Writing a Strategy Paper

Idea In Short

A strong strategy paper provides clear, actionable recommendations with supporting logic and data. Choose a company, research quickly, use two to three frameworks, create the appendix first and answer the so-what question for executives.

The Final Project and Its Constraints

Strategy students face a final assignment to advise a real company in 1,500 words, which is roughly three pages. The constraint forces discipline because a rambling 10-page diatribe is easy, while a tight executive memo requires strong opinions, loosely held. The goal is to help the company create or maintain a sustainable competitive advantage.

Peter Drucker framed the challenge as preparing today for an uncertain tomorrow. The paper must demonstrate analytical rigor, clear recommendations and persuasive storytelling. The following steps guide students from company selection through final review.

Choose the Right Company

The choice is yours, whether you admire the company, plan to work there or have read about it. Consider a mega-trend like 3D printing, hybrid work or electric vehicles, then down-select a leading company. Publicly traded companies are preferable because you can download analyst reports, investor presentations and compare with rivals.

Choosing a company you can research thoroughly matters more than choosing the most exciting one. Access to financial data, earnings calls and competitor benchmarks gives your analysis depth. Private companies limit your evidence base and make it harder to defend recommendations with data.

What Makes a Great Executive Memo

The syllabus defines the expectations clearly. Provide a concise situational analysis that highlights critical issues and explains why they matter. Guide the reader through your logic and be succinct. 1 emphasizes that managers who cannot articulate their analysis cannot defend it to others.

Provide clear, actionable recommendations and demonstrate the logic behind your conclusions. Answer the so-what question so the reader understands the implications. Support arguments with analysis, data and evidence. Craft the message in an easy-to-follow and persuasive way.

Research Quickly and Smartly

Start with the company's website and download investor relations presentations. Download the annual report to shareholders and listen to the most recent earnings webcast. Watch interviews with the Chief Executive Officer and Chief Financial Officer. Many consulting firms and investment firms publish free research on emerging trends.

Google your search term plus "pdf" for reports on the topic and narrow results to the past year. Search your term plus ".org" to find nonprofit or governmental industry groups. Read news and Wikipedia for basics, then dig deeper. Use financial screeners to identify competitors and gather primary data through interviews or surveys.

Investigate Core Competencies and Use Buckets

Strategy is about creating sustainable competitive advantage through an economic moat that fits your activities. Identify who the company is now and where it will be in five years if they follow your advice. Define what success looks like and what trade-offs the company is making.

Consultants love buckets because they simplify complex situations and structure thinking. What are the company's strengths and core competencies? What key trends influence their financials and positioning? What supply chain factors deserve focus? What are the key challenges and how do you know? 2 helps analyze buyer power, supplier power, new entrants, rivals and substitutes systematically.

Select Two or Three Strategy Frameworks

Frameworks are imperfect but useful tools to simplify problems. Business unit strategy focuses on activities and economic moats. Industry changes involve lifecycles, innovation types and disruption. Company growth connects to founder mentality, organizational design and culture. Cost structure involves fixed versus marginal costs and experience curves.

Customer segmentation uses willingness to pay versus price and Segmentation, Targeting and Positioning (STP). New market entry draws on blue ocean strategy and the technology adoption lifecycle. 3 shows how creating uncontested market space differs from competing in crowded red oceans. Select two or three frameworks that help you think about the company's future, because it is not a contest to say more but to focus attention on the right things.

Create the Appendix First

When a team has done the research and is halfway through writing, a useful approach is to start with the appendix. Figure out which frameworks and analyses you definitely want to include. Go deep and create the charts, graphs and tables first. Then reverse-engineer those points back into the body of the paper.

This design-thinking approach lets you dive deep and then bring insights up a level. It is like looking in your refrigerator, seeing what ingredients you have and then making pasta. The appendix anchors your narrative in evidence rather than aspiration.

Get Feedback and Be Smart With Time

Let other people read, critique and improve your work. Research immediately if you have not determined the company or done primary research. This is not a research project, but you need enough knowledge to form a point of view. Strategy is about what you will do today to prepare for an uncertain future, whether the challenge involves omnichannel retail, internet-of-things, regionalization of supply chains or changing consumer trends. You need to know enough to put together a coherent strategy for the company.

Identify what you could talk about, then determine your specific focus. You cannot solve all the company's problems in 1,500 words, so explain the scope of challenges and why you are narrowing the focus. Show your thinking and bring the audience along for the story. Link your analysis to strategy frameworks and make the appendix first, then knit together the paper.

Be a Cynical Judge of Your Own Work

Finish the draft early and walk away for 24 hours. Return and be a cynical judge of your own work. What is the company's strategic positioning and what does winning look like to them? What major trends shape their industry and adjacent sectors? What do the financials reveal about trouble or capacity for investment?

Examine their core competencies and how they map to your recommendations. Consider why you chose the specific issue to address and whether your recommendations fit the company or merely reflect best practices. Identify the trade-offs the company makes by choosing your recommendations. If the company follows your advice fully, where could they be in five years? A strong paper answers these questions with evidence, logic and a clear point of view that an executive can act upon immediately.

- 1Harvard Business Review on writing executive memos
- 2Porter's Five Forces framework
- 3Blue Ocean Strategy framework

Summary

Writing a 1,500-word strategy paper forces discipline. Choose your focus, gather evidence efficiently and let frameworks structure your thinking. Create the appendix first, get feedback from others and be a cynical judge of your own work. Strong opinions, loosely held, win the day.