

A photograph of two business professionals, a woman and a man, sitting at a table. The woman is writing on a document with a pen, and the man is looking at the document. There are various papers, charts, and a laptop on the table. The background is slightly blurred, showing an office setting.

LONG FORM CONTENT PLAYBOOK:

**How to Turn Ideas into Ebooks,
White Papers, and Reports**

Craig D|| Guillot

While white papers, reports, and ebooks take a lot of work, a little extra planning can go a long way to improve the process and content. One of the most critical steps is to refine the idea by clarifying your goal and the readership's needs and interests. A comprehensive outline process can help find the best way to tell the story and identify sources and experts, while an iterative approach to writing can help improve the content through drafts and feedback. Finally, a post-publication campaign of articles, blog posts, and LinkedIn content can help you get the most mileage out of the product. Here's a brief playbook to help turn your ideas into effective and engaging long-form content.

Get Clear on Your Goals

Getting clear on your goals at the beginning is critical. Clarifying whether the goal is to inform, educate, or promote awareness of an industry trend will pave the way for a smoother process with higher-quality content.

- **Identify Your Readership:** It is essential to clearly identify readership and who the content is for, as this will guide content, tone, and approach. Ask yourself: Who will read this content? Why will they read it? What makes this content valuable? Why is it important now? How is this content different than other published content on the topic?
- **Addressing Pain Points:** Knowing the audience enables you to identify their pain points better, provide valuable insight, and pitch a solution.
- **Qualify your Goals:** Consider how you'll qualify or quantify the goals of your content. Is it to generate leads and collect email addresses? Establish thought leadership in a particular area? Demonstrate a new capability your competition lacks?
- **Get Early Buy-In:** Get stakeholders and decision-makers involved early on. Over the years, I've seen several projects go back to the drawing board because one or two stakeholders weren't involved until the very end.

Refine the Idea

While most clients I work with come to the table with at least a rough idea of the kind of content they want to create, they often need assistance refining and clarifying their ideas. There are several things you can do to help refine the idea:

- **Hold a Brainstorming Session.** An informal brainstorming session via Zoom is a great way to put many ideas on the table. You can record the call, run a transcript, and then use this to organize everyone's thoughts.
- **Get Executive Support and Bring Relevant Parties to the Table.** Make a list of executives whose expertise, responsibilities, or insights may align with the idea. Reach out to them to get buy-in and participate in the brainstorming.
- **Establish Responsibility.** While the marketing director typically serves as the primary decision-maker, it is not common for sales directors or other SMEs to be involved. While there is no right or wrong, what is important is that you identify roles and responsibilities at the start, including who will have the authority to edit, change, or make recommendations about the work.

Select a Format and Publication Date

Long-form content comes in many flavors. White papers were traditional, lengthy, and heavily researched documents that ran 5,000 words or more, while ebooks were much shorter and informal. Reports were typically done annually or based on original research. However, the lines are blurring, and it is now up to the individual organization or marketing director to decide what defines a “white paper,” “ebook,” or “report.” While it ultimately doesn't matter what you call it, you should identify the format and targeted length and have a basic idea of what the finished product will look like.

Some considerations include:

- **Page Count and Word Count.** Things can change during the process but starting with a target page count can help guide design and content creation.
- **Art.** Does this topic warrant many charts, tables, and graphics? If so, you'll want to factor that into design considerations, as it will require more work from the designer and reduce space for text.
- **Publication Date.** It's essential to set a target publication date at the very start of the project, especially if it is seasonal or tied to an event.
- **Timeline.** Long-form content often takes a few weeks or more to bring to market. While a 2,500-word ebook may be completed in a couple of weeks, a heavily-sourced 5,000-word report with multiple interviews could take two months. Knowing your target length and format is essential to establish a timeline.

Working Backwards From Your Target Publication Date

It's beneficial to identify a target publication date as early as possible. From there, you can work backwards to identify milestones and create a production calendar to keep everyone on track. This includes:

- Completion of brainstorming and idea development
- Completion of the initial outline
- Review and feedback on the outline
- SME interviews completed
- Submission of first draft
- Review and feedback on the first draft
- Submission of the second draft
- Copy editing
- Final copy is delivered to designer
- Completed content from designer

Develop the Outline

An outline is a critical part of long-form content development. If one thinks of long-form content as building a house, the outline would be the foundation and framing. And just as paint, trim, and interior design work can't improve a house with a poor foundation, no amount of rewriting or editing can fix content built on poor framework.

Getting the outline right can prevent many potential problems down the line. I believe in investing time and effort into the outline process to get things right from the start. There are several components to writing a thorough outline:

- **Refining the Idea.** Writing an outline will naturally help you refine your ideas and turn your brainstorming session notes into a more formal document. In the process, you will find a lot more clarity on the idea.

- **Identify SMEs.** The outline process will also help you identify internal and external subject matter experts (SMEs) who can contribute to the content. I often drop potential interview questions into my outlines and make notes where quotes and insight could help strengthen the content.
- **Fact-Finding.** I typically use the outline process to identify supporting sources and materials like surveys, other reports, data, and articles.
- **Identifying Issues.** Outlining helps establish the structure but can also identify issues, such as when there may not be sufficient data or sources to back up an idea, or when the content needs to take a different angle.
- **The Best Way to Tell the Story.** The outline process will also help you the best structure and best way to tell the story. Ideas from brainstorming sessions and rough mental outlines may sound good until you start working through them on paper. You may find that a four-part outline works better as six parts or eight subheads work better as five parts or discover a targeted 3,000-word ebook will work better as 2,000 words with three small sidebars.
- **Feedback.** Finally, once I complete an outline, I share it with all stakeholders in a Google document where everyone can offer feedback, comments, and suggestions.

Write the First Draft

Long-form content writing is often an iterative process of building and weaving structures together. From there, you continually refine and improve each section, align the whole thing, and wrap it with an introduction, conclusion, and sidebars or callouts.

After conducting interviews and gathering the supporting documents, I'll then expand the outline with the supplemental content and insight. Here are some things to consider in the first draft stage:

- **Write Rough.** The first step is to expand the outline from text segments into full writing and complete sentences. I mainly focus on structure and content in this stage and don't worry much about style, tone, or grammar.
- **Add SME Insight.** I'll also add insight and direct quotes I obtained from SME interviews.
- **Enhance.** Next, I turn on change tracking in Word and start going through to enhance and improve the content. I often move things around and look for parts with duplicate ideas.

- **Revise, Revise, Revise.** I then accept all changes and start reviewing the content from top to bottom, focusing on style and tone. I'll repeat this process several times until there's little left to improve.
- **Placeholders.** No matter how well you plan, outline, and interview, there will always be a few missing pieces in the puzzle. I use notes and placeholders to identify where additional insight or information is needed.
- **Ideas for Design.** This is also a good time for the writer to think more creatively about ideas for art, sidebars, pull quotes, or an infographic. The writer typically has a clearer view of the content, and presenting these ideas early can help the designer get working on the design and layout.
- **Submit for Feedback.** Finally, the writer should send the draft back to the stakeholders and SMEs for review, edits, and comments.

Second Draft and Copy Editing

The second draft is typically the final opportunity to tidy up all the loose ends in the content and ensure everything is correct. SMEs and stakeholders should sign off on the final draft, paying close attention to context. Even the most skilled writers and editors can miss things or make typos, so doing a global grammar check is essential.

- **Fact-Checking:** A brand can quickly damage its reputation and lose authority by publishing content with errors or false statements. Ensure that all facts and SME contributions are appropriately sourced.
- **Tone:** The writer and marketing director should make a final pass to ensure the tone is correct and consistent.
- **Fill the Gaps.** The second draft is also time for the SMEs and any other stakeholders to provide any missing information found in the first draft.
- **Copy Editing.** It's critical to have the content reviewed by a professional copy editor as they specialize in grammar and context and find inaccuracies and typos that others may miss.

Design

Ideally, as the writer works on the content, the designer is working on the long-form content template. The writer should also forward ideas for charts, callouts, graphs, or other relevant art. Proposing ideas along the way can help the designer get a jump start on the layout and other elements. The writer should also be available to answer any questions that may arise during the design and layout process.

Publish and Promote

The final step is to publish, announce, and distribute the content across all relevant channels, including email, press releases, and social media. However, organizations can often do more to get the most mileage out of their long-form content.

- **Create a Plan:** Start by creating a post-publication content marketing plan with ideas and a schedule of posts or other marketing activities.

- **Content Repurposing:** Long-form content offers many opportunities to repurpose pieces and parts of the content. For example, an ebook can easily be broken down into a few thought leadership articles or blog posts. You can spread these out over a quarter to extend the long-form content's shelf life.

- **Spin-off Ideas:** Seasonal trends, new developments, and even new data can offer opportunities to spin off new blog posts or thought leadership articles to promote the initial content.

Ready to Collaborate?

I'm a high-performing ghostwriter who specializes in the financial services, supply chain, and retail technology industries. I've written reports, white papers, and ebooks for nearly two dozen Fortune 500 companies. I can help with all stages of a long-form content project, from ideation and execution to post-publication campaigns. Contact me at craigguillot@gmail.com to discuss how I can help. Read more about my work at www.craigdguillot.com