

How to Write a Great White Paper

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Executive Summary

Writing a great white paper is easy when you follow a *MAP* that outlines the Message(s) tailored to the target Audience to fulfill the Purpose of the document. White papers that fail to resonate with readers normally go astray in one of these three essential areas.

In this article, the author shares his methodology for writing successful white papers and articles—first time, every time. The intended audience is marketing and public relations professionals in computer networking companies, although most of the techniques apply fully to organizations in other industries.

The first three sections describe the *MAP* in reverse order: purpose, audience and message. This theoretical overview is put to practical use in the next section on how to navigate the *MAP* in a way that helps overcome so-called writer's block. A collection of miscellaneous and useful tips wraps up the discussion, followed by a brief conclusion.

The author welcomes constructive criticism on the usefulness of this methodology. Please e-mail him at REBiery@Yosemite.net with your comments and suggestions, or to share your actual experience (either good or bad!) following the *MAP* approach.

Pinpoint Your Purpose

A white paper can serve a variety of different purposes. Some are used to generate sales leads: “Enter your name and address, then download the document.” Or the paper may be offered as tantalizing fulfillment piece in a direct mail or advertising campaign.

Other white papers help “tell the story” to serious prospects. Perhaps its purpose could be to help qualify leads: “If you have these needs, then this product or service is perfect for you.” And some white papers may help overcome common objections or offer a competitive analysis with or without naming specific competitors.

One way to pinpoint your intended purpose is to think in terms of the sales cycle: When and why is this particular white paper needed? A typical sales cycle involves lead generation, first contact (the one chance to make that positive first impression), suspect qualification, selling and overcoming objections, closing (getting the order or trial), and reinforcing the customer's decision after the sale. The purpose of any white paper should then be to convince the prospect to *take the next step* in the sales cycle.

Connect with Your Audience

Who should be reading your white paper? Is it the CIO? The CEO? Two very different audiences with two very different backgrounds and perspectives. Is it targeted at both the CIO and the CEO? Then write for the CEO. *Always* write for the highest level of your intended audience. The rest will just have to move up a notch or two in their perspective.

For this reason, it is helpful to identify your target audience in the executive summary. When the CEO discovers (at the end of the executive summary) that the document is intended for network administrators, he or she can then forward it on without reading another word. If it is intended for executive managers, say so, and the network administrator will realize immediately that no technical details are presented. But the network administrator will still read it—especially if it came from the CIO or CEO!

An important corollary to connecting with your audience is to limit your audience. Many networking vendors want white papers that appeal to both service providers (their customers) and the enterprise (their customers' customers). While this is certainly possible, it can serve to dilute the message. For example, it becomes impossible to tell service providers how they can be sinfully profitable while concurrently telling enterprise customers how much money they will save! Different "customers" are distinctly different audiences, normally worthy of their own respective white papers.

Stick to Your Message

Think of the last white paper you read, whether it was yesterday or a month ago. What do you remember? Can you recall all 12 of those wonderful benefits promised by the company's next-generation platform? Do you even remember there were a total of 12? Can you recall the name of the product? Can you remember anything at all?

Chances are you will remember only one thing. So, what do you want *your* readers to remember when they're done reading *your* white paper? That's your key message. And stick to it. Sure, there will be lots of other messages, but all should play a supporting role subservient to the key message.

Your message can be "our product is the best" because it is...

- ... The fastest owing to its powerful architecture.
- ... The simplest to implement and operate.
- ... The newest with the latest and greatest state-of-the-art technology.
- ... The most visionary based on its future-proofed flexibility.
- ... The most cost-effective with its exceptional price/performance.
- ... The most complete because it replaces a whole rack full of other systems.

Whatever. Just make sure that every key message is tied directly to a compelling benefit. "Can't live without it." "Really would like to have that competitive advantage." "The cost savings could balance the IT budget—and then some." A company's value

proposition often contains the gist of good message, optionally distilled or refined for the white paper's intended purpose and audience.

Putting Pen to Paper

Talk about old clichés that have lost their meaning! But when it comes time to writing the white paper begin with an outline and think first about the message. The key message is just that: a key to unlock a theme or “plot” that can be used in the white paper.

Then organize the main and supporting messages in a way that will resonate with your audience. Get into their heads and empathize with them. What keeps them awake at night? What are their challenges? How are they rewarded?

Then, tune the outline to underscore the document's purpose. A powerful way to do this is work “backwards” by starting at the end with the conclusion and its all-important “call to action.” In fact, write the entire conclusion (one or two paragraphs) and be very specific about what you want the reader to do. Every other section in the document should then help lead the reader to this logical conclusion. “Yes, I *should* learn more about how my company can benefit from this new technology. I *will* go the Web site and download that cost-savings calculator now!”

Working backwards can be a beneficial technique anywhere in the document. First, answer the “question” with your strongest story. Then “ask” the question to set up your persuasive answer. Still stuck coming up with a story? Think debate by making the competition's argument, then countering it with one of your own. Or give your story first, then poke holes in the “counter argument” that might be on the reader's mind.

The use of an outline has some other major advantages. It makes it easy to rearrange and organize thoughts. It offers a “high level” opportunity for quick review. The ease of creating and changing an outline helps overcome writer's block. As ideas occur, drop them into an appropriate spot in the outline. The outline eventually grows to become fairly complete, at which point it can be filled out and organized into a coherent story. Remember: A solid outline almost assures producing a successful white paper.

Other Tips...

Here is a collection of miscellaneous tips or “tricks of the trade” that have served me well in the past:

- Keep the length to 10 pages at most. The percentage of people willing to read your white paper diminishes with each additional page.
- Less can be more. There is no reason white papers need to be 8-10 pages. If you can get your message across fully in fewer pages, do it! (This article does it in four.)
- Always include an executive summary—limited to a single page—and expect that some readers (even if they like your message) will only read this section.

- Tell ‘em what you’re going to tell them (in the executive summary), tell ‘em (in detail in the body of the document), then tell ‘em what you just told ‘em (very briefly in the “call to action” conclusion).
- Make liberal use of sections and subsections, diagrams, sidebars, lists and other techniques to make for an easy read, especially in longer pieces. OK, so I didn’t use any diagrams in this article. Mea Culpa. Mea Culpa. Mea Culpa.
- Keep the reader reading by keeping the content genuinely informative. A single paragraph that is too self-serving, too boring or too confusing can cause a reader to go on to the next item on his or her to-do list.
- Pick a writing style suitable to the purpose and audience. But avoid the temptation to get too technical. Prospective customers want to know what a product or service does for them, not necessarily how it works on the inside.
- Similarly, don’t get too “academic” or try to be objectively altruistic. Vendors have agendas, and that’s OK, because the marketplace has unmet needs.
- Use humor. Who said white papers have to be dry and totally serious?
- Last, but not least, encourage “constructive criticism” during the review cycle to get the best results. Ask reviewers to comment *specifically* both on what they like (*and why*) and what could be improved (*and how*).

Conclusion

Writing a great white paper is not rocket science. But following a proven methodology does simplify the process and produces a better result. The MAP guideline—Message, Audience and Purpose—has served me well over the years as I have written white papers and similar marketing collateral for companies in the networking industry.

So try it... you’ll like it! Feel free to use these guidelines as you see fit, and adapt them as necessary to meet your own specific needs. Or contract with me to write that next white paper for you, and you’ll see just how painless the outsourcing process can be. Either way, I am confident your next white paper or article will get rave reviews.

About the Author

Roger Biery is an independent marketing communications consultant with over 25 year of experience. He focuses exclusively on the networking industry where his specialty is writing white papers that position new technologies for maximum impact in a crowded marketplace. Roger’s style is to write clear, concise and convincing copy that compels readers to take action. Details about Roger’s background and capabilities, including samples of his work, can be found on the Web at www.MarComConsultant.com.

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