Suggestions for Assignments

When preparing your assignments, give some time and attention to formatting and presenting things carefully. You can use pens and pencils to make calculations and rough work. But aim for a final product that looks professional. You can pull your answers together using Latex, google docs, excel, word, and other similar tools.

You are in a very quantitative program. We put, justifiably so, a lot of emphasis on rigorous quantitative analysis. However, a very solid piece of analytical research is not helpful unless you can communicate your ideas, analysis, and recommendations. To do this, you need to write brief memos with clear and logical supporting exhibits. I am not an expert on this. (Those of you who have noted my spelling skills already know that I am no expert!). However, here are a few suggestions that I have found helpful in the past.

Since like many things, you get better with practice, a couple of the assignments ask you to present your analysis in a brief “memo.” There is nothing onerous about this. Quantitative work requires you to be careful and clear about your assumptions and calculations. There is no reason, therefore, not to present things with the same carefulness and clarity. Try to work your presentation skills on all the assignments. These suggestions might help.

General Suggestions

- Compiling all your solutions / analysis in a self-contained document is helpful. I find that cutting and pasting small sections of a spreadsheet into a word document or latex works best. (In fact, I often find that screenshot graphic is cleaner and quicker).
Use some judgment on the appropriate detail to show. Readers of your work do not need to see every algebraic or computational step but a single and then a miracle happened step is also not helpful. For homework/assignment questions, think of your audience as your fellow student or colleagues. How much work do you need to show to let a well-informed individual follow along.

Sometimes, the assignment calls for a “memo.” For example, one of our assignments will have an equity valuation. There are many assumptions and steps to the analysis. Describing and presenting your work in just the right amount of detail takes some practice.

Here are few suggestions on case/memo preparation

- Be sure your recommendations are stated clearly up-front. The first paragraph of the memo should be the recommendations. The analysis that follows is designed to support that conclusion.
- Focus on supporting your recommendations. Try to avoid simply giving a narrative that describes your steps (First we calculated the cash flows, then we looked at , and then we did this).
- Any suggestions your get for a case are just to help guide your analysis. Simply “answering the question” will not make a good memo. A memo should offer the recommendation(s) with support.
- Be careful not to over-sell. Any recommendation that you make will have alternatives, disadvantages, and key assumptions. Be clear what these are.
- You have one page (or less) to make your recommendation do not waste space by restating material from the case or question.
- While bullet points are useful, I find that tables of numbers are best placed in the appendix. (Lots of people disagree with me here. Some people find a short table that summarizes a recommendation is a space-efficient presentation technique)
- Focus on your expertise. In any project analysis or problem, there is always a lot going on. Stay focused on your area of expertise.
- Exhibits (spreadsheets)
Any exhibit used should be clearly labeled and described. An exhibit should be understandable without referring back to the text.

Every exhibit should be referenced in your memo (as in “see Exhibit 1”).

Just because you created a spreadsheet or chart, does not mean it should be included. Include the information that is relevant to explaining your analysis, alternatives, and recommendations to the reader.

Avoid just repeating information that is given in the case. (Imagine being a CFO and hiring a consultant who simply reformatted information you gave him and sent you a sizable bill).

Often times, trying to reduce your analysis to one or two charts or figures is a useful analytical tool. It forces you to focus on the key aspects of the case.

Make sure the precision in the numbers you present corresponds to the accuracy. For example, round your numbers to appropriate degree (thousands, millions, etc.).

Cash-flow and other accounting information is best presented in a format that looks like accounting. For example, both the tables below convey the same basic information. The one on the left is easier to read since it follows the conventions of accounting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sales</th>
<th>100.0</th>
<th>Sales</th>
<th>100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COGS</td>
<td>(40.0)</td>
<td>Gross Profit</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross Profit</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is worthwhile spending a few minutes thinking about the graphic design of your memo and exhibits. It is not that the design is somehow more important than the content. You want to avoid making artificial barriers that cause people to avoid reading your work. If the first thing your boss says after picking up your memo is where did I put my darn glasses you are not off to the best start.

If you have more tips and suggestions, pass them along.