

White papers are similar but distinct from business reports. In order to write a successful one, you need to understand the difference and include key elements. This article will help you decide if a white paper is right for you, and if yes, how to prepare and produce one.

What is a White Paper?

A white paper is an authoritative document intended to fully inform the reader on a particular topic. It combines expert knowledge and research into a document that argues for a specific solution or recommendation.

The white paper allows the reader to understand an issue, solve a problem, or make a decision.

White papers are data-centric, text-heavy business documents. Due to the large amount of data and research, white papers are deep reads and tend to have a formal tone.

Use and Value

Businesses write white papers both to record expertise and to market themselves.

White papers are generally written for an audience outside of the business. Therefore, they are a tool to attract readers to the company by offering top-quality, industry knowledge. However, a white paper is not a sales pitch. It sells the company by highlighting the internal expertise and valuable recommendations, not by bidding for business.

Example:

Sales Pitch: 8 Ways ABC Marketing will save money in your social media budget

White paper: Social Media Advertising: Matching marketing needs and platforms

How to select a white paper topic

Choosing the right topic is essential to having your white paper read. There are three major factors:

1. Audience

As with any business writing, the audience is your first consideration. The white paper must be written with a target reader in mind. The audience may be long-time customers familiar with the industry or new prospective buyers who are entirely new to the field.

Reflect on the reader's pain points or major questions. Within these topics, look for ones that have not been fully investigated or the available information is out-of-date.

2. Expertise

Your white paper should match and highlight your company's expertise.

The document should provide a complete investigation including external research and internal knowledge. The business's own know-how informs the content that is included and how it is compiled.

3. Problem-Based and Solution-Focused

White papers should identify and address a particular problem. The problem should be relevant and timely in your field. The document may focus on issues such as common dilemmas, new trends, changing techniques, industry comparison, etc.

The white paper must have a proposed solution or recommendation to answer the problem. This solution is based on a thorough examination of the problem and potential solutions.

White Paper Preparation

Research

The selected topic must be comprehensively researched. Pull information from online references, industry resources, and internal documents. White papers are data-focused, so they should be supported by significant research. There's no hard and fast rule on citations but you need to cite any information that is not public knowledge and that you didn't know before beginning your research. However, understand that the reader's confidence is likely to increase with an increasing number of cited references.

Of course, all resources must come from authoritative sites. In order to write a valuable document, all research materials must be from credible, reliable sources.

Read Other White Papers

Are there white papers covering your topic or area already? Read them to determine the knowledge gaps and the opportunities to build on existing content. This review will also ensure that your white paper is novel instead of redundant.

Use a Mind-Map

It can be overwhelming to keep track of the many sources, ideas, and content involved in preparing a white paper. A helpful organizational tool is the [mind-map](#). A mind-map allows the writer to catalog and connect the many different pieces into one visual overview.

We suggest using the free tool [FreeMind](#) to organize your content. It's simple to use and free.

White Paper Format

White papers generally follow a standard document format. The content order may seem similar to other business reports, but there is one major difference:

A white paper places the conclusion at the end.

Many business communications, such as technical reports or proposals, place the main conclusion at the beginning of the document. This order responds to the desires of the reader and their preference in receiving the information.

In a white paper, the content and research informs the reader and increases their understanding of the problem throughout the document. The final section provides the 'Ta-da!' moment where the reader now receives the solution which is supported by the evidence in the document.

The reader's journey and preferences in a white paper and business report differ. The major findings follow suit.

If you're unsure of these distinctions or are looking to improve your business writing skills, consider enrolling in our [Technical Report Writing Course](#).

And no matter the journey, the document must be easy to understand and include informative headings for easy navigation.

Choose an Accurate Title

A good title is essential. It should clearly indicate what the reader will learn from the white paper. It should also be enticing.

Example:

Bland: White paper on Law 123.4 Referencing Environmental Impact Assessments.

Enticing: The Rules are Changing: White Paper on the Environmental Impact Assessment Legislation Proposals in 2018

The phrase 'white paper' does not necessarily need to be in the title at all. Some audiences are seeking that authoritative indicator. Other readers may be scared off from valuable content because of the term. As always, think of what your audience would prefer.

Abstract

The abstract offers the reader a brief overview of white paper's main points. It allows the reader to ensure they have found a document relevant to their needs. After reading, the reader should be able to know if they are 'in the right place.'

Problem Statement

The problem statement specifies the issue the white paper will address. The problem needs to be defined and placed into a context to ensure it's understood by the reader.

Background

This section provides the background information required for the audience to grasp the problem and, ultimately, the solution. The content may be detailed and technical or broad and high-level. The content depends on the reader and the problem.

If original research is completed for the white paper, the methods should be communicated.

Solution

The 'ta-da' moment of the white paper.

Based on the preceding information, the solution is now presented. It is developed and argued for using the gathered evidence and the expertise of the author and their company.

Conclusion

This section summarizes the white paper's major findings. Recommendations based on the solution are provided.

References

All sources used to develop the white paper must be collected and cited in this section. It adds validity to the document. It also gives the reader content for further research. Depending on your industry, follow MLA or APA citation formats.

Final Thoughts

Writing a good white paper is not a simple task. However, the investment of time and skill can produce a valuable document that shares your company's knowledge, contributing to overall education and progress in your industry. And, a good white paper increases business opportunities.