

A MAP for Writing Better White Papers

By Roger Biery

Writing a successful white paper is easier when you follow a *MAP* to navigate the Message(s) needed to reach the target Audience and 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 I share my methodology for writing successful white papers and contributed articles. The intended audience is marketing and public relations professionals in high technology companies, although the techniques should work equally well in virtually any business.

The first three sections describe the MAP approach in top-down 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 useful tips wraps up the discussion, followed by a brief conclusion.

I welcome constructive criticism on the usefulness of this methodology. Please e-mail me 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 be either generic or product-specific to serve a range of different purposes. Generic ones are often offered as a fulfillment piece in direct (e)mail or marketing campaigns, where prospects are directed to a dedicated landing page on the Website to: "Enter your name and email address to receive the white paper."

Product-specific white papers might then be used to help qualify those sales leads: "If you have these needs, then this product or service is for you." Others could simply provide general information about the solution with details on the problem(s) solved and the benefits afforded. And some might position the solution in a competitive marketplace, or address related issues or concerns.

One way to pinpoint the 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), prospect 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? These are 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 the intended audience; others will just need to elevate their respective perspectives.

It's helpful to identify the target audience in the executive summary or introduction. When the CIO discovers, while reading the aptly-named *Executive Summary*, that the document is intended for IT managers, he or she will hopefully forward it along. If it is instead intended for executives, then say so, and the IT manager will understand why the content might be light on technical details (but will likely still read every word, especially if it was forwarded by the CIO!).

An important corollary to connecting with your audience is to *limit* your audience. For example, a cloud solution vendor might want a white paper that appeals 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 achieve tremendous savings with a managed service, while also telling service providers they will be enormously 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 weeks ago. What do you remember? If it was product-specific, can you recall all 10 benefits promised by the company's next-generation solution? Do you even remember there were 10? Can you recall the name of the product? Do 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 that core, key message.

In a product-specific paper, your key message might be "our product is industry-leading" because it is...

- ... the fastest owing to its purpose-built design.
- ... the simplest to implement and operate.
- ... the most advanced 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.

Or whatever. Just be sure that every key message is tied directly to a compelling benefit to solicit the desired response: "I want to know more about this."

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.

Arrange the key 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? Where is their pain? How are they rewarded?

Then begin filling out and tuning the outline to fulfill the document’s *purpose*. A powerful way to do this is to 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 solution guide.”

Working backwards can be a beneficial technique anywhere in the document. Begin by articulating your strongest story, then ask a question to set up this “answer”. Still stuck coming up with a story? Think “debate” by making the competition’s argument, then counter it with a convincing one of your own. Or give your story first, then poke holes in the “counter argument” that is likely to 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 showing how the content would be organized into sections) almost always gets a project started in the right direction. The next step, a detailed outline that contains all of the messaging, provides another opportunity to make sure the project is staying on track. Outlines also help overcome writer’s block by providing a simple way to organize the many supporting messages into a persuasive story line. As ideas occur, drop them into an appropriate section in the outline. The outline eventually grows to become fairly complete, making the paper far easier to write. Indeed, a solid outline effectively 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 as a contract writer:

- Keep white papers to less than 12 pages. Decision-makers are busy people, and many may be reluctant to even start reading a really long document.
- Less can be more. There’s no reason white papers need to be 8-12 pages. If you can get your key message across fully in fewer pages, do so. This one does it in four.
- Always include an executive summary or introduction—as appropriate for the length of the paper—and expect that some readers (even if they like your message) might read only 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), especially in longer papers.
- Make liberal use of sections and subsections, diagrams, sidebars, lists and other techniques to make for an easier read. (OK, so I didn’t use any diagrams or sidebars 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 will care about how it was built.
- Use some humor. The occasional pun or one-liner can help 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 factual and educational, 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 need to write a white paper is often met with dread or anxiety. 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 many years of writing countless white papers, contributed articles and other marketing material 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 be successful.

About the Author

Roger Biery is an independent marketing communications professional with over 25 year of experience. He focuses exclusively on two related areas—computer networking and the Smart Grid, including renewable sources of energy—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.MarComPro.biz.

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