

On Writing a Strategic Management Paper

On Content

1. *Problem Definition.* A paper must always begin with an indication of why it is being written. Ideally this 'mission definition' should be stated as a problem definition.
2. *Solution Method.* Not only should the writer have a structured method of approaching the problem, but he must also share this solution method with the reader, preferably as early on in the paper as possible.
3. *Analytical Depth.* The most common problem of papers is that they merely scratch the surface of a case, which is usually justified by referring to the page limit. However, the need for brevity may be no excuse for superficiality. The page limit refers to how much one may report, not to how much one may think. One important rule of thumb when striving for depth and brevity is to avoid rehashing the information in the case. You may presume that all the facts in the case are known to the reader, so that you can focus on analysis instead of description.
4. *Use of Theory.* Trying to reinvent the wheel is a cardinal sin for someone striving for an academic education. Theory is the residue of generations of problem solving, is hence usually useful at indicating avenues for attacking a problem and therefore should be used according to need. One must, however, keep the right sequence in mind; for a practitioner theories should not be looking for appropriate problems, but problems looking for appropriate theory.
5. *Structured Reasoning.* Brainstorming is good, as long as it is constrained to one's brain. Wait until the storm is over and things have been straightened out before confiding anything to paper. This should be done in a structured manner, with a clear line of argumentation. Checklists may be used as a structuring tool, but in themselves argue nothing. Checklists need to be explained and woven into the line of reasoning. It is this structured reasoning which is usually more important than the solutions that it bears.
6. *Explicit Assumptions.* Every argument will be partially based on assumptions and estimations. This is no large problem if the writer points them out to the readers, so that readers may determine whether they share them or not.
7. *Motivated Solutions.* Although from an academic point of view reasoning is more important than actual solutions (process more important than the product), business administration is an action-oriented science and therefore necessarily interested in solutions. Hence, it is expected that the paper's line of reasoning is carried through to its logical end, resulting in motivated solutions (including an overview of costs and benefits, and detailed indications of how implementation could be assured) or a well-motivated lack of solution (including alternative lines of action).
8. *Creativity.* Working in a structured manner shouldn't imply that one works through the case mechanically. 'Doing a case' should never become synonymous with 'fill in the blanks' exercises or 'painting by numbers'. Creativity, for instance in terms of original responses to competitive threats, inventive growth strategies or unconventional solutions to implementation problems, is an important element in the strategist's arsenal and therefore actively encouraged.

On Presentation

9. *Clear Structure.* It almost goes without saying that the whole structure of the paper should be clear at a glance. This not only means that the content should be structured (see previous section), but that the structure must be visible to the reader. Obvious helps are clearly named chapters and paragraphs (preferably numbered), use of bold and italic typesetting and use of a structure guide (either a table of contents or a clarifying diagram).

10. *Clear Layout*. Consult a writer's handbook if necessary for rules and hints with regard to margins, page numbers, spacing, listings, tables, bibliographies and footnotes.
11. *Grammar*. It cannot be expected of non-native English speakers that their English rivals that of the Queen, but unfamiliarity with the language may not become an excuse for laxity. Rereading of texts and use of a spelling check program can easily resolve 90% of all errors.
12. *Writing Style*. Although a matter of taste, one may safely assume that a professor grows to dislike unnecessarily woolly, outdrawn and boring writing rather quickly, the more so after 20 papers! So, be concrete, to the point and exciting. Dare to be witty, entertaining and different - your reader is human and will probably enjoy it!