

Ten Tips on Writing White Papers

Technical writers are often asked to contribute to their company's white papers (documents that educate industry customers about products or services). Sometimes a product manager will write the paper and a technical writer will edit it; other times the writer will generate the text. These completed papers are usually posted on the company's Web site and distributed to potential customers at trade shows and meetings. Having written and reviewed my fair share of these documents, I offer the following ten suggestions for improving results.

1. Analyze Your Audience

Before you begin writing, define your audience. You might even want to include a section called "Intended Audience" in the body of the paper. An audience analysis will reveal the extent to which you must explain technical concepts. The results of this analysis will determine not only the level of technical content but also your writing style. For example, if your white paper is pitching a brand new technology to business development experts (as opposed to engineers), you should take care to explain the technology in language your audience can understand.

2. Create an Outline

Your outline will vary depending on your subject, but generally it's a good idea to structure your white paper so that it presents a solution to a problem. You could use an introductory section to define the problem, and then describe your solution in the body of the document. Ideally, you should have a subject matter expert, a marketing representative, and a member of your potential audience review the outline. This spares you the pain of removing sections because "that window didn't make it into the release" or "we're not pitching that feature right now."

3. Use Diagrams Carefully

While a picture may be worth a thousand words, a diagram often requires a thousand-word explanation. Clear, professional-looking diagrams are invaluable, but overly complex diagrams tend to look silly and can often confuse readers. There's nothing worse than the "hockey puck object models" and "Dadaist program architectures" that we find in industry documents.

You should also make sure that all diagrams in a document are of similar quality. The authority of a white paper is diminished when a colorful, professional "marketecture" diagram is followed by a technical diagram whipped up by one of the developers in Microsoft *Word*.

4. Explore a Less Formal Writing Style

Unfortunately, most white papers are less compelling than most user manuals--and that's not a compliment to user manuals. Because white papers are marketing documents, they should be not merely readable but riveting. Don't be afraid to use metaphors, contractions, humor, and other devices. This doesn't necessarily mean writing in dialect or using other verbal fireworks to get attention: It simply means minimizing the technical lingo and inserting the occasional analogy. One of the best white papers I've read used a can of black beans to explain the basics of XML.

5. Solve a Problem

Too many white papers are extended brochures that offer minute detail about features but don't explain why the reader might want the product. Your white paper should tell a simple but compelling story about how your company, product, or feature particularly and uniquely unravels the reader's Gordian knot. For example, instead of writing "Buy a DVD player because it has 128-bit oversampling and advanced virtual surround sound," you'd be better off with "Buy a DVD player because you need better sound and a crisper picture."

6. Beware of Marketing-Speak

As technical writers, we're the first readers who can sniff out the vague adjectives that sometimes accumulate in white papers. If potential customers have gone to the trouble of actually procuring your document, they want to know what your product does and why they should buy it. One of my professors used to say that "big truths are for posters, small truths are for short stories." Tell small truths in your white papers, and leave discussions of "leveraging synergy" and "re-imagining Weblications" to the press releases. Also, if you want to be taken seriously, do not fabricate new terms.

7. Supply Supporting Evidence

Quotations from your customers are valid, but everyone knows they are often solicited and tweaked to fit a company's message. It's more valuable to provide third-party information that supports your proposed solution. For example, if your company's DVD player has an embedded clock, you might state that a reputable survey reports that "80 percent of VCR owners cannot set their VCR clock."

8. Introduce and Summarize

An effective, compelling introduction is crucial, and should obviate need for an "executive summary"--the synopsis that precedes the table of contents in most white papers. These summaries have little value: Your audience may not consist solely of suit-wearing bigwigs with too little time to read the whole document, and the non-executives in your audience may resent the implication that these summaries are not for them.

At the end of the document, be sure to repeat the problem and summarize how your product addresses it. Too many white papers peter out after the last feature.

9. Spiff It Up (Appearance Is Important)

Many of the white papers I read look like freshman history essays: page after page of nothing but text. In terms of style and length, a white paper has a lot in common with a magazine article, so it should receive similar graphic treatment. Use all of the usual designer's tools--text boxes, columns, pull quotes, graphics, and so forth--to create an attractive, readable document.

10. Trim It Down (It's Probably Too Long)

Even if you've followed all this advice, your white paper isn't going to get more attention than a Stephen King novel, or even the reader's e-mail. The shorter your paper, the better. The length of the paper depends on the complexity of your product and method, but I certainly don't care to read anything longer than, say, fifteen pages. If you can't say what is necessary in that space, perhaps you need to divide your message into more than one document. For example, my company has a product suite of developer tools that could be presented in one long white paper. Instead, we plan to produce future documents along two themes related to our products--development and deployment.

Most people drastically underestimate the time and effort it takes to produce a decent, readable white paper. While this list is not exhaustive, it may help you avoid a few common pitfalls.

Resources

The following are good examples of white papers that adhere to most or all of the guidelines discussed in this article:

www.adobe.com/products/xmp/pdfs/whitepaper.pdf

www.capeclear.com/products/whitepapers/cc3concepts.pdf

www.mps.com/supportlink/docs/WhitePapers/W0002_Protecting_Project_Data.pdf

For more white papers than you could ever read, go to www.itpapers.com, the "Yellow Pages of white papers."