The Ideal Length of the
White Paper:

Solving the Long and Short of It.

Part One: The Length Question

This paper is the first part of a three-part series:

> **Part 1: The Length Question**
>
> **Part 2: What to Do When Your White Paper Is Too Short** (Coming soon)
>
> **Part 3: What to Do When Your White Paper Is Too Long** (Coming soon-ish)

Part 1: The Length Question

White papers vary in length from three pages to over 50 pages. That's a huge range – so how do you figure out the ideal length for your company's next white paper?

The simple answer to the question – and one that I hear often - is that a white paper should be as long as you need to accomplish your marketing objectives.

However, that answer is not all that helpful
– unless, of course, you're an expert at writing white papers.

I also hear simplistic statements like, 'a *white paper is 4 to 9 pages in length*' or '*5 to 16*' - stated unequivocally and without explanation.

The bad news? There is no easy answer to the length question.

The **good news?** Exploring the issue of length more profoundly can provide knowledge that enables you to write better white papers.

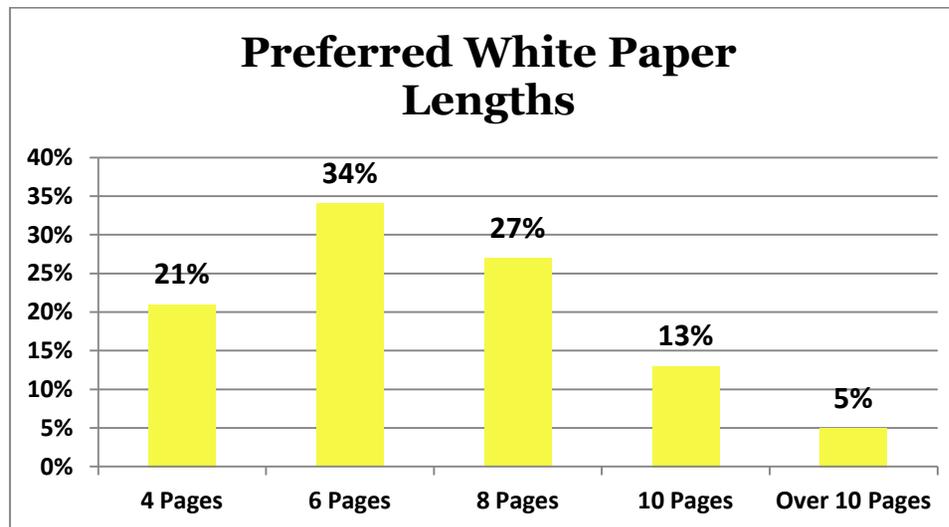**This article examines the length question from a few perspectives:**

- Reviewing some recent research on white paper length
- Examining why it matters if a white paper is too short or too long
- Providing suggestions of how to improve white papers that are either too short or too long.

A Little White Paper Research

In the past, white papers tended to be longer with some stretching to a hundred pages or more. But times have changed. People are pressed for time - suffering from information overload and higher job expectations. Technology has shriveled attention spans and changed how business-to-business decision-makers take in information and make choices.

The sheer volume of data we're required to process and the fact that we're taking it in between texts, emails and tweets has led to the assumption that people want shorter papers. But is this actually true?

In 2010, Eccolo Media conducted research with 500 technology purchasers asking them what they thought was the ideal length for a white paper:

Preferred White Paper Lengths

Length	Percentage
4 Pages	21%
6 Pages	34%
8 Pages	27%
10 Pages	13%
Over 10 Pages	5%

Source: Eccolo Media 2010 B2B Collateral Survey Report

The most popular lengths were between 6-8 pages with 4 pages not far behind.

This is good information, but needs to be examined in context.

To start with, there are distinct types of white papers with different purposes. For example, a paper of pointers is different from a paper establishing a company as a thought leader. The former works well as a short document. The latter is a more complex document requiring a certain length and development to be successful. The survey asked about white papers as though only one style exists.

The survey also asked a theoretical question. In the abstract, people are more likely to say they prefer shorter papers. In theory, most people would like to buy a house for $10K versus $200K. In reality, they might not like what they get for their $10K.

In the same survey, respondents said they're more disappointed when a white paper doesn't contain enough technical information than when it contains too much. And the following year, in the 2011 survey, respondents had slightly shifted their preference from shorter to longer papers.

In March 2012, UBM TechWeb conducted a survey with 240 technology decision-makers. They asked what information decision-makers want during their buying process and the mistakes vendors make that eliminate them from consideration.

The research suggested that content is more important than length:

Including too much 'fluff,' failing to provide real-world examples and applications and a lack of technical depth are bigger issues than length to decision-makers.

> *"A commonly held marketing belief is that there's a magic length for information — get it wrong and the material won't be read. But the research tells a different tale. When asked for the top mistakes tech vendors make when producing information, only 19 percent cited information that's too long. Far worse, respondents said, are including too much marketing 'fluff,' failing to provide real-world applications and examples, and a lack of technical depth."*

(Moutsos, 2012)

The Internet makes a tremendous amount of information readily available. The problem is that so much of that information is superficial, of poor quality or both. Yet, decision-makers still require solid, in-depth information to be able to educate themselves and make good decisions.

This creates tremendous opportunities for smart companies. Provide good information of adequate depth, well written and presented and distribute it in a way that engages people – and people will flock to you.

It's easy to stand out in the sea of information on the Internet. Produce really good content and people will flock to you for answers.

The Problem with the Long and the Short

Too Short

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Poor Impression

Many companies are making the mistake of calling one or two-page documents white papers. A white paper is a particular document that generates certain expectations. A potential customer or investor opening a white paper anticipates a decent discussion of the challenges and potential solutions in their industry.

Your white paper must demonstrate that your company really understands the issues the reader is facing. The information you provide has to be genuinely helpful.

A good goal is to aim to make your reader an expert on the topic by the time they have finished your paper. Your paper should make it possible for them to be able to intelligently discuss the topic or make an informed presentation to others.

If you fail to deliver in your white paper, you risk creating a poor impression. In fact, in the 2010 survey of 500 technology purchasers, the number one disappointment in white papers was poorly written content (Eccolo Media, 2010).

Combining the Forces of Social Media and Traditional Communications

Social media such as blogs and tweets can be used to complement traditional communications such as white papers.

Tweets and blogs tend to be short and can only provide limited information, which is not enough on which to base a complex decision.

However, you can use social media to point people to the material, facilitate discussion and enable the sharing of and commenting on documents while traditional materials can provide the depth of information required.

Too Long

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Failure to Communicate

The problem with too long is simple: your white paper probably won't get read. Usually, the issue isn't really that the paper is too long. Instead, it is more likely that the paper has underlying issues – such as it's not well crafted or presented.

Technology and the sea of superficial information may not have chiselled away people's critical thinking abilities, but they have changed how people take in information. People once tended to read in a linear fashion from start to finish.

A good white paper creates trust.

However, that means you have to create strong content.

After all, if you can't deliver on your white paper, how can a prospect trust you'll deliver on your product or service?

Today, people more frequently skim documents to see if they contain relevant information before committing to a more in-depth read. That means that it is more important than ever to write well and avoid burying your main points in long blocks of text. Your main ideas must jump out and grab the attention of the right readers.

The Length **Winner?**

Eliminate Confusion in Expectations

Use the right document to deliver what your audience needs. For example, if you are writing a technical brief, then call it a technical brief rather than a white paper.

This will eliminate confusion in expectations on the part of your reader.

A good rule of thumb for white paper length is between five and sixteen pages. The five-page minimum is a good guideline because a document shorter than five pages is probably not a white paper. That doesn't mean you can't write something shorter, just title it something more appropriate such as an article or technical brief.

For maximum length, sixteen pages is a very **bendable** guideline. I could have just as easily said twelve or nineteen pages … or more.

Shorter is always going to be better but never at the expense of providing quality content. Short – and good - means you have cut verbiage and communicated your case in a clear and compelling manner. Focused content increases the probability that your paper will be noticed and consumed.

Starting with a ballpark idea of the length you want is fine, but allow your materials, topic, key points, goals and objectives to guide you in creating the right length.

5-16 pages
=
good rule of thumb.

Even better?

Allow your information, goals and objectives to guide you to create the right length.

The Myth of the Magic Length - **Busted**

There is no perfect or magical length for white papers to ensure they get read. But white papers that are too short or too long have underlying issues that prevent you from communicating successfully. Solve those and you'll be well on your way to effective engagement.

Taking Action

What to Do When White Papers Are the Wrong Length

The first part of this 3-part article examined the myth of the magic length of the white paper. Parts 2 and 3 focus on what actions to take to avoid length issues and ensure you create powerful white papers:

Part 2: What to Do When Your White Paper Is Too Short (Coming soon)

Part 3: What to Do When Your White Paper Is Too Long (Coming soon-ish)

"It doesn't matter how long it is or how short it is, if it gives me the information I need."

Jonathan Vlock
Director of Client Marketing
UBM TechWeb

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