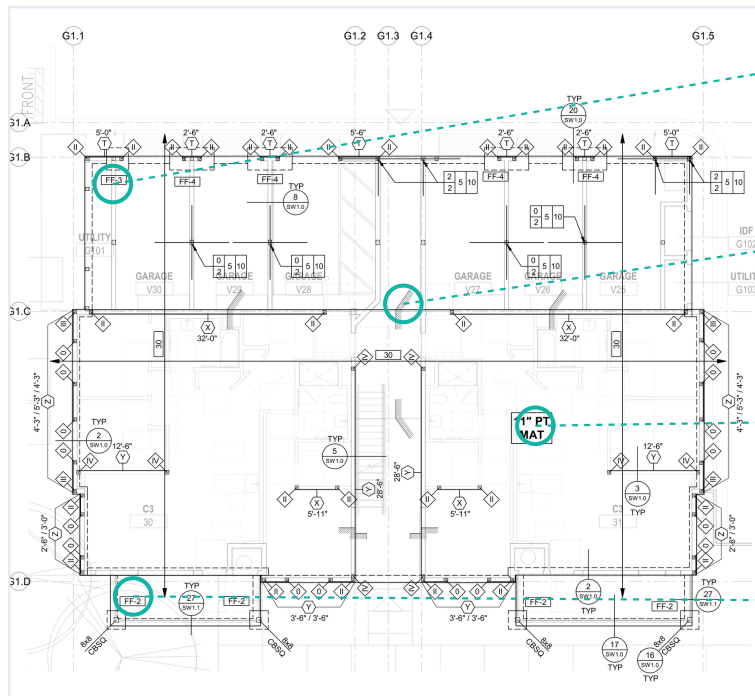
Every line is a work unit you can put a rate against. There is no man-hour, crew-day or productivity figure anywhere in the takeoff.

That last point is the one that matters commercially. **We measure the work. Your rate sheet prices it.** Your rates carry your crew, your market and your history, and none of that is ours to guess at.

Drop caps are their own line, deliberately. A drop cap is neither deck nor column: the deck carries gross area at slab thickness and the column band stops at the soffit, so folding a cap into either one double-counts it or loses it. That is the level the scope list is written at.

How a number gets built

Every quantity in the workbook declares how it was derived. Not in a footnote, as a field on the row, and it is one of four values.



FOUNDATION • PAD FOOTING FF-3 • 4 EA
DERIVED FROM SCHEDULE • isolated pad sched

FOUNDATION • FORMWORK • 1,180 SF
MEASURED • contact area, both faces

FOUNDATION • PLACEMENT • 246 CY
MEASURED • slab edge x 11 in. mat

FOUNDATION • PT TENDONS • OPEN
DEFERRED SUBMITTAL, NOT ON THE SET → RFI

Quantity, unit, derivation and source travel together.
The fourth row is the one that matters.

A real level-one foundation plan from a podium multifamily project, title block and all identifying marks removed. Isolated pad footings, a post-tensioned mat slab and continuous perimeter footings. The fourth callout is the honest case: this sheet's own general notes make the post-tension layout a deferred submittal, so the tendon quantity is genuinely not on the drawings. It is carried as OPEN and becomes a question, not a guess. Quantities shown are illustrative.

- **Measured.** Taken off the drawing. The dimension exists on a sheet and the row names it.
- **Derived from schedule.** Computed from a schedule the set publishes: a footing schedule, a wall schedule, a rebar schedule. The arithmetic is ours, the inputs are the engineer's.
- **Allowance.** The drawings do not say, so a stated allowance sits on its own line with its basis written beside it. You can accept it, change it, or strike it. It is never blended into a measured total.
- **Open.** We do not know, and we are not going to pretend. It goes on the RFI list.

Because the derivation rides on the row, the total can be read back by it. On a complete set most lines come back MEASURED and that is what you want to see; the value of the field is that when a line is not measured, the row says so instead of looking like every other row. That is a more useful thing to know than a percentage.

What the takeoff refuses to do

It will not repair a bad input to keep going. A dimension it cannot parse, a unit written in the wrong case, a stated total that does not tie to the sum of its parts: each one stops the run and gets reported instead of quietly corrected.

That sounds like a limitation. It is the opposite. A silent repair produces a number that looks fine and is wrong, and there is no way to find it afterward. We would rather hand you a stop than a clean-looking total nobody can check.

A declared absence is not the same as nobody looking. There is a real difference between "this element carries no formwork" and "nobody has looked at this element yet." If a takeoff cannot tell those apart, every gap looks like a decision somebody made. Ours tracks them separately and reports them separately.

Where the RFIs come from

The RFI list is not written at the end as a formality. It comes out of the places the drawings failed to answer a question, which are already recorded on the rows that needed the answer. They fall into two kinds, and the difference matters.

Things missing from the total. A family of elements with no source. A dimension the set never states. A quantity that came back zero when it plainly should not have. A scope the drawings themselves exclude in a note. None of these are carried in the number, and all of them are named.

Things carried, but with a caveat. A quantity that moves if a schedule is revised. A convention we had to adopt because the set is silent. A value taken from a stated band rather than a single figure. A place where two sheets could both be read as carrying the same element. These *are* in the total, and the disclosure travels with them.

An estimator then reads the whole thing and decides which of those become questions. The software counts and refuses to guess; the human decides what the gaps mean.

An RFI that can be closed by reading is not an RFI. Every candidate question is tested against the whole set first: the structural drawings, the specifications, the geotechnical and civil sheets, every volume, not just the one it came from. Text search is blind to a scanned detail, so the sheets get read a second way. Only questions that survive that go on the list, and each one says where we looked.

The result is a short list of real questions rather than a long list that makes a general contractor stop reading. Where convention and the drawings already agree, you get a written exclusion in the proposal's scope section instead of a question, because asking a GC "who installs this?" invites the answer "you do."

What we do not do

Finding this out late is worse than reading it now. A concrete package does not include mix design, engineering or sealed calculations. No PE stamp, on anything. No formwork engineering, shoring or reshoring design. No rebar placing drawings or bar-bending schedules for fabrication. No procurement, ready-mix supply or buyout. No placing crews, pumps, cranes or field supervision. No testing or special inspection. And no crew productivity assumption of any kind, which follows from having no effort unit in the takeoff at all.

We also do not price scope that is not shown on the drawings you send. Where the set is silent on something the job will clearly need, it comes back as an RFI and an allowance you can accept or delete, never as a quiet assumption buried in a total.

What we need from you

A PDF plan set, as a file or a shared link. Any size, no portal, no software to install.

Four things help. **Your rate sheet** is the important one: concrete per cubic yard placed, formwork per square foot of contact by type, reinforcing per pound or per ton, finishing per square foot, pump and pour costs, markup. We do not carry rates of our own. Send a past estimate and we will read your rates out of it. Then the **bid form and invitation**, which often define scope more precisely than the drawings do; the **addenda issued so far**, cheaper to build in than to price around; and the **county and awarding agency**, so we can flag prevailing wage or a project labor agreement before you price rather than after you win.

The process is that short: you send the plan set and your rates, we build, and the package comes back. If your rates are not to hand, send a past estimate and we will read them out of it. What we will not do is substitute rates of our own and let a total look finished when the pricing behind it is a stranger's.

Turnaround

48 to 72 hours is standard for concrete, measured from when the plan set lands. A 24 to 48-hour rush is available at 35% on top of the package price. Tell us the bid date in your first message and we confirm delivery before starting, so that if a date is not workable you hear it then and not three hours before it.

Geography changes nothing. The set is a PDF, so a job in Redding and a job in Chula Vista take the same time. We have offices in San Jose and San Diego and we estimate across every county in California, north and south. We take out-of-state sets too. We just will not pretend to know your local labor market.

Addenda issued after delivery are re-priced against the takeoff already built, and quoted as an addition rather than absorbed into the original fee. Send the revised sheets and we come back with the delta and what it costs before we start.

Send one plan set and see what comes back. Email it with the job name and the bid date to bids@topoutapp.com, or call (408) 306-0094 and talk it through with an estimator first. Your plans are never shared, never used to bid against you, and deleted on request.
