

How to Write a Great White Paper

By Roger E. Biery

Abstract

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 contributed articles—first time, every time. The intended audience is marketing and public relations professionals in high technology companies, although the techniques should apply equally in most other industries.

The first three sections describe the *MAP* approach 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 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 Roger@Biery.biz with your comments and suggestions, or to share your actual experience (either good or bad!) following the *MAP* approach.

Pinpoint Your Purpose

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

The purpose of a white paper may be to help qualify sales leads: “If you have these needs, then this product or service is perfect for you.” Others might provide critical background information about the subject. And some may help overcome common objections or offer a competitive analysis—with or without naming the competitors.

One way to pinpoint your underlying 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 essential purpose of any white paper should ideally be to convince the prospect to *take the next step* in the sales cycle.

Connect with Your Audience

Who will be reading your white paper? Is it the CFO? The CEO? Two very different audiences with two very different perspectives and priorities. Is it targeted at both the CFO 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 perspective.

For this reason, it is helpful to identify your target audience in the executive summary or introduction. When the CEO discovers, while reading the aptly-named *Executive Summary*, that the document is intended for engineering managers, he or she may forward it along. If instead it is intended for executive managers, then say so, and the engineers will understand why the content is light on technical details. But the engineer will likely still read every word—especially if it was forwarded by the CEO!

An important corollary to connecting with your audience is to *limit* your audience. For example, networking vendors sometimes want a white paper to appeal to both service providers (their customers) and the enterprise (their customers' customers). While this is certainly possible, it can serve to dilute the messaging. Imagine trying to convince enterprises they will save a lot of money with a managed service, while concurrently telling service providers they will be sinfully profitable! Different “customers” are distinctly different audiences, normally worthy of their own targeted white papers.

Stick to Your Message

Think of the last white paper you read, whether it was yesterday or months ago. What do you remember? Can you recall all 12 of those wonderful benefits promised by the company's next-generation solution? 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 in driving home the key message.

Your key message can be “our product is industry-leading” because it is...

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

Whatever. Just make sure that every key message is tied directly to a compelling benefit to solicit the desired response: “Can't live without it.” “Really would like to have that competitive advantage.” “The cost savings could help balance the department's budget.”

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

MAPping the White Paper

When it comes time to write the white paper begin with an outline and think first about the *key message*. The key message is just that: a key to unlock the theme or "plot" that will be used to tell a coherent and compelling story 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, begin tuning the outline to fulfill 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 first (one or two paragraphs, at least) and be very specific about what you want the reader to do next. 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 Website and download that cost-savings calculator now!"

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

Using an outline has some other practical advantages. I have found that a high-level "structural outline" (just one page) usually gets a project going in the right direction. The next step, a detailed outline, provides another opportunity to make sure the project is staying on track. Outlines help overcome writer's block by making it easier to organize thoughts and rearrange the flow. As ideas occur, drop them into an appropriate section in the outline. The outline eventually grows to become fairly complete, at which point it can be more easily written into a coherent story. Indeed, a solid outline virtually guarantees 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 my many years of writing white papers:

- Keep the length to around 10 pages. 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 8-12 pages. If you can get your key message across fully in fewer pages, do it! (This article does it in four.)

- Always include an executive summary or introduction—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 ‘em (in the executive summary or introduction), 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 easier read, especially in longer pieces. (OK, so I didn’t use any diagrams in this article. Mea Culpa. Mea Culpa. Mea Culpa.)
- Keep the readers 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 move 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. Every prospective customer wants to know what a product or service can do for him or her; only a few may care about how it was built.
- Use some humor. The occasional pun or one-liner helps keep the readers reading.
- Keep the content credible. Readers know that white papers are basically sales pitches. And that’s OK, because readers have unmet needs. When the material is fair and factual, the reader will be more inclined to accept the pitch.
- Last, but not least, encourage constructive criticism during the review cycle to get the best results. Ask reviewers to comment *specifically* about both what they like (*and why*) and what could be improved (*and how*).

Conclusion

The idea of writing a white paper makes some folks nervous. But by using a proven process, you can simplify the effort and get better results. The MAP approach—Message, Audience and Purpose—has served me well over the many years that I have written white papers and similar marketing collateral for my clients.

So give it a try! Feel free to use these techniques 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 outsourcing 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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