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How to Write a White Paper

Table of Contents

- 1. Things to Consider Before You Start3
 - 1.1. Designing White Papers.....3
 - 1.2. Identify Your Goals.....3
 - 1.3. Set Objectives3
 - 1.4. Structure and Format4
- 2. How to Write the White Paper.....5
 - 2.1. Putting the Conclusion First5
 - 2.2. Readers are Potential Investors.....6
 - 2.3. Avoid Ambiguities.....6
 - 2.4. Balance the Text to Graphics ratio.....7
 - 2.5. Using Clear English.....8

1. Things to Consider Before You Start

The origins of the White Paper are to be found in the diplomatic service where they were first used as public policy statements.

1.1. Designing White Papers

In the IT industry, the white paper has become a popular tool for promoting a product or service. It is frequently used in tandem with case studies, and other sales collateral, to promote a company's respective product or services.

In this brief article, we will outline a suggested format to use when writing your white paper.

Like other publications, such as a Case Study or Request For Proposal, the white paper has an accepted format that is recognized by its readers.

1.2. Identify Your Goals

As with all writing, you first have to define your target audience. Once you have this organized, you can then begin to tailor your arguments towards their needs.

It is important to stress this point, as many novice writers—especially those with a technical background—will focus on the low-level aspects of the software. Though this has its place, it's probably not here.

Executives, and those in the management layer, are typical white papers readers. So, write with these readers in mind.

As mentioned above, you also need to determine the topic of your white paper.

This may sound obvious but many writers overlook this and ramble from one vaguely related subject to the next.

1.3. Set Objectives

Your white paper is intended to achieve several objectives:

- It needs to establish you as the definitive authority on the subject in question, i.e. that you stand head-and-shoulders above the competition in this area.
- It needs to create awareness of a new market trend and/or a product offering that very specifically addresses a requirement. And it demonstrates how you are uniquely qualified to achieve this objective.

- It ensures that decision-makers select you over your competitors by providing them with persuasive arguments backed up with trustworthy references.

1.4. Structure and Format

There are several sections required in every white paper:

- Introduction — this opening section covers the high-level issues and trends in the industry (or market sector) that you are involved with. It may also include the recommendations or conclusions that you have made about this main subject matter.
- High Level Solution — this describes the relevant technologies at a high level, especially those you have designed and intend to promote. In this section, it is recommended that you support your arguments with tables, charts, and graphics. All of these add weight to your argument and provide a contrast to the main text.
- Solution Details — this explains how the service, technology, or business model works. This is the heart of the white paper, and differs from the previous section in that here we detail specific aspects of the solution. You can also use tables, charts, and graphics for this section, with cross-references to external supporting documents if required.
- Business benefits — this includes areas such as ROI (return on investments), usability, adherence to international standards, and value-for money. Quotes for customers who have used your solution are always very helpful. It demonstrates that you have authority in this field and can back it up with an authentic reference. Don't take this for granted— not all your competitors will be able to supply such endorsements.
- Summary — this closes the paper with a concise summary of your main points. As many readers will skip the entire document and just read this section, you need to summarize here the main selling points about your solution. Here's a suggestion: write the summary as if it were an entirely standalone document. Distil the entire solution into this one page and conclude it with the single most important point that you want the reader to consider. If this section is compelling enough, you might persuade them to go back and read the entire document.

Finally, remember that your white paper is a primarily a sales document; it is not a technical manual.

Once you have finished it, leave it aside for a few days. Then go back and read it.

Ask yourself: would I buy this solution?

Hopefully the answer is Yes.

If not, don't be too hard on yourself as it takes time to write a persuasive white paper.

Instead, identify the areas you feel are weak and go about strengthening them. Soon, you'll have a nice, sharp document that you can proudly stand over.

2. How to Write the White Paper

Let's now see how we can fine-tune our papers and give them an even sharper edge—that extra polish that will leave your competitors trailing in the dust.

Let's look at five areas:

- Putting the Conclusion First
- Approaching Readers as Potential Investors
- Avoiding Ambiguities
- Balancing the Text: Graphics ratio
- Using Clear English

2.1. Putting the Conclusion First

Here's a mistake that all writers make when starting out writing white papers.

They genuinely believe that you, the reader, will comb through every word, phrase, and paragraph of their paper.

To be honest, when faced with un-inspiring white papers, most executives will quickly examine the abstract, scan a few inside pages, and then turn to the summary.

You might not want to hear this after weeks of hard graft, but if your paper doesn't have an edge, that's what happens.

Be honest: how many white papers have you read from cover to cover?

Why?

Because you, the reader, felt excluded, overlooked or patronized by the tone of the writer.

We can do better than this. Let's start turning an average document into a 'must read.'

We're going to start by putting the conclusion first. You do this by weaving the most salient points into the opening section. And don't just cut-and-paste from the summary! Modify the words and phrases to suit the tone and style of the opening sections.

Of course, we'll still leave our conclusions in the final summary section, but by applying them to both sections, we've doubled our chances of conveying the most relevant points to these key decision-makers.

Other forms of written communications have used this trick since the time of the Egyptians. Well, maybe not quite...

However, if you look at newspapers, for example, you'll see that they use an 'inverted pyramid' approach to presenting the article's main points. First, the most important point is summarized, and then explained in greater detail in the supporting sections.

They also use a generous amount of headlines and paragraph summaries (and white space) to keep the reader hooked—your white papers can benefit from the same approach.

Remember: You're targeting your white paper at an executive level. These 'time-poor' individuals scan for the key conclusions. They're in a hurry and need to make decisions fast. By placing the key points at the start makes their life much easier, and encourages them to return to your paper in the future.

2.2. Readers are Potential Investors

When you sit down to write, who do you envisage will read it?

Marketing Managers. Analysts. Programmers. Journalists. Job hunters.

You're right! All of these are likely candidates to read your work.

Preparing a reader profile for all of se types is a harrowing task. Instead, make your life simple and try to consider your readers as prospective investors.

Why as investors?

Investors are a discriminating type. They judge ideas, products, and technologies on hard facts and proven track records. Isn't that what you do when your about to invest?

Like you, they will dismiss unsubstantiated claims as hyperbole. I can guarantee you that you'll only keep their attention by building their trust—offer them real information that is accurate, relevant, and proven.

By providing this evidence, you save their time, establish trust, and increase your credibility. The combination of these three factors transforms your humble white paper into a very effective sales tool.

2.3. Avoid Ambiguities

As mentioned elsewhere on this site, avoid sending out mixed messages. Ask yourself this: how can I explain my product (or service) in one sentence?

That's called the 'topic sentence'.

After you've defined the topic sentence, outline the main functions/features that you're discussing. For example, if the main topic is about CRM solutions for the Financial Services sector outline:

- Who will use it?
- What it does — this is a one sentence definition of your solution.
- Where they will use it.
- When it will be used — and when not!
- State whether it's hardware, software or a service.
- Prerequisites, such as a specific operating system.
- And where relevant, include other key attributes such as the programming language (or markup language) that it's based on, e.g. EBXML, J2EE. Your readers will love you for this. They know exactly what you're offering.

You'd think this sounds obvious, wouldn't you? Go to Google and download 5 white papers from different sources.

- Do you really understand what they're writing about?
- Do you want to read it again?
- Do you want to do business with them?

However, when others read your high-impact white paper, the answer to these three questions will be a resounding Yes.

Remember. Avoid clichés, hyperbole, and shoddy writing.

These are guaranteed to drive prospective clients into the arms of your competitors!

2.4. Balance the Text to Graphics ratio

What's your reaction when you open a document—and all you see is blocks of solid black text?

Impressed? Dejected? Angry?

Well, your readers are no different.

An experienced business writer is kind to his or her readers. They want the reader to enjoy what's in front of them. And then to read it several times, share it with friends, and recommend it to their colleagues. With that in mind, let's not force potential clients to endure pages and pages and pages of dense text.

Your white papers should be a joy to read. After all, you've probably spent months and possibly even longer, developing the technology that is the subject of this paper. The enthusiasm that went into building your terrific product should come across. We can convey some in several ways.

One key ingredient in a successful sales document (which is what the white paper really is) is to strike the right balance between text and graphics. Counterbalance the word count with charts, tables, and graphics. Use each of these to illustrate key points about the technology.

For example, a well-presented graphic can clearly illustrate the relationship between concepts, technologies, and systems in a way that reams of texts just cannot.

Charts are ideal for highlighting the results of findings from your surveys, customer feedback, or benchmark testing.

And color co-ordinated tables are a user-friendly way to present data, features, and functionality. All of these visuals combine to reinforce the message in the rest of the document. Even the most enthusiastic reader gets tired every so often; charts, tables, and graphics will balance the main text and give your white paper that nice, professional appearance.

2.5. Using Clear English

Though your prospective clients may be well-educated and erudite professionals, many will struggle to understand your material if it is not well written. Indeed, in today's international marketplace, you need to bear in mind the requirement of readers for whom English is not their native tongue.

You can improve your writing by cutting out excessive wordiness and deadwood phrases and replace them with better expressions.

The following is a list of the 'most wanted' culprits.

The "deadwood" is in bold; use the suggested term instead.

according to our data --we find

accordingly --therefore, so

after the conclusion of --after

ascertain the location of --find

by a factor of two --two times, double, twice

come to a conclusion --conclude

give consideration to --consider, examine

give indication of --show, indicate, suggest

in close proximity to --near

in some cases --sometimes

in the event that --if

in the near future --soon

in the neighborhood of --near, about, nearly

in view of the fact that --because, since

it is our opinion that --we think

it is possible that --perhaps

it is well known that --(nothing)

it may be said that --(nothing)

make inquiry regarding --ask about, inquire about

manner in which --how

not with standing the fact that --although

on the basis of --from, because, by

on the order of --about, approximately

present in greater abundance --more abundant

prior to --before

provided that --if

put an end to --end

reach a conclusion --conclude

serves the function of being --is

subsequent to --after

the question as to --whether

there can be little doubt that --probably

utilize or utilization --use

with reference to --about

As mentioned before, an experienced business writer will guide his or her readers through the document and avoid confusing them with acronyms, convoluted sentences, and labyrinthine paragraphs. Simple, clear writing is concise, effective, and persuasive.

You can significantly improve the effectiveness of your business documents by adopting a clear writing style, which in turns improves your chances of winning new customers.