

Computer Writing and Research Lab

White Paper Series: #030917-1

Preparing White Papers in the CWRL

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Abstract: This white paper launches the CWRL White Paper Series. It establishes a rationale, principles, and guidelines for structuring white papers and suggests how they might be distributed and archived for future use.

Rationale for White Papers in the CWRL

TRADITIONALLY, research and development units in academic, business, non-profit, and government institutions have produced white papers to document their work both internally and for public audiences. This genre is more formal and more developed than a memo or newsletter item, less so than an article in a peer-reviewed journal. It serves a valuable role in the social distribution of information within and outside of organizations and it provides an institutional memory with historical value.

Although the Computer Writing and Research Lab is well established, and although there is a great deal of thoughtful and creative work by instructors, students, and administrators in the lab, much of the ongoing intellectual, pedagogical, and organizational activity remains invisible. While it is true that courses are to some extent represented by class web sites, and that there is a CWRL web site¹ that provides a great deal of helpful information for students and instructors, something is missing. White papers can help fill the need for an ongoing record of the intellectual activity in the lab, and serve many other purposes as well. In the process, they will help document how the resources of the lab are being used, documenting the case for the support of the CWRL and its work.

¹ <<http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu>>.

Theoretical Foundations

White papers can serve a valuable purpose in presenting some of the theories and methods we are investigating and using in the lab, both

for instruction and for research. In this way we can develop a deeper connection between theory and practice (for example: what is the relationship between classical rhetoric and blogs? How do issues of web accessibility impact purpose and audience in composing?) The exploration of diverse theories of composing, of technology, and of teaching and learning has long been fundamental to the lab's mission. White papers will provide a medium for documenting and sharing this exploration.

Advancing Research Agendas

The CWRL offers a wide range of research opportunities. White papers can support research as an intermediate step between data gathering and final reporting. They can also stand alone as a way to initiate critical thought that can develop into more formal journal articles, books, conference talks. White papers can also provide opportunities for early peer review and critique to strengthen ideas. Furthermore, sharing ideas publicly in this way can suggest possible research collaborations, both within the lab community, and outside, in other disciplines, institutions and in the community.

Professional Development

The process of planning, preparing, revising, and formatting white papers can give graduate students (as well as staff and faculty) practice in professional communication. It will also provide an opportunity for graduate students and junior faculty to earn publication credits. A white paper may serve as a seed or stepping stone to a conference presentation, journal article, dissertation, or book chapter. From a larger perspective, white papers can also help reveal the limitations or shortcomings in our thinking, as we review them with a critical eye and invite feedback from readers.

Community Building

The CWRL is a vibrant ecosystem of people, hardware, software, networks, and social structures. Many newcomers to the lab are startled by the highly collaborative environment and the pervasive effects of the technologies. This can be unsettling and confusing. Since the lab is such an unusual environment for teaching, learning, and research, white papers about this environment will be of interest not only within the university, but in other institutions and programs as well. They can also provide opportunities for discussing the health and well-being of the lab ecosystem and its social structure. They may serve as a useful tool for working out issues that cause difficulties or challenge our administrative or pedagogical thinking. But

most importantly, white papers can reflect and continue to develop a culture of intellectual activity and communication.

Principles

Some fundamental principles will establish the white paper series on a solid foundation:

- Everyone participates. This is to say that we will welcome contributions from anyone connected with the lab, including faculty and administrators, graduate student instructors, staff, undergraduate proctors, and students.
- White papers should not pose an added burden of extra research—they are based on what we know or are working out. References to relevant research or other resources, while welcome, are not required.
- White papers tend to focus on a single topic.
- In the CWRL, topics might include pedagogy, technology, research, administration, or various issues in literacy, or the intersections of 2 or more of these.
- White papers should be written in a conversational yet professional tone—not as formal as a journal article, but more formal than a newsletter article.
- If references are included, a bibliography should be provided only for sources cited.
- Screenshots and even multimedia are welcome: authors can specify web-only publication. The CWRL web site will have a special section for the white paper series.
- Because white papers reflect both on the writer and on the CWRL, we expect that great care will be taken with the content and presentation.
- White papers will be reviewed by the CWRL Assistant Directors primarily for appropriateness to the white paper series. They will not be edited, although authors may be asked to clean up papers with serious flaws or problems. We hope that the work presented in this series will represent exemplary thought and writing.

Formal Structure

The white papers in this series will likely cover a wide variety of topics and may be presented in diverse formats. However, a certain minimal structure should help readers quickly recognize that this is a serious piece of writing in a professional series. This structure provides a scaffold for the development of the piece. It should include: The heading (see example above):

Computer Writing and Research Lab
White Paper Series

Number in series (date: yymmdd-pub order for that date, e.g.,
030525-1)

Title

Author(s)

Contact info and institutional affiliation

Date

Keywords: Identify topics that can ultimately make these papers more searchable

Abstract: Provides a brief overview that can be quickly scanned

Body: Makes liberal use of subheads. Typical length ranges quite a bit, from 4-25 single-spaced pages. There should be minimal use of footnotes. It is appropriate to use, as needed: sidebars, screenshots, hyperlinks

Bibliography: Include sources cited only. If there are some important uncited sources readers should know about, there should be an explanation in the body, then referenced in the Bibliography.

Online papers: If the white paper will be web-based only, the structure above should still be provided, either within the body of the paper, or linked to it. Online papers are expected to meet standard guidelines for accessibility.

Distribution

White papers will be jointly published in paper and on the web. Print-based documents will be made available on the web in PDF format; web-only documents will be described in a print document that follows the structure above. The URL for the online paper will appear in place of the “body” section. The white papers will be distributed by subscription, by request, and by direct delivery to key administrators, faculty, funding sources, and others with an interest in the activities of the CWRL.

On the web, white papers will be archived at http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/professional/white_papers.shtml. We plan to implement the archive within a blog, which will:

- Provide a robust environment for commentary and discussion
- Incorporate built-in archiving
- Note most recent additions
- Post a list of recent comments and other affordances to build community
- Allow multimedia content to be linked to articles

Print copies will be archived in a binder located in the CWRL administrative office in FAC 8. They will be available for

photocopying.

We will provide special delivery of white papers to:

- Dean of the College
- Technology Dean of the College
- Division of Rhetoric and Composition Chair
- Division of Rhetoric and Composition Unit Heads
- Perry-Castañeda Library
- DRC faculty
- English department faculty interested in teaching with technology
- English Department graduate advisor
- Center for Instructional Technologies
- Liberal Arts Instructional Technology Services

Concluding Thoughts

Considering the value of white papers in making ongoing intellectual work visible, in scaffolding research, in developing ideas, and in evaluating our activities, it is surprising that the CWRL has not launched this series sooner. I hope that the series provides a helpful resource both within the lab community, as we present, share, and discuss our ideas, and also beyond the lab, in the university and in the community, as well as in our disciplines. Over time, the white paper series will become a resource for institutional memory and historical research as well.