How to Write a White Paper
A White Paper on White Papers

By Michael A. Stelzner

About the Author: Michael Stelzner is the author of *Writing White Papers: How to Capture Readers and Keep Them Engaged*, the executive editor of the 20,000-reader *WhitePaperSource™ Newsletter* and has written more than 130 papers for major corporations such as Microsoft, FedEx, Motorola, Dow Jones, LinkedIn, HP, Monster, and SAP.

So you've decided you need a white paper. What exactly should the objectives be? Will the paper be well-received? How long should it be? Who will write it? These and many other questions are common concerns that should be addressed from the start. The good news is you are not alone! Since its first edition, more than 85,000 people have read this paper. It is my hope that it leads you in the right direction.

This paper's objective is to guide you in the process of developing effective white papers and persuasive business documents.

What Is a White Paper?

The term *white paper* is an offshoot of the term *white book*, which is an official publication of a national government. A famous white paper example is the *Winston Churchill White Paper of 1922*, which addressed political conflict in Palestine.

A white paper usually argues a specific position or solution to a business problem

A white paper typically argues a specific position or solution to a problem. Although white papers take their roots in governmental policy, they have become a common tool used to introduce technology innovations and products. A typical search engine query on "white paper" will return millions of results, with many focused on technology-related issues.

White papers are powerful marketing tools used to help key decision-makers and influencers justify implementing solutions. For some examples of white papers used in the technology marketplace, see http://www.stelzner.com/copy-whitepapers.html.

Know Your Audience

An effective white paper quickly gains affinity with its readers

Perhaps the biggest mistake white paper writers make involves not properly understanding the disposition of their readers. ==Instant affinity is key==. A white paper must quickly identify problems or concerns faced by its readers and lead them down the path to a solution provided by your product or service. Different types of readers look at the same problems from different perspectives. For example, an engineer might care about technical nuances, whereas a CIO is more interested in business benefits. In the case of high-level executives or managers, their busy lifestyle means they have extremely short attention spans, an important consideration when writing to this type of audience==. If you do not grab the reader's attention in the first paragraph, you will never achieve your objectives==.

Decide on an Approach

There are really only two ways to write white papers: (1) by focusing on your self-interests or (2) by concentrating on the interests of your readers. The self-interest or "chest-beating" approach focuses **exclusively** on a product, service or solution by expounding on its benefits, features and implications. While effective in some circumstances, this approach is best left for something other than a white paper, such as a data sheet or product brief.

The self-serving approach to white papers focuses exclusively on a product or solution

The self-serving approach is often focused on the mistaken belief that people like to read boring details about why your product is the best thing since the invention of the Internet. This method is an ineffective approach to writing that turns most readers off immediately. If you want your customers to actually read the paper, you should try to gain affinity with them right away. It should be noted that it is perfectly appropriate to touch on product features and benefits if they are carefully crafted into the white paper.

The customer-focused approach to white papers concentrates on the problems the customer is experiencing and broadly addresses solutions

The alternative approach, and the one I strongly recommend, is to focus on the needs of your readers. This can be effectively accomplished by leading with the problems your solution overcomes, rather than the actual solution itself. To many people, this seems counterintuitive, but it really is just the opposite. ==By focusing on the pain points experienced by the reader and talking about the problems caused by those pains,==

==highlight== *you are establishing credibility with the reader and simultaneously filtering out unqualified customers.* ==highlight==

EXAMPLE A:

<u>Title</u>: Groundbreaking TechWidget by XYZ Company Solves Time Management Dilemma!

<u>Opening Sentence</u>: XYZ Company has done it again; another great TechWidget invention can help you overcome time management challenges.

EXAMPLE B:

<u>Title</u>: Solving the Time Management Dilemma with Technology

<u>Opening Sentence</u>: If you find it difficult to manage your time effectively, a new class of technology products may be the solution you are looking for.

Consider the two examples in the sidebars. Example A does mention the problem, but it is tainted by self-serving mentions of the company and the product. Contrast that with Example B, which focuses exclusively on the problem and hints at the solution in a broad sense. Readers will feel more inclined to read Example B because it seems more educational to them. They have the chance to learn about a new technology that could solve their problem. With Example A, they learn more about the company and the product and less about the solution. Readers of Example A may never get to the point where they understand what the solution is. By describing problems, you are really developing an important affinity with the reader.

You can take it a step further by looking at issues such as historical precedents, describing new classes of solutions that address the problems and even identifying what to look for in a solution, while never once mentioning your product name or company (at least not yet). This altruistic approach will score major points with the reader and greatly increase the likelihood he or she will actually read the entire paper.

Add Substance

A white paper must contain informative and persuasive information. The goal of a white paper is to lead the reader toward the conclusion that your product or service will best meet his or her needs. To accomplish this, you must substantially make your case. Here are a few areas that may help you add beef to your paper:

- **Provide a historical overview**: A historical overview can be a powerful addition to your white paper. In the world of technology, it's useful to discuss what has led to the modern-day dilemma solved by your solution. Take, for example, a paper I produced for one of my clients on the topic of multimodality. Briefly, this new technology allows mobile callers to talk on their cell phones and simultaneously interact with the onscreen display. A big section of the paper focused on how consumers have moved from touchtone dialing to text messaging to mobile applications and ultimately to converging next-generation solutions. The objective was to show how the needs of users have evolved

and to set the stage for this client's new technology.

- **Introduce a new class of products**: You may need to write about something that has never been addressed in the unique way you need to address it. In these circumstances, it may make sense to introduce your solution as part of a new class of products. This can be very powerful because you have an opportunity not only to name the class, but to define its key characteristics. For example, one of my clients developed automated software that responds to e-mails using artificial intelligence, offloading support staff. I coined the term "virtual support teams" and it stuck in the industry. When you create a new class of products, you can refer to the benefits of the class and even address specific minimum requirements for a product to be part of the class. All of this can be done without yet mentioning your specific solution.

- **Offer the "what to look for" pitch**: Providing an overview of the key considerations to look for when seeking a solution can be very useful and persuasive. This section of your paper can be "the buyer's guide" that helps your readers set a standard by which all of your competitors will be judged. This is a great opportunity for you to toot your own horn and get away with it. For example, you might state that it is important to work with a company that has an established client base and a global support team. You could explain the benefits and ultimately knock your smaller competitors out of the equation for the reader. This should all be done at a high level without getting into the specifics regarding your company or product.

- **Provide examples**: It is always useful to explain situations where your solution would be particularly effective. You can be as specific or as generic as you like. Sometimes it is useful to talk about specific industries where the solution works well. Other times it makes sense to talk about specific customers who have found success with the product. These examples can and should be directly related to your organization's solution.

When to Mention Your Product

It is appropriate to mention your solution after you establish a high-level business case or need

One of the most important things to master is the skill of transitioning from a general to a very specific discussion of your solution without appearing too self-serving. After you have established a high-level business case for your product or service, it is a good time to discuss the solution offered by your company. *Use the following test to determine the right place to mention your solution: Have I clearly addressed the problems and reasons my solution can overcome them*? Would you personally be convinced if someone handed the paper to you?

Adding Credibility to Your White Paper

To add credibility, write objectively and reference known third-party sources

There are some circumstances where you will need to boost your credibility to the reader to persuade him or her that the claims you are making are true. Here are a few things you can do to achieve this goal. First, you should write objectively. It is important to speak clearly and not appear too biased. If you are making claims that are clearly out in left field, your reader will question your validity. Second, you should quote reputable third-party sources when making claims that involve numbers of any kind.

For example, if you claim that corporate workers spend an average of 2 hours a day performing personal tasks on their computers, costing corporations billions of dollars in lost revenues, you had better present some hard evidence to back up your claim. Even though it may be true, in the absence of a good source you would be better off saying corporations are losing excessive amounts of workforce labor time to personal Internet usage.

The Little Details

It's always the small stuff that seems to make or break a white paper. For example, a well-written paper that is poorly formatted may never be read. Here are a few tips:

- **Keep it short**: Try to keep your white paper to 12 pages or less. If you cannot do that, then consider splitting your topic into multiple papers.

- **Use images, charts and illustrations**: Be careful here, because I am not talking about clip art. It is often useful to make a nice chart or custom graphic illustration that reinforces your points. If you do not have this skill, consider hiring an illustrator. In addition, it's okay to use stock photos to help set the tone for your piece.

- **Break content into small digestible chunks**: Try to keep each major thought to no more than a few paragraphs before breaking it down further into sub-thoughts. It is helpful to use bullets and many creative subheads. Remember your audience and their unique attention span.

- **Add sidebars and callouts**: Think of those great textbooks you read in school. They were the ones that had little summary sentences next to major sections so you knew if you should read it. Sidebars and callouts are very effective tools to help your reader get through the entire white paper.

- **Come back to your paper later**: I have found it is useful to review the paper after a good 12- to 24-hour break. As a painter is blind to missed spots on a wall, it is easy to overlook glaring mistakes that would be obvious after a good rest.

- **Have an editor review your work**: Having an objective set of eyes look over your document is critical. You don't want a grammatical oversight to ruin your reputation with your reader. In addition to syntax and grammar evaluation, an editor can suggest slight changes that make your words more powerful.

Who Should Write the Paper?

Engineers and marketing managers are not the best people to write white papers

This is a biggie. You may think the best person to write a white paper is the engineer who developed the product or the product-marketing guy who is managing the entire team. This could not be further from the truth. Asking someone who is immersed in the daily details of a product to step back and write about it is like asking a student to write a paper about his first year in college. Sure, he or she might be initially interested in writing the paper, but it will most likely fail for a couple of very important reasons.

First, a good manager or engineer is not necessarily a good writer. You need someone who can clearly formulate your white paper to your target audience. Sometimes that person might be a salesperson, because he or she sells these types of details daily to your clients. However, asking a salesperson to write a paper is like asking a fireman to clean out sewers. He or she will generally say, "That's your job."

Second, assess the cost of labor to have an engineer or product manager write a paper. It may be cost-prohibitive to ask a high-cost employee to take the up-to 80 hours needed to produce a paper. Finally, look at your timeline. How quickly do you need it produced? If it ends up sitting on a desk somewhere, you could be in trouble.

A freelance writer should be able to complete a white paper in a few weeks with minimal staff interruption

Sometimes it is important and appropriate to bring in an outside writer. A good contract writer should be able to conduct a few hours' worth of interviews and come back with a well-written draft in a matter of weeks. The benefits here can be very significant. You get the paper done quickly, you free up your expensive in-house labor and you get a very high-quality paper. Add to this the knowledge the writer brings to the table, which allows him or her to eliminate the learning curve on how to write a white paper.

What to Look for in a Writer

Finding the right person to write a white paper is not a simple task. Here are a few things to look for:

- **Writing skills**: Is this person generally good at writing? Has he or she done a significant amount of it? Will he or she be open to suggestions and changes?

- **Interviewing skills**: Can this person efficiently extract the key nuggets of information from content experts; information necessary to write an effective paper? A white paper writer is similar to a journalist, asking the important questions that reveal the key points of a paper.

- **Experience with white papers**: Now that you have found a writer, can he or she do white papers? It takes a specialized breed to truly understand the unique idiosyncrasies that make a

white paper great. Be sure to ask for white paper samples.

- **Technical competency**: Can the writer bridge the gap between what engineers are saying and the language spoken by the reader? This requires a general technical competency and a good understanding of the target audience.

- **Organized and motivated**: Pigeonholing thoughts into clearly organized categories is essential for a white paper writer. Good organization should be driven by a motivation to do the work and see it through to completion.

A Few Words on Outsourcing

When seeking a white paper writer, ask to see examples and speak to former clients

Freelance writers range from technical writers who focus on producing manuals to advertising copywriters who specialize in short communications. Somewhere in the middle lives a rare species—the white paper writer. Many claim to have perfected the skill of white paper writing, but few truly specialize in producing white papers. When you seek a white paper writer, be sure to ask a few key questions:

- **Who are your writing clients?** This question alone will not reveal the quality of a writer, but may provide insight if the clients are respected.
- **How long have you been writing white papers?** Ask the writer to back up his or her claims with examples and people you can call to verify the work.
- **Are you the one who does the writing?** Many white paper outfits subcontract or delegate to junior writers.
- **What is your methodology?** You may be surprised that many writers have no methodology; they simply write whatever you ask them to produce.
- **Do you have an editor?** This is important. A good writer should always have a second set of eyes to evaluate his or her work before sending you the first draft.

Where to Go From Here

This paper merely touches the surface of the art of white paper writing. If you need help completing your white

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Rev: 2.0

paper, need one updated or want someone to produce multiple papers with a common flavor, consider Stelzner Consulting. We offer the following services to help you:
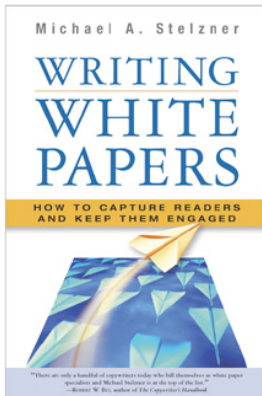
- **Book: Writing White Papers**: Do-it-yourselfers, be sure to pick up a copy of *Writing White Papers: How to Capture Readers and Keep Them Engaged*, the only book dedicated to the art of writing white papers. See www.WritingWhitePapers.com/book/.

- **White Paper Writer Report**: The result of an extensive study of more than 575 white paper writers, the *White Paper Writer Industry Survey* offers the best information on how white papers should be formatted, structured and priced. It can be found here: www.WhitePaperSource.com/report/.

- **White Paper Community**: The WhitePaperSource™ Forum is the Internet's first and only online community dedicated to the art of writing and marketing of white papers. In the forum you can post questions and seek advice from others. Join the forum at www.WhitePaperSource.com/forum/.

- **Blog on Writing White Papers**: Be sure to check out Michael Stelzner's blog for the latest information on the white paper industry. See www.WritingWhitePapers.com/blog/

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The Last Word

Thank you for your interest in this free paper. We welcome your comments, feedback and suggestions. Please consider sending us a note about how this paper has helped you.

Check out Michael Stelzner's new blog, *Writing White Papers* at www.writingwhitepapers.com/blog/.