# The Air University
## eSchool of Graduate PME
*Serving the World through Distance Learning*

# Writing White Papers

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The Air University

eSchool of Graduate Professional Military Education

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## A Glaring Omission…

Chapter 16 of Air Force Handbook 33-337, *The Tongue and Quill*, explains the most common written products used in today's Air Force, except one – The "white paper."  A white paper ("WP") is used to present and advocate for a position. Its closest relative in Air Force writing is the background paper, which serves as a multi-purpose communications instrument to transmit ideas or concepts from one office to another.

White papers are common in Air Force advocacy writing at the headquarters level.  As a staff officer, you may be tasked to develop, or work with a team to create, a white paper to advocate for a position or…

This short addendum to Chapter 16 presents the background of, and rationale for, a white paper, plus it provides an example and format for you to follow.

**Addendum to Form and Function Quick Reference Table**
**(Tongue & Quill, Chapter 16, page 223)**

| Form | Function |
|---|---|
| **White Paper**<br>• Single issue or several related issues in impact<br>• Multi-page<br>• Full sentences, details<br>• Numbered sections (not paragraphs) | Present the background of an issue or subject and makes persuasive case.<br>• Detailed information<br>• Condenses and summarizes complex issues<br>• Advocates for a specific approach |

WHITE PAPER

ON

WRITING WHITE PAPERS

## 1. Purpose

A white paper is many things to many different people.  In Air Force parlance; however, it is generally meant as a persuasive essay that uses facts and logic to promote a certain policy (doctrine or guidance), product (weapon system), service (something we buy or provide), or viewpoint (the Air Force position on an issue).  It is an excellent way to express ideas on a specific topic, or to define and advocate for a specific position.  This white paper outlines the primary function, structure, and format of an Air Force white paper.

## 2. Primary Function and Key Characteristics

The primary function of the white paper is to present the background of an issue or subject and make a compelling (persuasive) case for a specific approach.  In its 70-year history, the Air Force has used white papers to promulgate vision, to advocate for specific capabilities, and to describe the need for organizational changes, among many other things.  White papers may be used for a variety of purposes when all of the other paper formats specified in *The Tongue and Quill* are inadequate.

Unlike the other Air Force papers outlined in *The Tongue and Quill*, there are no specific (i.e., Air Force-defined) standards for a white paper.  This document outlines white paper guidelines used in the eSchool of Graduate PME as derived from a review of existing Air Force white papers and industry best practices.

In general, an Air Force white paper is:

- A narrative document
- 5-20 pages long
- Educational, practical, and useful
- Not a sales pitch, but used for advocacy
- Designed to provide facts, not opinion
- Organized into logical sections from introduction/executive summary to summary/conclusion/recommendation.

## 3. Organization

The organization of a good white paper is no different than that of a point paper, talking paper, or background paper.  All these papers open with a purpose that leads to an outline of the main points and ends with a summary, conclusion, or recommendation.  The first section of the white paper provides the reader with a clear statement of purpose and an outline or "road map" for the paper.  This is followed by the discussion (written in cohesive, single-idea paragraphs) which leads the reader logically to the conclusion.

Longer white papers may include a table of contents and a list of tables and figures. A bibliography may also be included. For citing references, students should follow endnote/footnote formats specified in AU-1, *Author and Style Guide*, as required.

### 4. Style of Writing.

The style of writing should be professional, and in the third person, although writing in first person, active voice will sometimes be more appropriate. Even though the white paper is written in paragraphs, the concise, telegraphic style of the talking paper or bullet background paper is sometimes used (while following the rules for grammar and punctuation for complete sentences and paragraphs). By intent, the white paper is more narrative in style and form.

### 5. Format

The format of the white paper varies to meet the needs of both the author and the intended audience. Like a background paper, the white paper is intended for stand-alone use and is usually several pages in length. White papers may also include a bibliography, explanatory references, and other attachments. While longer than talking or bullet background papers, brevity is still valued: make the paper as short or as long as necessary to cover the topic adequately.

In general, Air Force white papers use major section headings offset from individual paragraphs as shown here, though this is not mandatory. Unlike the background paper, individual paragraphs are typically not numbered. Logical organization requirements should dictate how the paper is structured.

Some additional guidelines for formatting your white paper are shown below:

**Cover:** Most white papers have a graphical cover which highlights the white paper title, the producing organization, and the date of publication. For student papers, a cover is not needed (unless specified in the assignment instructions). Instead, use a three-line title block as specified for other papers in *The Tongue and Quill* (see below).

**Titles and Title Blocks:** If used in place of a cover page, the title block for a white paper resembles that of other Air Force papers. The first title line, "WHITE PAPER," is centered one (1) inch from the top of the first page. The second line, the word "ON," is centered below the first line with one blank line between them. The third line is the title line that conveys the topic of the white paper, and it is centered below the second line with one blank line between them. Manual line breaks may be used to format long titles for readability or appearance (e.g., to visually balance the lines).

> *Note: This reading demonstrates both formats. The "cover" format on the front page, and the "title block" format at the top of this explanatory section.*

**Margins:** All pages use a one (1) inch margin all around, unless designed for production (see Designing for Production below).

**Line Spacing and Text Wrapping:** Single-space within paragraphs, and double-space between paragraphs. Wrap all paragraphs to align flush with the left margin.

**Identification line:** Unless specified in the assignment instructions, an identification line is not required. If specified, format the identification line in accordance with the guidance for the point paper, placing the identification line only on the first page, one (1) inch from bottom, flush left. Alternatively, the identification line may be placed in the footer, one-half (1/2) inch from the bottom, flush left.

**Page Numbering:** Place the page number for page 2 onwards at the top of page, one-half (1/2) inch from the top and flush with the right margin, unless designed for production (see Designing for Production below).

**For Classified Content:** Refer to DOD 5200.1-R/AFI 31-401 for guidance on how to prepare classified papers.

## 6. Designing for Production

Once content is approved, a white paper will often complete a series of steps to ready it for publication: professional layout, graphical design, packaging review, public affairs review, and sometimes even focus-group testing to ensure the message, as transmitted, is the one received by the intended audience. Professional layout may include graphical cover design, page layout and graphics, font styling, element placement, and other items which support the production of a professional product for public consumption.

For student papers, designing for production is not required (unless specified in the assignment instructions).

## 7. Conclusion

The key to an effective white paper, like any well-written document, is to get to the point quickly, cover all aspects of the issue in sufficient detail to meet your objective, and close the paper with a sense of finality.

For additional guidance, contact your instructor.

## Some Air Force White Papers to Peruse

Moseley, Michael T. "The Nation's Guardians: America's 21st Century Air Force." CSAF White Paper.  Headquarters, United States Air Force, 29 December 2007. http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/af/csaf_white_ppr_29dec07.pdf.

Deputy Chief of Staff, Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance. "Revolutionizing AF Intelligence Analysis." Headquarters, United States Air Force, January 2014. http://www.defenseinnovationmarketplace.mil/resources/20140211_IntelligenceAnalysisWhitePaper_PA.pdf

"U.S. Air Force White Paper on Long Range Bombers." Headquarters, United States Air Force, 1 March 1999. https://fas.org/nuke/guide/usa/bomber/bmap99.pdf.

"On Learning: The Future of Air Force Education and Training." Headquarters, Air Education and Training Command. 30 January 2008. http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/aetc/afd-080130-066.pdf.