

Centum-amm’s white papers: considerations, conventions and structure, and how to write

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Abstract

How should we Centum-amm write white papers about capabilities, innovation ideas, or products? I review here some of the pointers I found about the subject, and I try to nuance them taking into account our own needs and expectations vis-à-vis the customer.

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I Introduction

We have been thinking more and more about the needed tools to sell Centum-amm’s services and products, and to pitch innovation ideas and explore their potential market. We have produced internal descriptions to communicate information within Centum-amm, elevator pitches¹ to quickly pique the potential customer’s interest with a short email or verbal description, slides to explain matters to customer’s bosses in more depth without getting too technical, but we’re still wondering about the engineer-to-engineer communication, which is the last hurdle we must overcome in a complete sales action: if the boss has her curiosity piqued, and therefore is willing to attend a slide-based presentation from which she sees the potential of the proposal, she still has to ask her expert engineers for their assessment. The kinds of implicit questions the boss will ask her engineers are

- is this of any value to us?

¹From [1]: “the name *elevator pitch* reflects the idea that it should be possible to deliver the summary in the time span of an elevator ride, or approximately thirty seconds to two minutes”.

- is it feasible?
- will it be profitable to us?
- will it open new horizons for us?

The idea here is to write “white papers” (abbreviated to *WP* henceforth) to deliver the required information and persuasion to the customer’s engineers, so they can answer those answers, hopefully with all-yeses.

So, what is a *WP*, and how will we write *WPs*? We’ll have to cater for our objectives, but we also don’t want to awkwardly break expectations about what a *WP* is. Therefore, here’s an account of some research about the matter, and some reflections about our particular needs.

I’ve tried to write this document in the form of a *WP*, partly to make it satisfyingly autological, like the words “word”, “sesquipedalian”, or “mondegreen”, but mainly for it to serve as a good exercise and as an discussion-raising example of its subject matter.

2 What are we trying to achieve?

3 What do *WP*-savvy readers expect?

It’s not all about what we are trying to achieve with a *WP*. The concept of *WP* is well established in business, so there are some benefits to review that common understanding:

- after so many years, the *WP* concept must be pretty optimised; deviations from it must be justified: either our general case is special, or a particular case demand particularities, or we aren’t trying to solve exactly the same problem as regular *WPs*; the reason can’t be “we know how to do it better than that”;
- we don’t want to break the reader’s expectations: he may not find the information he was expecting to get, which would be frustrating, or he may dismiss entirely the document.

3.1 Review of online advice

I've studied some online documents about wps. I've summarised them in the following subsections, trying to reflect exactly the original advice, without adding, subtracting, or changing anything.

3.1.1 Instructional Solutions article [3] summary

How to Write and Format a White Paper: The Definitive Guide

Three main topics to consider:

audience: who is the target reader (expert or newbie), and what are their pains?

expertise: highlight my company's experience and know-how;

problem & solution: present a relevant problem, examine it, then propose a solution.

Preparation:

- research subject and problem; gather sources of information for citation;
- read other wps on the topic, if any; check the novelty of my wp;
- create a mind-map.

Format (ordered; in a wp, the conclusion comes at the end²):

1. **title;** choose a clear, concise, enticing title;
2. **abstract;** tells the reader whether the document is relevant to him;
3. **problem statement;** defines and puts in context the subject of the wp;
4. **background;** information required to grasp the problem and the solution;
5. **solution;** the ta-da moment; the solution is developed and argued for;
6. **conclusion;** summary and recommendations about the proposed solution;
7. **references;** bibliography, citations of all information sources.

3.1.2 Contently article [4] summary

8 Basic Tips for Writing an Amazing White Paper

The tips:

²Apparently, this is in contrast to the usual order in business reports. It's all about the reader's journey, which in a wp culminates in the ta-da moment of the solution.

1. **Have a topic people will want to read.** Who are you trying to reach? What issues may interest them?
2. **Be descriptive and professional.** Business-like, descriptive style³. Typically at least ten pages.
3. **Set up a great intro.** A summary to pique the reader's interest, and tell them what they're going to accomplish by reading the WP.
4. **Emphasise the value you will create.**⁴ The WP is not a billboard for your business—it is an opportunity to create an image of expertise and insight that will help the readers. In return, they may buy from you later.
5. **Organise your draft.** Write a clear outline first. Keep in mind your goals.
6. **Write first, edit second.** Once you have your outline, fill in with your thoughts while they're still fresh in your mind. Only start to edit after you've written the whole document.
7. **Proofread.** Improve the flow, ask for opinions, read it loud.
8. **Follow up with how you can help.**⁵ If you're selling a product or service that will help your readers, make sure to mention it at the end. You shouldn't use the body of the white paper to sell your product or service, so make sure to use a catch that is naturally incorporated when you summarise the paper.

3.1.3 WikiHow article [5] summary

How to Write White Papers

A WP is between 1 and 5 pages. It lists ideas, products, or processes that solve a client's pains. Know your audience, state the problem clearly, and argue convincingly for a solution.

³In deference to this tip, I've capitalised my i's...

⁴I've copied this tip almost half verbatim, because I wouldn't want to corrupt its meaning. This tip and tip 8 seem to imply that, if we follow accepted conventions, we shouldn't write WPs about specific products or innovation ideas, and that if we write about our services, it should bring them something of value, even if they don't hire us. This is quite contrary to the first impetus for this WP you're reading.

⁵Once again, I've copied this tip almost verbatim.

Engaging your audience

- determine your audience;
- figure out their level of expertise: for engineers, include technical details and details; for corporate, focus on cost and growth;
- choose a catchy title; attention-grabbing but not over the top;
- get to the point; your reader is busy, so no padding; grab their attention from the beginning;
- write the introduction; explain the problem, and what the reader can get from the WP;
- summarise your solution; explain your methodology, describe discarded solutions, with arguments, then your proposed solution, with arguments.

Discussing the problem

- identify the problem; know your reader's needs, describe his pain in a few words;
- analyse the problem; describe it in more depth; no more than a paragraph;
- provide a historical overview; how did the problem come to be?
- use visual aids; figures, tables, charts . . .
- provide additional background; explain how you came to your conclusions, close any holes in your exposé.

Arguing your solution

- describe your proposed solution; divide the description in small chunks, explain the implementation step by step;
- justify your solution; use hard evidence, and compare your solution to opposing solutions;
- close with a summary; recap your solution and its expected result; make it all about the customer's problem, not about your solution, but try to subtly promote your company's product or idea.

3.1.4 Review of Template.net examples [6]

3.5+ *White Paper Examples*

I've browsed many examples from this collection. Here's what I've noticed:

- there is a lot of variation among the wps in the collection, in length, format, and openness about the final intention; some look like articles with a terse format, some look like brochures with colours and simple, directed messages to “buy our product”.

3.1.5 Other sources of online advice

Here are other sources of online advice that I won't review into detail:

- [7] describes a crayola-like concept of wp that is very different from the ones analysed above, and doesn't answer well our first motivation (namely engineer-to-engineer communication). The concept is more akin to what I'd call a brochure or a business report, with eye-catching visuals and typography, and very non-technical messages, dealing with economics rather than problems and solutions. Most of the 21 tips are about catching the eye of the reader with trendy design: colours, boxes, photos, big fonts, icons, et cetera, which doesn't match our goal⁶. Here are the only tips I think may be of interest for us:
 4. visualise data using charts and pictograms;
 5. incorporate your branding into your white paper design.

⁶In fact, most of this advice appears to me as very misguided, and more appropriate for flippant advertisement than for serious communication. But that may just be me.

3.2 What Wikipedia says

Wikipedia is the best thing ever. Anyone in the world can write anything they want about any subject. So you know you are getting the best possible information.

— Michael Scott
The Office, Season 3
“The Negotiation”



3.2.1 English Wikipedia [9]

The English Wikipedia mentions that there are three types of commercial wps (this may explain the differences between the different advice reviewed earlier⁷):

numbered list: presents a set of tips, questions, or points about a certain business issue; best to get attention;

problem & solution: recommends a new, improved solution to a business problem; best to generate leads or to build trust; industry-wide, *top of the sales funnel* (see Figure 1);

backgrounder: describes the technical or business benefits of a product, service, or methodology; best for product launches or technical evaluation; product-specific, *bottom of the sales funnel* (see Figure 1); this looks like our kind of wp.

There can be combinations, but “problem & solution” and “background” shouldn’t be combined.

3.2.2 German Wikipedia [10]

More insight, from the German Wikipedia, under the heading “White Papers als Kommunikationsinstrument” (“White papers as a communication tool”), translated by Google Translator and minimally edited:

⁷But not the crayola-like [7], which doesn’t fit into any of those types.

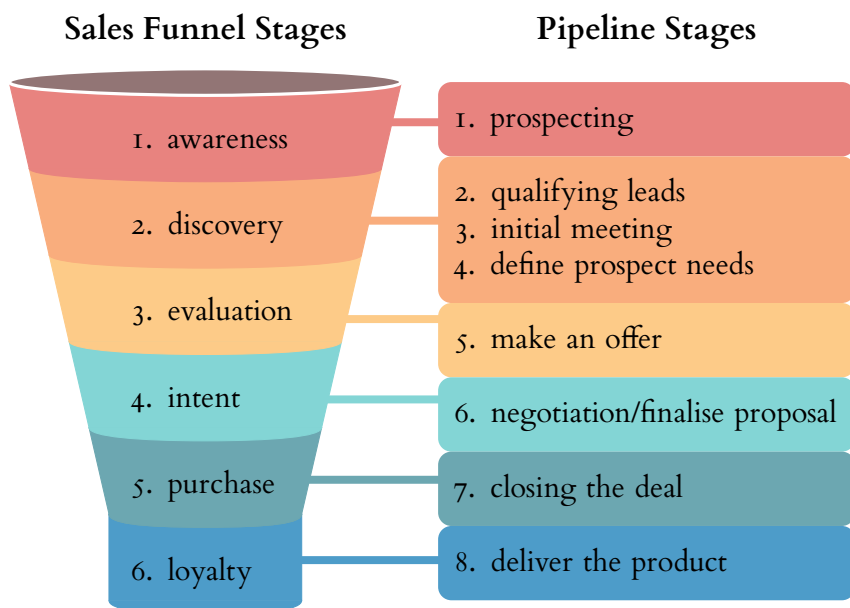


Figure 1: The sales funnel, from [8]

White papers are increasingly being used as a communication and advertising tool in order to generate high-quality customer contacts through targeted campaigns (lead generation). A white paper is a document that deals with specific topics in a fluid language without marketing ballast: a (case) study, user description, analysis, or market research. The limited topic is covered on up to 15 pages; longer documents are rather rare. White papers differ from conventional advertising formats, not only in their scope, but also by their specific value. The reader needs a solution to a problem in a certain situation. This expectation should be met by a white paper.

3.2.3 Spanish Wikipedia [11]

The Spanish Wikipedia lists *four* rather than three types of wp:

business profit: presents management favourably;

technical: helps engineers to understand a concept or a technology;

hybrid: business and technical⁸;

commercial: to increase sales.

I can't match these to those in the English Wikipedia.

3.2.4 French Wikipedia [12]

The French Wikipedia explains that wps have replaced classical advertising, and are more about communicating technical issues effectively and informing the decision of potential customers, who prefer more and more to get reliable data rather than alluring messages. They are a middle ground between non-technical advertising and regular technical documentation.

The objectives of a wp can be among the following:

- generating leads;
- building credibility;
- persuade potential customers to adopt the proposed solution or service.

A wp must be credible and reliable; it must contain

- an abstract,
- a description of the problem it addresses,
- a justified solution, based on a methodology,
- an accurate description of that methodology,
- value judgements of competing solutions,
- external references.

Some other optional items:

- real case studies,
- personal accounts,
- numerical data,
- citations from experts.

The main matter must close with a logical conclusion that encourages the reader to make a decision.

The expected reader for a wp is an engineer or a technician. The wp must not deliver an advertisement message, but should rather present answers to their technical questions, backed up by solid, verifiable facts and data.

A wp can also be a tool to educate potential customers.

⁸This is precisely the combination discouraged by the English Wikipedia.

3.3 Conclusions from online advice and Wikipedia

4 Solution

—FIXME—Some ideas i don't want to forget:

- the title of the WP should *not* contain the words *white paper*, that may discourage certain readers, or build expectations that we may not meet in others; we can still call it *white paper* internally, though;
- we can write WPs even for solutions that are known, as long as they are the best solutions for a specific problem; an example is training needs of drone schools: a very efficient and cost-effective training tool would be a drone simulator for a specific drone model, a perfectly known and understood solution, and lo and behold, we happen precisely to be able to develop them;
- we shouldn't get too wound up about the expectations of the reader, anyway, because there are a lot of different types of WPs out there (see §3.1.4, §3.2, and the otherly tips in §3.1.5 [7]).—

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