

A Research Paper Template

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In my May 25, 2015 [blog entry](#), I discussed the research paper that I regularly assign my BBA 407 strategic management students. In that discussion, I noted that students who took advantage of receiving frequent feedback as they conducted their research and drafted their paper typically did better than those who did not solicit such feedback. As a result, I stated that I would develop a research paper template that I would introduce during the fall 2015 semester.

My goal was to provide students with a framework that would allow them to better structure their research, analysis, and writing. The template has been posted on Blackboard and was discussed in Thursday's opening class. All students are required to complete and submit their templates with their papers.

The template is broken into two components. The first part of the document contains explanations, guidance, and examples. The second part is the template that will be completed by the students as they research and write their papers.

The first part of the document contains among the following information:

- Purpose of the template
- Background information as to why it was developed
- Steps for effective group work
- Information on writing abstracts
- Guidance for developing a robust analytical framework. Components include a SWOT analysis, the Porter Framework for industry structure and profitability, questions that should be addressed in a financial analysis, charts for evaluating a company's financial strength and trends internally and against the industry and/or major competitors, an analytical summary linking the company's competitive position with key drivers and changes in those drivers, guidance for developing a strategic focus, guidance for determining how the company should pursue its strategic focus, and an evaluation of possible strategic options.

Those components are based on outcomes from past student work, common deficiencies in papers, and elements of the strongest papers.

Overall, the development of corporate strategy is a rigorous evidence-based approach. Moreover, strategy does not occur within a vacuum and/or unchanging environment. A company is essentially one member of a larger industry ecosystem. Its choices will have an impact on an industry. In turn, its choices lead its competitors to respond and/or competitor choices lead a company to make its own responses. At the same time, an industry is in a continual state of flux, both from internal factors and external ones.

The template is designed to help students gain a larger, but more focused overview and more robustly analyze options, trade-offs, and feasibility.

If the template is effective, the advantage between students who seek regular and early feedback relative to those who do not should narrow.

Abstract: *To be written only after all the research and analysis has been completed, strategic options have been evaluated, and a recommendation has been selected.*

Company's current market position...

The major opportunity or problem facing the company...

The recommended strategy to realize that opportunity or address that problem...

The expected outcome of that strategy...

Example 1: *Colgate-Palmolive has a strong global market position in multiple consumer product categories supported by well-known brands and global distribution capabilities. Approximately 80% of the company's net sales are generated outside the United States. Global personal hygiene spending is forecast to increase nearly 5% per year over the next five years. The company should expand its personal hygiene offerings in the fastest-growing overseas markets while leveraging its strong international presence to create economies of scale in distribution and marketing. The company's strong cash flow could allow it to underwrite this expansion with little material impact on its existing capital structure. We expect that this strategy would allow the company to reverse a recent slowdown in its revenue growth.*

Example 2: *Best Buy enjoys a strong position in the consumer electronics retail market. In recent years, it has faced declining revenue. The company faces intense competition from large companies that have significant pricing power. Best Buy also relies heavily on a small number of vendors making it dependent on them and vulnerable to their business decisions. We recommend that Best Buy strengthen its relationship with its vendors to mitigate the risk that they would use their strong bargaining power to adversely impact the company's business. Best Buy can provide vendors with their own personal areas within Best Buy's stores, allowing vendors to demonstrate the use and knowledge of their products and offer access to trained experts. Low-cost competitors would not likely imitate this unique approach, as it would undercut capacity utilization efforts aimed at minimizing costs. We expect that this strategy would mitigate the risks presented by strong supplier power by providing mutual and sustainable benefit to Best Buy and its vendors.*

Guidance in the research paper template