THE WHITE PAPER
Tailored Research for Decision Makers
Nathaniel A. Rivers, Georgetown University, 2009
WHAT’S THE USE: DISTINCTIONS

As with most documents, the form and content of White Papers varies according to audiences, contexts, and purposes

- **Internal Use**: enables long-term professionals to keep up to speed with new developments in their field

- **Governmental Use**: brings legislators and other government officials up to speed in order to make policy decisions
WHAT’S THE USE: DISTINCTIONS

- **Professional Use**: identifies multiple solutions to problems and the various positions held in relation to those solutions; also used to advertise the particular expertise of an organization

- **For Client/Customer Use**: generally compares products or services; discusses potential solutions to “widespread problems;” generally concerned with technology issues
**WHAT’S THE USE: SIMILARITIES**

- All White Papers are designed to allow users to:
  - Identify the key issues or the key elements of a “problem”
  - Learn about the various solutions to this problem and their relative merits
- Their basic function is educational (even in marketing situations)
WHAT’S THE USE: SIMILARITIES

- Thus, their tone should essentially be educational; they shouldn’t sound like a sermon or a television commercial
  - Although these can be educational
- Your tone is important
WHAT’S THE USE: SIMILARITIES

- The *ethos* or credibility of a White Paper comes from its being perceived as fair and objective, and as having the reader’s best interests in mind.
FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

- Working from the principle that users of documents are the ultimate judges of their success, here are some suggestions for successful White Papers:
For Your Consideration

- Be a client advocate
  - Give them as complete a picture as you can
  - Put their interests first
  - Be honest
FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

- Have something worth saying
  - Make sure this is a relevant topic of some import in their lives
  - The models of a university education that you research and present are viable and within their means (*political and economic contexts of use*)
For Your Consideration

- **Be wary of certainty**
  - Be skeptical as you do research
    - Readers will evaluate the authority and credibility of your White Paper: you should do the same of your sources
    - Check a range of sources and use multiple sources
    - Avoid **WYDSDE**: what you don’t see doesn’t exist
FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

- Avoid absolute pronouncements, particularly with regard to ethical dilemmas (which are often without clear, certain solutions)

Back up what you say
- Do you have enough evidence from a variety of trustworthy sources?
FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

- **Be visual**
  - This will draw readers in and create a good first impression
    - Remember, it sets a tone as well
  - Also, visuals can provide support
    - Tables, figures, charts, diagrams, formatted/bulleted lists, clear and specific headings all create support for your research
  - They direct readers to key findings and allow them to access important information quickly
For Your Consideration

Be redundant

- Not every reader reads the entire White Paper or reads it the same way with the same expectations
- Be sure that readers who are skimming get the same basic information as readers who read more deeply
- This is a key difference between White Papers and research papers: they are designed to be read different ways by different readers
**For Your Consideration**

- **Put important things front and center**
  - Arrange the information so that readers can access important information quickly
  - Delete “irrelevant” information
  - Label things clearly and with contrast
For Your Consideration

Summarize

- Your White Paper should contain an executive summary
- Use summary text boxes throughout the White Paper that gloss key points or information from the body text
- Your conclusion should also summarize key findings
**For Your Consideration**

- **Write clear, concise and accurate labels**
  - The stand alone test
    - Does this label or heading make sense on its own?
    - Will the reader know what the section contains?
FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

- The main message of the text should be evident from the headings
  - This gives users control over the document
  - Can they make an informed decision about what to read?
FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

○ Check for format and prose consistency
  • This is a key issue, as your White Papers will have multiple authors
  • Also, use repetition both in design and verbiage
    ○ Repeat key or interesting design features
    ○ Repeat key terms (develop a list of them, perhaps)
**FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION: DETAILS**

- **Sweat the details**
  - Your White Paper should exude care and concern
  - A White Paper littered with errors, design anomalies and other inconsistencies does not create an *ethos* of care and concern
FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION: DETAILS

- Edit and proofread very carefully, so that readers become confident decision makers
FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION: DETAILS

- You want to maintain a professional image that creates confidence on the part of the reader when they make an important decision based on the information you have gathered and presented to them.
FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION: DETAILS

- Sweating the details is especially important given that you are composing these collaboratively
  - Set joint standards
    - Third person
    - Contractions
    - Terminology
  - Compose and edit with these standards in mind
While Stelzner looks at White Papers from a marketer’s point of view, his advice, for the most part, applies to the genre outside of marketing contexts.
First and foremost is Stelzner’s formulation: “Instant affinity is the key” (2)

- You must understand the disposition of your readers
- And we know this is foremost, because of the contrast he uses to set it off
THE WHITE PAPER: STELZNER

The two approaches to constructing White Paper’s:

- Focus on your interests
- Focus on the interests of the readers
**The White Paper: Stelzner**

- The way you frame the White Paper depends upon the purpose of course, but more often than not the second frame is much more productive and likely to succeed.
- The impulse to focus on your interests is the same impulse that makes the second successful
“By focusing on the pain points experienced by the reader and talking about the problems caused by those pains, you are establishing credibility with the reader and simultaneously filtering out unqualified customers” (3).

- “I feel your pain.”
- “Nothing more deeply engrosses a man than his burdens” (Kenneth Burke).
The altruistic approach can grab the reader’s attention and make it more likely that they will read the rest of the document.
**The White Paper: Stelzner**

- Stelzner argues that the White Paper should contain “informative and persuasive information.”
- I would agree, but with this distinction:
  - To a certain extent, all communication is persuasive communication.
  - Even the sharing of information contains persuasive elements.
THE WHITE PAPER: STELZNER

So you are certainly persuading your audience:

- To trust that you have their best interests in mind
- That you are knowledgeable
- That you have shared all available information in a thorough way
THE WHITE PAPER: STELZNER

- However, you are not to advocate for one model over another.
  - Explicitly or implicitly
- Discuss the merits and limitations of each model, based on the preponderance of evidence, but do not advocate.
- Persuade, but don’t advocate.
The White Paper: Stelzner

- Some more “little things”
  - Keep it short: around eleven pages, including text (1600-1800 words) and images
  - Use images, charts and illustrations
    - Not just clip art, but images that contribute to your goals: creating *ethos* and conveying information (*consistency*)
THE WHITE PAPER: STELZNER

- Break-up content into digestible chunks
- Add sidebars and callouts (summary text boxes)
- Come back to it later: review and edit!
“The Steak Behind the Sizzle”

- Why White Papers Fail:
  - Lack objectivity (the language of objectivity)
  - Inappropriate or inadequate details (restricted v. elaborated codes)
  - Written poorly (duh!)
“The Steak Behind the Sizzle”

- Pointers (how they can succeed):
  - Manage such a project well
  - Catch the little mistakes (copy edit)
  - Visual appeal is important
How to read the samples

I want you to really focus on the ways that White Papers are designed

- What elements are included?
- What effects do they have?
- How are they organized?
- What alignments are used?
- What typefaces and font sizes are used?
HOW TO READ THE SAMPLES

Focus on:
- how the White Papers are laid out
- how is the text organized
- how is information presented (form and content)