

DECONSTRUCTING

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

“WHITE PAPER”

The racial and colonial context and why we need to retire the term



Questioned by community members and partner organizations about why we are still using the term “white paper” (also cited and referred to as whitepaper) the Chairs for Women in Science and

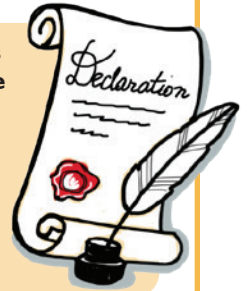
Engineering (CWSE) Network began a

journey of discovery into the history of the term and data gathering on how the term is used and perceived.

The goal of the CWSE program is to increase the participation of women and other under-represented persons in the natural sciences and engineering. This is undertaken through research, leadership and advocacy work that supports intersectionality and diversity that enables accessible, equitable and inclusive learning and working environments.

Our research team discovered that the term “white paper” is used by a wide range of professionals to describe material made available to the public through non-traditional publishing. Originally referring to government documents, a “white paper” now refers to a document meant to educate and aid decision making. They are used in government, politics, academia, business, and technical fields. Currently there is no universal definition, and the term is vague and does not clearly reflect the content of the work. At present, and informed by individuals with expertise in library science, there is no formal way to classify white papers.

The historical significance in Canada is different than other countries because of a specific policy paper: “The White Paper, 1969” (formally the Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy, 1969) which refers to a Government of Canada policy paper proposing changes to the Indian Act.



Discussion of biases that identify white as good, and black as bad occurred as early as the 1970s (Burgest, 1973). The practice of categorizing terms as white or black to denote good and bad is racially biased. Equating white with authority also implies superiority of peoples or individuals based on race. No matter the intent of the authors, nor the historical origin of the term, “white paper” is problematic because it is meant to connote authority.

Because of the issues arising from the origin of use in Canada and the racialized terminology, we invited experts from across Canada, and hosted a consultation meeting to explore the use of the term and gather participants personal and professional views on building a new naming practice. Participants were academics, researchers librarians, Indigenous leaders, science policy experts and other leaders who work in or are advocates in areas of racism, de-colonization and who use or would be impacted by the term.

The group agreed that “white” used to connote authority in general is an issue and the hierarchies inherent in the creation of white papers are seen as artefacts of colonialization. The term is exclusionary to some groups, and evokes racism, privilege, power or oppression.



After discussion, the group proposed three possible renaming options:

1. a universal term to replace “white paper”,
2. embedding names that describe what the document is, and
3. a combination of a new term and embedding names.

One example of a universal term was “Position Statement” which is context driven; while the term “Briefs” works well because it outlines the issues and opposing sides as well as moves away from the hierarchical nature of scholarly titles. This would likely increase broader reader engagement. The group also identified using “Resource” versus “Document” because it encompasses nonwritten communication such as video or visual representations.

The second option discussed was redirecting to specific category names that identify the type of document. For example, being specific and calling the document what it is: survey, policy, case study, consultation, technical document etc.

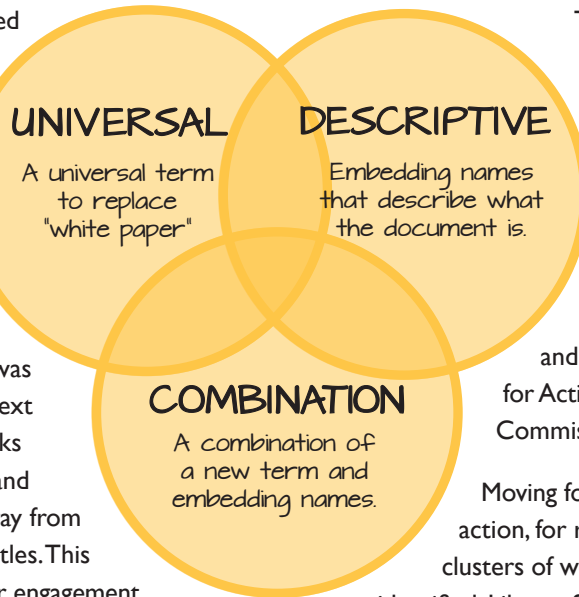
The third option, combines approaches one and two and might assist in capturing multiple resources and then categorizing with specificity. An example would be a universal term followed by a specific category such as Brief-Technical Document.

The work to-date has deconstructed the term; and shapes the starting point to retiring and renaming the word white paper.



Language that embeds a new term must be inclusive, non-racialized and take into consideration the historical context. Using “white” as synonymous with authority is the antithesis of inclusion.

Event took place on the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and the Mississauga of the Credit River (Pearson Airport Toronto, ON).



To heal from the past and support the process of reconciliation, we propose ending the use of the term “white paper” and creating practices for naming documents that align with the United Nations Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (United Nations, 2007) and the Truth and Reconciliation Calls for Action (TRC) (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada et al., 2015)

Moving forward, to build ideas into action, for retiring and renaming, clusters of working spheres were identified: Library Science, Government, Academia, and Business. The participants recognized that there will be cross-over between spheres, and additional operational spheres are likely needed. These spheres require a focal point to articulate ideas and support steps, while minimizing redundancy in efforts towards renaming of white paper.



While we gain consensus on a new naming procedure, we are advocating for redirecting to specific names that describe what a document or resource is. By embedding descriptors into resource titles, we will be able to retire racist language of white paper while gaining consensus on a universal term.

For a full graphical and written report of the event please visit <https://wwest-cwse.ca/category/news/>.

We would like to thank the participants in this process and are grateful for the knowledge and openness of those who have collaborated with us. We acknowledge funding from NSERC for the CWSE Network research and advocacy activities.

Dr. Jennifer Jakobi

NSERC Chair for Women in Science and Engineering (CWSE) for BC and Yukon
Westcoast Women in Science and Engineering (WWEST)
Professor in the Faculty of Health and Social Development,
The University of British Columbia Okanagan
(250) 807-9884
jennifer.jakobi@ubc.ca



We respectfully acknowledge the Syilx Okanagan Nation and their peoples, in whose traditional, ancestral, unceded territory UBC Okanagan is situated and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation in whose traditional, ancestral, unceded territory where the focus group event took place.

