



E 303: TECHNICAL WRITING

School of Literature and Languages

Louisiana Tech University



Interoffice Memo

To: Mr. Merchant's English 303 students
From: Mr. David M. Merchant, English Instructor
Subject: Lecture 13: What is a White Paper?
Date: April 17, 2020

The purpose of this memo is to give an overview of what is a white paper including how it differs from scientific papers and technical reports.

White Paper Overview

The term "white paper" comes from a century-old practice of British government reporting. When Parliament requested government agencies to provide data to help them make decisions, the agencies would offer three different types: comprehensive reports with a blue cover, open-ended reports with a green cover, and short reports on a single topic with white covers. This last type is what we call a "white paper."

White papers identify a problem or opportunity and then convince the reader to accept a specific solution or approach. They are written by subject-matter-experts or sales teams. But they are not traditional sales pitches: **a reader should feel informed, not sold.**

As explained by D. R. Willerton, in his dissertation *Ethos and Exigence: White Papers in High-Tech Industries*,

White papers represent an intersection of technical documentation (i.e., providing technical information about a product or service) with marketing communication (developing information to inform potential customers, improve sales and garner attention in the marketplace).

Thus, a white paper can focus on a complex solution, an expensive solution (and so the reader needs persuading), the implications of a governmental policy, a misunderstood technology, a new concept, a new opportunity, a new service, a new solution, or a new trend.

A white paper is often a predecisional document, one prepared to help decision-maker(s) in arriving at a decision; the purpose of a predecisional paper is not to set forth ultimate conclusions or facts but is a subjective document which reflects the personal opinions of the writer rather than the policy of the organization. You would not be making a recommendation per se, but a report on the feasibility or the implications of your topic (policy, solution, opportunity, etc.). A decision-maker may read several white papers on the same topic, each expressing a different analysis, opinion, or suggestion; they would make their decision after reading the papers.

Also, a white paper can be used to train new employees; for example, a company may want new employees to be aware of a new product or service so they can join in promoting or supporting it. In a business context, a white paper's purpose is to **generate or nurture leads** by engaging your reader by **teaching** your potential client or customer about your company's brand, a new solution or technology, or a new opportunity and how it is relevant to your reader. However, this fits with any white paper topic: you are promoting a policy, a policy change, a new direction for a program, a new way to use a technology, etc.

By the way, the traditional sales funnel metaphor does not work well anymore because of the internet and social media—modern sales funnel is complex and sometimes white papers are used not to build trust or engage clients or customers but to rebuild trust or to reengage them.

Types of White Papers

The main types of white papers are Government (directed to policy decision-makers), Technical (directed at advisors, influencers, or recommenders, sometimes users as well), Business Benefits (directed at decision-makers, managers, users), and Hybrid (Technical/Business) (directed to influencers, decision-makers, and users).

Government

The purpose of a government white paper is to discuss the implications of policy decisions. Government agencies issue many white papers. Government includes city, state, and federal. This also includes organizational governance: universities, for example, have policies.

Sometimes organizations call for input on what should a program focus on. For example, NASA's Planetary Science Decadal Survey looked for input from their community (which included university partners) to help the NASA decided what space and ground-based explorations should NASA focus on for the next decade. NASA, in a perfect world (or at least with funding levels NASA had in the 1960s), would have enough funds to explore most of what interest scientists, but funds are quite limited and so they needed help in deciding. The collected white papers are at www8.nationalacademies.org/ssbsurvey/publicview.aspx.

Technical

Not too long ago, this used to be the most common type of white paper; the purpose is to describe how things work. In information technology, a white paper is often a paper written by a lead product designer to explain the philosophy and operation of a product in a marketplace or technology context. Many, if not most, Web sites for software products include a white paper besides a frequently-asked-questions (FAQ) page and more detailed product specifications.

Business

The most common type of white paper now is the business white paper; the purpose is to describe the benefits of a solution and to generate leads. They may describe a new product, approach, or diagnose a problem, with the final purpose of generating business leads (but not as an overt sales pitch).

Hybrid

A hybrid white paper is one that combines the technical and business white paper types and is directed to influencers, decision-makers, and users.

Scientific Papers and Technical Reports Versus White Papers

Scientific reports differ from white papers in that while white papers are written to persuade a reader to accept a recommendation for an action or decision (policy change, product, solution, viewpoint, etc.), the scientific paper is to objectively, neutrally present an analysis of data to add to the body of scientific knowledge. Also, while white papers may be anonymous (written by writers-for-hire or marketing departments), scientific papers are not anonymous.

Technical reports differ from white papers in that technical reports are a more traditional recommendation or feasibility report; in a technical report, often the audience already knows there is a problem and that it needs to be solved or that there is an opportunity that they want to take advantage of, but they do not know which of two or more ways to solve the issue or take advantage of the opportunity is the best and so they request you to research the options and to make a recommendation. A white paper targets audiences who may not know they have a problem, or that it can be solved, or that there is an opportunity, or that the opportunity is one that they could take advantage of as well as targeting audiences who are researching what is out there and may use several white papers in writing a recommendation.

In addition, while scientific papers, technical reports, and white papers should be written according to the situation and audience, white papers have a much greater diversity in formats and styles.

Closing

If you have questions, please contact me via email or the course Moodle page (forum or messaging service).

References

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