**Q&A (MUST READ AS SOON AS POSSIBLE)**

Just to say it again, if you need to speak with me voice, just email me a number where (and when) you can be reached, and I will call you back. If it is urgent, just put that in the subject line. Of course, you can always reach me by calling my office phone and leaving a message, which will be sent to me by email immediately. You can also contact the Department of Management (see syllabus) and tell whoever picks up the phone that you need to get an emergency message to me. They check their voice mail daily and, of course, have my cell number. Now, here are a few questions from students from previous terms, along with answers. I elected to post these here, just to prevent me from having to send out multiple email messages.

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**WRITING ASSIGNMENT GENERAL**

**Question:  What about the "Title Page" and "Title" of the Writing Assignments?**

Answer:  Format your Title Page and Title EXACTLY as you see it in the Sample Submission (a "Ford" study) in the "Writing Assignment Documents" module. Just change the information to match your info. The "Name of Industry: NAICS code" is given in the "Preliminary" part of the instructions for the assignment. You will add the company-specific information in Writing Assignment #2.

**Question:  What about the rest of the pages in each Writing Assignment?  Do they all need to be formatted strict APA, or like you have it in the Sample Submission?**

Answer:  The formatting is similar to APA 7th edition, with the exception of table formatting and a few other minor details. You should NOT just rely exclusively on the APA style guide. This is not an academic paper!  Again, format your document EXACTLY as you see it in the Sample Submission in the "Writing Assignment Documents" module. Just change the content in the sample to match yours. I won't count anything wrong if the format you use is the same as the one that I gave you to use in the sample submission, even if it is not perfect APA. Most students lose tons of points (and I do mean, like, several letter grades) because they don't pay attention to detail. They have extra blank lines, italics where they don't belong, headings that are slightly different, font types incorrect, etc. EXACTLY means just that... EXACTLY. Part of the assignment is assessing your ability to follow examples and very detailed instructions. If you can't do it in school under the supervision of an instructor, you probably can't do it very well for a company in the "real world".

**Question: Why do you give such detailed (and repeated) instructions and why do you insist on the project format you require?**

Answer:  First, we give detailed instructions (including explanations of how to fix some key issues) because students must not only learn how to do these things, but they must demonstrate it by doing. We allow almost unlimited submissions to Writing Assignment #1 because it is, by far, the most difficult to understand and the most challenging in terms of getting the formatting correct and attention to detail. So, we give very detailed comments in order to teach. Nearly all students are unable to demonstrate that they can get these two things (format and "opportunities") perfectly correct in the first submission, so we give detailed comments on what is incorrect and allow resubmissions. However, it is in very poor form for a student to simply resubmit work with very few of the identified issues corrected. Do this too much to a CEO and it can have serious repercussions on one's career.

Nevertheless, it is understood that students who do not understand something should simply ask. We spend quite a bit of time answering email and talking on the phone with students, which we seriously do not mind doing, so don't hesitate to ask if you have a question. That's what we are here for. A 100% score for any of the writing assignments demonstrates an ability to put the document together correctly using the sample submission and an understanding of the material required in that part of the project. Please note that, while we could require perfect APA and leave it at that, the style guide is well-suited to academic research but not so much for practical business reports. Because of this, nearly all companies have their own internal style guide that is to be used on reports and such. Rather than rewrite a style guide just for our own purposes, we (the faculty who teach strategy, not just me) took the APA style guide and adapted a few key things into a format that is easy to read and duplicate. We then put out sample submissions (depending on the program) so that students have something to look at and, right or wrong, require that it be followed even if it is not perfect APA.

In addition, please understand that strategy courses (like MSM-6650 or MBA-6611) are typically the capstone courses for an entire program. Therefore, students are required to demonstrate competence in the material from all of the program’s core courses. Student work (as well as much of the instructions) should closely resemble a formal business environment, similar to what they would experience as managers after graduation. So, when a CEO says that one must do research and write a major report (i.e., the project), and that the report must follow a particular format (even a proprietary one), one should not only follow that format exactly, but the work should demonstrate a command of the relevant course material. And yes, capstone projects (including the one in this class) are designed to put pressure on the student, just like they can expect after graduation, in terms of an ability to communicate, following instructions, managing time, learning new things, integrating material, etc.

If a student cannot perform in a business environment, we need to know it before they graduate. That's why we put the assessments in strategy and a few other courses and that's why they are built the way they are built. Most students who can follow explicit instructions, start the project early, and manage their time well don't usually have trouble with getting the project completed by the due date.

**Question: Do we do a conclusion at the end of each writing assignment?**

Answer:  No. Writing Assignments #3 and #4 require some paragraphs, but these are not formal "conclusions" *per se*. The earlier writing assignments are not complete documents. Rather, they are only small portions of a much larger assignment. Because of this, don't add conclusions and such to the end. Furthermore, when you get to Writing Assignment #2, you will simply add the work required in that assignment to the end of what you wrote in Writing Assignment #1 (before the references, of course). Your finished document will look like a single long document, with a single title page (from Writing Assignment #1) and a single references section (which grew from all of the references you added along the way). You will proceed the same way with Writing Assignments #3 and #4.

**Question:  How long should our submissions be for each writing assignment?**

Answer: Not a good question for graduate students. Your paper should be as long as it needs to be to PROPERLY answer each part of the assignment; no more and no less. The shortest I have had that was still a well-done project was about 20 pages or so, the longest about 90. Again, your paper needs to be as long as it needs to be to get the job done; no more and no less.

**Question: Should we tell you what strategy, common industry terms, and other such things mean as we write about them?**

Answer:  NO!  You are graduate students and I believe it is safe to assume that the audience you are writing for (me) knows what the terms mean. Your job in this paper is to convince me that you know how to do the strategic planning process correctly and completely. That's it. Don't explain to me what the parts mean. You would not do that to a CEO. It can get you fired.

**Question:  Should we include graphics and such?**

Answer:  Generally, no. That is, it's up to you, but they are rarely needed and there are a few guidelines. First, don't include graphics and charts and such unless that is the best way to present data. That is, don't try to make your document "pretty". It won't work. Second, if you do think that a chart or graphic is NECESSARY, you must use citations and references for anything you use (unless, of course, you created it yourself). **This is not the place for clip art!** Finally, don't use an online table generation tool to build your tables for you. These typically give you an image of a table that you would then paste into your document. **Those are automatically incorrect.** Use Microsoft Word's table functions to build all tables (this is mandatory, or I won't grade it). Just to be clear, I have never had a paper submitted where the use of a figure or chart was necessary. This type of writing simply does not require it, though it is not prohibited. Take a hint folks. It's too easy to make a mistake in formatting and lose points, so just don't do it unless you have to.

**Question: Should we use APA 6th edition of 7th?**

Start with the 6th, which is closer to what Word uses in Source Manager (they haven't done the 7th in Word yet). The only real difference after that is to remember that the sample submission has a different table formatting that you are to use. Remember, using Source Manager is mandatory for all in-text citations and for the entire references section. **Also, keep in mind that we are not following strict APA**. Rather, the sample submission in Canvas should serve as your example. Follow it EXACTLY in terms of format because that is the standard that I am holding you to.

**Question:  How do I enter the Gale references into Word's Source Manager?**

Answer:  Remember, this is not perfect APA. If you don’t have a human author’s name for a source, then use the company name. This presents a problem with the Gale references because the only way to get to their online database is through a library. HOWEVER, their database is technically just an online copy of book sections derived from an actual printed encyclopedia. That said, I would enter it as a printed book section and don’t include a URL at all. If you already have a Gale source in Source Manager, you will likely need to create a new entry because Word will still show “Retrieved from”, even if you delete the URL data. So, create a new entry using the info below, go through and replace the Gale citations you have now with those to the new entry, and then delete the old entry (you can’t delete it until you remove all citations that point to it. Here is how I would enter it into Word’s Source Manager:

*Type of Source:  Book Section*  
*Corporate Author: Gale*  
*Title: Soft Drinks and Bottled Water*  
*Book Author: (blank)*  
*Book Title: Encyclopedia of Global Industries*  
*Year: 2017*  
*Pages: 672*  
*City: Farmington Hills*  
*State/Province: MI*  
*Country/Region: USA*  
*Publisher: Gale Publishing*  
*Standard Number: ISBN: 978-1410363213*  
*Edition: 6th.*

Leave all other fields blank.

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1**

**Question: How do I find the type of information you are looking for in Writing Assignment #1 (and #2)?  All of the journal databases have old information.**

Answer:  Don't spend too much time digging around in the university journal databases looking for items Writing Assignments #1 and #2. The Gale sources are good, but you will likely exhaust those pretty quickly. The problem is that you can't really find much in normal academic journals that would do you any good. Remember, this is a snapshot of the CURRENT environment in which the industry operates. By the time a phenomenon is studied, written up, submitted to a journal, reviewed, edited, resubmitted, and published, far too much time has passed for it to be of any use in this type of project. This is NOT an academic research paper as you have written in your earlier classes. Again, the Gale sources would be okay as they give some very general descriptions of the industry itself, but that's probably about it. That said, the most logical question you should be asking would be about what kind of sources you should be looking at. First, take a look at the sample submission and read the items in the lists. Also, take a look in the instructions at the list of things I said you should include (unemployment, exchange rates, etc.). Finally, just think about the most logical place you might find the data. For the vast majority of phenomena, just use Google. For example, if you wanted to know what unemployment is doing, just Google "Latest United States unemployment numbers". You should find something from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (i.e., "bls.gov"). Because this information is reported monthly, look for something reported in the last month or two. When I search for this, I might see the latest data from the last couple of months, which would be ideal. In this report, I find that unemployment is slowly falling, but is up quite a bit from a year ago due to COVID-19. Next, ask yourself what this means for the industry and (or) strategic group. If unemployment is falling, then that means that people have a bit more money to spend on average (i.e., more people are earning paychecks). This suggests that "Disposable Income" is up, which is a number you need to report as an opportunity (if it is going up). Furthermore, if fewer people are out looking for work, then companies will probably pay more to hire people than in the past. The technical way to say this is that "Due to falling unemployment from the COVID-19 crisis, there is upward wage rates compared to months past."  So, there you would have a single threat (wage rates are rising) and a single opportunity (disposable income is climbing), all from a single Google search. (Note here. You are a manager for a company - which I have not assigned to you yet - so write this based on what is "good" or "bad" from a company viewpoint, not from the consumer viewpoint). The next time you are walking around the local grocery store (I assume you all buy groceries or can get to a place to do so), walk down the soft drink isle. What do you see?  When I walked through Walmart last week, I noted that the shelves were bare in places where aluminum canned soft drinks are normally stocked. Why is that?  Just Google "soft drink aluminum can shortage" and you will find that there was an issue. I also noted that there are a number of new flavors of Diet Coke and other soft drink brands. I see Creme Soda, Raspberry, and other flavors that were not there before. Never forget that the reason you see things on store shelves is because people are willing to buy them. So, this suggest that there is INCREASING demand for MORE variety of flavors in soft drinks. So, I Googled, "soft drink flavor trends" and found a few things from one of the FlavorMan sources. There is increased demand for a sparkling water (increased demand for a substitute product is always a threat), increased demand for flavored soft drinks (increased demand in THIS industry is always an opportunity), there is rising demand for "flavor over sweetness", increased demand for "floral and herbal profiles of botanicals", decreased demand for sugared soft drinks, etc. Just so you know (and, admittedly, to throw you a bit of free help, the source is https://flavorman.com/flavor-trends-2020). In this one paragraph, I described only 3 Google searches and have identified a half-dozen or so items that could (and SHOULD) go into your List of Opportunities and Threats. I also give you a few more things to search for in the instructions, which I EXPECT you would take a look at!  I trust this helps explain how to best search for items in Writing Assignment #1. You'll do something similar in Writing Assignment #2, except you will be focused the company I assign you after Writing Assignment #1.

**Question:  Please explain why an opportunity is not something a company can do. In normal conversation, an opportunity is something that a person can choose to do, so why is it not the same here?**

**Answer:  This is probably the single most difficult lesson for students to learn in this class.** In normal conversation, an opportunity is something someone can do, or at least that is the way that the word is normally used. People often say, "I have the opportunity to do so-and-so."  However, in strategy, a STRATEGIC opportunity is something that a company can do something ABOUT. Here is an example. In normal conversation, one might correctly say, "I have the opportunity to go to college."  In describing the same thing strategically, however, that would be incorrect. WHY would you go to college?  Perhaps it is because "O1. There are graduate college programs available in the area."  Perhaps it is because "T1. Employers in my field of choice prefer to hire managers with graduate degrees in management."  Your research might even reveal that "O2. Federally-backed student loans are available."  When you consider your own strengths and weaknesses (or those of your company in Writing Assignment #2), you might say, "W1. I do not have a graduate degree in my field" or "S1. I have extra time resources in the evenings and weekends."  When you get to the actual SWOT analysis itself, your SWOT matrix has all of these as input factors. The SWOT analysis is where you link them together to come up with possible actions you can take, along with the input factors that lead you to think that it might be a viable option. One possible output of a SWOT analysis might read something like, "A1. Get a graduate degree in my field (S1, W1, O1, O2, T1)". The reason that strategic opportunities are not things you can do, as they are in normal conversation, is because you cannot feed possible actions that a company can take into a SWOT analysis, which is designed to create an output list of possible actions that a company can take. That is, you can use SWOT output actions as SWOT input factors in the SWOT analysis. **I AM FULLY AWARE THAT, EVEN THOUGH I SPEND A HUGE AMOUNT OF TIME TEACHING THIS SINGLE CONCEPT, MOST STUDENTS JUST DON'T GET IT. THIS IS WHY YOU ARE NOT PERMITTED TO GO TO WRITING ASSIGNMENT #2 UNTIL YOU GET THE OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS WORDED CORRECTLY!!!  STUDENTS ARE NOT ASSIGNED A COMPANY TO WORK ON FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE COURSE UNTIL THEY CAN DEMONSTRATE THAT THEY UNDERSTAND THIS CONCEPT WITH A CORRECTLY WORDED LIST OF OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS IN WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1.**

**Question: Why do you mandate that opportunities and threats be worded in the present tense?  I thought threats are things that can happen in the future.**

Answer:  Think about it. Opportunities and threats are statements about the CURRENT state of the external environment, not what has happened in the past nor what might happen in the future. If you talk about the past (i.e., "Interest rates have been falling in recent years"), you just need to reword it so that a present-tense statement (i.e., "Interest rates are expected to continue falling, as they have over recent years"). Don't talk about what might happen in the future either ("The COVID-19 is going to cause a recession"). If you have strong and clear evidence that something will happen in the near future, then word it in the present tense, such as "Many economic forecasts are showing that a recession is likely in the near future". See how this is worded in the present tense (i.e., "are showing")?  Think of this using something that COULD happen, but might not, such as an earthquake. It is possible that an earthquake will hit Troy Alabama at any time, technically speaking (Troy Alabama is not far from the New Madrid fault). However, what is the chance of that happening?  Would it influence your decision making? Probably not much. However, if you were in California, you might have a threat that says, "Seismologists agree that a strong earthquake is likely within the next few years."  See how this is worded in the present tense (i.e., "Seismologists agree")?  Would this affect your decision making?  It depends. If you were planning to build a new factory, you might opt for a different location. If you were a consulting company that specialized in making buildings earthquake proof, then it certainly would affect your decision making. Only include a future event if it is relevant and if there is strong and clear evidence that the event will likely take place in the near future. That generally means, at least for most strategic planning processes, within less than 5 years.

**Question: What do you mean when you say not to write about things that are “always true”?**

Answer: Simple. It’s a grammatical issue, really. Let’s consider unemployment again. Let’s say that unemployment was falling and, therefore, disposable income was rising. If you write, “Falling unemployment causes a rise in disposable income,” it would not be a suitable opportunity because the grammar of the sentence says nothing about what the unemployment is ACTUALLY doing NOW. The statement is always true. Even when unemployment is skyrocketing, it is still true that falling unemployment does cause rising disposable income. The better way to write this as an opportunity would be, “Unemployment is currently falling, which is causing a corresponding rise in disposable income.” See the difference? It’s like trying to describe falling prices. When prices fall, people generally buy less, right? That’s always true. In fact, it is so true ALWAYS, that it is referred to as a law when studying economic theory. However, it says nothing as to whether or not prices are rising or falling NOW, does it? So, you might say, “Prices are currently rising, which is driving demand down.” Again, this is generally just a grammar issue and is easily correctible. However, it is sufficiently important that it constitutes a “MAJOR” issue in your assignment and will prevent you from getting a company assignment.

**Question:  My score on Writing Assignment #1 was really low? Should I be concerned?**

Answer:  You should be, but that's normal. Most students are blind-sided by the amount of detail (not to mention labor) required for this project. Generally speaking, students must submit Writing Assignment #1 at least 3 or 4 times to get to a point where I can assign them a company for the rest of the project. Again, this is normal. Remember, this is your capstone project, so it will be the hardest of all that you have had to do in your program.

Think of it as serving as your master's thesis. You'll likely end up with a total of around 30-50 or more pages (but that's including tables, references, cover page, etc.), so there is a bit of work involved but a lot of it is redundant. Writing Assignment #1 is the most difficult for two reasons. Either students don't understand what an opportunity or threat is (see instructions), or they don't pay attention to the detailed instructions (not to mention the sample submission) about what should be in the document. Sometimes, they just don't proof using the same proofing tools I use (i.e., Word and Grammarly's free Office add-in on an updated Windows PC).