

The Ideal Length of a White Paper:

Solving the Long
and Short of It.

Part Two: What to Do When Your White Paper Is Too Short

This paper is the second part of a **three-part series**:

Part 1: **The Length Question** <http://www.sherlockink.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/IdealLengthofWhitePaper-Part1-Final.pdf>

Part 2: **What to Do When Your White Paper Is Too Short**

Part 3: **What to Do When Your White Paper Is Too Long** (Coming Soon)

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Part 2: What to Do

When Your White Paper is Too Short

Part One: The Length Question examined the myth of the magic length of the white paper concluding that there is no perfect or magical length for white papers to ensure they get read.

While, there is no magic number of pages, there are definitely issues if you make your paper too long or short.

Length problems are generally symptomatic of other underlying issues. The solution to the problem lies in fixing the underlying issues, and in the process, length issues should resolve themselves of their own accord.

Taking Action:

What to examine and actions you can take if you think your white paper might be too short. Read on.

Tell the **Whole** Story

A white paper should be a stand-alone document. It should tell the whole story.

Common mistakes on this front include:

Being so immersed in your own content that you fail to set the context for people.

Expecting people to get the context from other communications.

The document your reader is looking at may be the first interaction with your company. If you are not clear to the reader, it may be the last. You may lose your only chance to communicate with that person. On the Internet, people don't tend to look back if they don't find something good the first time.

Helpful Hint:

Imagining your white paper telling a story will help you ensure that you are providing all the needed information for your reader - the beginning, the middle and the ending. Tell the whole story, but do it succinctly.

Understand your Market

And How Well They Understand You

In order to tell the whole story – and a good one at that - you need to know key things before you start to craft your paper.

You're aiming your white paper at a particular market that you have identified as having a desire for your product or service.

1st  Clearly define the market that is receptive to your offering.

2nd  Understand the desire within that market – the needs that have created that market. This may require research – or it may require that you write different white papers (or other content) for different sub-markets.

3rd  Recognize how aware your intended market is of your company. How well does your market understand how what you offer satisfies their desire for a solution?

Put the Proof in Your Puddin' uh, White Paper

To be credible, you have to substantiate your position – otherwise, it's just your opinion. Opinion is fine, but white papers are not opinion pieces.

The more proof you provide to substantiate what you are saying, the more credible you will be in the eyes of your readers. Following is a list of ideas of what you can use to provide proof:

- Research – summarize information and then direct readers to the original research should they want more detail.
- Surveys
- Statistics
- Quotes or references from experts
- Quotes or references from users
- Case studies
- Testimonials
- Articles and other documents



Don't have proof?

Create it.

(no, I did not say 'fake it' or make it up).

Interview experts by phone or on video. The latter is useful because you can quote them in a white paper and link to an edited video posted elsewhere.

Interview customers or customers of customers.

Conduct your own original research:

Focus groups, web surveys or survey your current customer base about their needs and experiences.

Commission independent research.

You may uncover issues with your product or service – or your industry - as you do research and put together your white paper. Be honest about them. What are they? Why do they exist? What is your company doing to address them?

One thing the Internet has done is to shorten the life cycle of companies without integrity. There is simply too much information out there to be able to hide.

Integrity,
Honesty
=
Thought
Leadership

Include the Key Elements

White papers are fairly traditional documents and consist of particular components. If your white paper is too short, chances are it is missing some of these expected elements. While there are different types of white papers, such as problem/solution, backgrounder and pointer white papers, you still want to include the basic elements. The difference among the varying formats will be the length of the components.

White Paper Key Elements

Executive Summary or Abstract

Introduction

Background

Solution Discussion

Conclusion

BASIC ELEMENTS OF A WHITE PAPER

*Executive
Summary
or
Abstract*

An executive summary is an essential component of a white paper. People searching for solutions will skim the summary to see if the information is relevant to their situation. Writing a good executive summary ensures your target audience won't overlook your document when scanning for information related to their problem.

To ensure the information resonates with your target audience, write the executive summary from their perspective. Keep it short and keep their pain points in mind.

Introduction

The introduction introduces the problem or opportunity (i.e. something that is holding back business or a place where there is potential to increase business or make better use of resources).

Including a brief explanation of why you produced the paper builds trust with your audience.

***Background
Discussion
(Proof
the
Problem
Exists)***

The background discussion provides context by discussing the challenges in the industry or the larger context of the problem under discussion. Provide evidence of the problem and the costs of that problem backed up with statistics, market research and expert interviews. Secondary or related problems can also be discussed in this section.

The exact composition of a background discussion varies depending upon your objectives and the type of white paper, but it plays a vital role demonstrating your company's expertise and thus building trust.

The background discussion also serves to:

- Ensure all readers have the needed background information.
- Validate the problem – either to remind readers of the pain of the problem and/or to educate them on its costs.
- Demonstrate that your company firmly understands the issue.



***Solution
Discussion***

This section is the bulk of your white paper. You describe the elements or features of a good solution and the specific benefits provided. Remember the focus is educational and not sales oriented. Your goal is not to pitch a solution, but rather to open a conversation.

Make this section comprehensive and provide an adequate depth of discussion to your purpose. How you set up this discussion depends upon your goals and objectives for the white paper, the needs of your target audience, and your plans for the distribution of the paper.



Conclusion

The conclusion sums up your key messages. It is vital for online audiences. Readers skimming a document often jump to the conclusion to see if the paper is worth reading in full.

You can locate your call to action here or in the solution discussion depending on where it functions best.

Any good rule has its exceptions, and there may be times when you choose to vary or eliminate a fundamental component. However, if you are leaving out any of these basics, you should be doing it strategically (in other words, you should clearly be able to voice why you are choosing not to include it. ‘I hate writing conclusions so I left it out,’ doesn’t cut it).

Do You Really Want

A White Paper?

Sometimes, white papers are too short because they're not actually the document you want.

Make sure you're using a white paper for the right stage in your audience's buying cycle.

White papers are most often consumed in the evaluation stage of the buying cycle when people are looking for more in-depth information to help make a decision.

If you are writing content for the awareness stage, for example, you need something shorter than a white paper, so choose a different format for your content.

Buying Stages

Awareness

Interest

Evaluation

Trial

Purchase

Loyalty

So, You Want to Be a Thought Leader ?

A white paper is a great vehicle to demonstrate your expertise and quality of thinking. If your goal is to establish your company as a thought leader, then the focus of your white paper will be around examining the parameters of the problem and the solution.

Discuss the problem, trends, solutions, including the features someone should look for in a solution, or existing solutions and their pros and cons. Whatever you choose to talk about, the discussions should occur from an industry-wide point of view rather than just focusing on your company.

A white paper allows you the ability to make a presentation without physically being present. In fact, you'd have to put a lot of time and effort into opening doors and building relationships before someone would give you the time to deliver the information that you can provide via a white paper.

Research shows that executives regularly consume and depend upon white papers in decision-making.

(Coming Soon)

**Part 3: What to Do When Your White
Paper Is Too Long**

Read [Part 1: The Length Question](#)

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