

**Excerpt from a draft of Chapter 26, “Writing for Business and the Workplace.” *The Thomson Handbook: A Writer’s Reference for the Digital Age* by David Blakesley and Jeff Hoogeveen. Thomson Publishers, 2005.**

## **White Papers and Recommendation Reports**

### *White Papers*

White papers are used in business, industrial, and governmental contexts to sum up the gist of what’s known about a subject. The phrase comes from “white book,” which was a document used by governments to summarize current thinking about a political issue or another government. The subject matter of white papers is often technical and therefore writers need to pay special attention to the needs and expectations of readers. Because a white paper also needs impeccable credibility, **ethos** is once again a major rhetorical appeal.

### *Purpose and Context of White Papers*

In spirit, at least, a white paper represents the most accurate information—the facts—about a subject. A white paper appeals to a reader’s desire for accurate and unbiased information. As you might expect, however, in practice white papers are not always as objective or factual as they seem to be. In fact, many organizations, including governments, use white papers to stake out a position on an issue by presenting information as if it were unambiguous or inarguable.

Nowadays, organizations use white papers in their own self-interest to establish that their service or product represents the best, or only, solution to a problem. Doing so may be misleading because of the nature of the genre of white papers, but it is certainly understandable that an organization would be an advocate for its own service or product.

As a writer in a workplace or business setting, you will likely write or read white papers of each type: A) White papers informed by self-interest; and B) White papers that convey information as accurately and as objectively as possible. Once again, the decision about which type of white paper is most appropriate for a given situation depends on its purpose, the audience, and the rhetorical occasion.

### *Content of White Papers*

White papers are typically comprised of several important components, each of which should be clearly identifiable so that readers can quickly move through a document the first time and review it later with a glance at its major components. White papers range in length from a few pages to hundreds. In most cases, they are short documents because their purpose is to explain clearly and convincingly, something more easily managed in a few pages rather than hundreds.

The parts of a white paper are

*Title Page:* The title page of a white paper should list the official title and subtitle, the names and positions of the authors, and any sponsoring organizations or companies. Some writers also choose to include a short table of contents on the title page or immediately following.

*Summary* (“Executive Summary,” “Abstract”): The summary—often called an “executive summary”—usually is placed on the title page of the white paper, the idea being that readers will be able to decide right away whether they need to read further. These summaries should be **informative** (listing the essential point) rather than **descriptive** (announcing what the white paper will cover without giving precise details). **(See Chapter ## for further discussion of the differences between the two types of summary.)** As a summary, this opening section should be concise and yet should cover as fully as possible the main point of the white paper.

*Body or Argument:* The body of a white paper is best broken into chunks, with each part representing one piece of the larger puzzle. The body of a white paper may have various header levels (such as A-level and B-level headers) so that information can be clearly divided and subdivided into logical units. All headers should be descriptive of the content beneath them rather than generic. For example, this table shows the headers used in the first two sections of the sample white paper, “ and more generic headers that might have been used. Descriptive headers are useful because they help readers remember the main points of the white paper.

Descriptive A- and B-level headers	Generic headers
A. Domestic and Foreign Economics of Open Source Software <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Open Source Software is Economically Beneficial</li> <li>b. There are Several Benefits to the Open Source Programmers</li> <li>c. Effect of Open Source Software on Big Business</li> </ul> B. Open Source Software on the Domestic Front <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Open Source Software serves as competition for Proprietary Software</li> <li>b. Microsoft’s take on Open Source Software Usage</li> <li>c. Government and Political Use of Open Source</li> </ul>	A. Economics of Open Source Software <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Economics</li> <li>b. Benefits</li> <li>c. Effects</li> </ul> B. Open Source Software on the Domestic Front <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Competition</li> <li>b. Microsoft</li> <li>c. Government and Political Use</li> </ul>

*Conclusion:* A white paper may or may not have a formal conclusion that sums up the topic. If the issue remains unsettled, it can be helpful to readers to indicate that in a concluding section. Writers may mention what questions remain to be answered. Above all, it is important not to take sides on a position too obviously lest a reader believe all of the information presented is biased (even if it may indeed be so).

*Resources on White Papers*

How to Write White Papers (Stelzner Consulting)

<http://www.stelzner.com/copy-g-HowTo-whitepapers.php>

IT Papers: <http://www.itpapers.com/>