

Some Tips on Writing Up Phonology Problems

1. Goals of Problem-Set Solving (beyond just finding a good answer)

- Get command over the crucial ideas and theory being taught by using them in an analysis.
- Get practice in linguistic expository writing—hopefully useful in presenting your research results later on.

2. Starting In

It is usually good to give an *overview* of what is going on: what in general are the phenomena that need to be dealt with? What formal resources will be important in accounting for them?

3. Interleaving Data and Analysis

Often, clarity is maximized if an analysis is developed *gradually*, in tandem with the crucial data generalizations. One gradually adds to the formal apparatus, in sections that alternate with sections that present the relevant data. The protocol commonly used is to say “Such-and-such happens, as the following examples show.”

It is good to quote actual relevant examples from the problem set data, rather than just saying things like “in the data of (7)”. See below on how this can be done more conveniently.

4. Presentation of Rules/Constraints

The three things that ideally should appear together in presenting a rule/constraint are:

- A **name**. It should be clear, designate what the rule does (“Pre-Palatal Diphthongization”) or what the constraint bans (*Prepalatal Monophthong), and should not be abbreviated (“PPD”, “*PPM”).
- An explicit **formalization** of the rule in the theory being used.
- In all but trivial cases, a **prose restatement** of the rule.

All reference to rules in the later presentation should use the full name of the rule, not an abbreviation, and certainly never something like “Rule 7”. This sounds pretty picky, I admit. But there’s a real purpose behind it: if you free your reader of the burden of looking up your abbreviations, this permits her to spend more time thinking about the substance of what you have to say.

For constraints, the most crucial part of the exposition is that it should be straightforward for the reader, after having read your formalism and prose statement, to be able to decide how many times a given form violates the constraint, and come up with the same answer that you intended.

5. The preferred position of illustrative derivations

Derivations (and similar devices like the tableaux of Optimality Theory), are really helpful in making an analysis clear. But it doesn't serve the reader to put them all together at the end. They belong in carefully chosen positions, right after the material that they suitably illustrate. Often, one will see in a good phonological exposition "the effects of these rankings and arguments can be seen in the following derivation/tableau, which illustrates...".

6. Strategic redundancy and cross-references

Linguistic systems are often very complicated, with multiple links and interactions between their parts. But writing is necessarily linear. A task that can be quite tricky is the development of a suitable linearization, arranging the elements of the system at hand in an effective order on paper.

There are two things I know of that help:

- Moderate redundancy: say some things twice. Example: "*As will become clear later on, there are a number of complications involved; but as a first approximation we can formulate the rule as follows.*" ... (later:) "*I suggested earlier that the rule of xxx should be stated so as to With these further data we can now see that actually ...*". The idea is to keep things clear in the reader's mind at all times, while building up the level of complexity until the full analysis emerges.
- Cross-references, as in the example just given. They tie the presentation together. Further, to the extent that you do have to leave the reader hanging at some point (because you can't yet cover a crucial item), you can *reassure* the reader; obtain their confidence that the gap which is unavoidable now will be filled later on.

7. What's wrong with this picture?

It's often nice to put in a paragraph near the end saying what you think is wrong with your answer. The idea is not to self-flagellate, but rather just to be more reflective, and ponder ways in which further research/data/theories could improve the answer.

8. Word-processing issues

- Free phonetic fonts: see my font page:
<http://www.linguistics.ucla.edu/people/hayes/Fonts/>.
- I will try to remember to post the problem set to my Web site, in Word format:
<http://www.linguistics.ucla.edu/people/hayes/201>.
Purpose: you can then cut and paste data, rather than having to retype them.
- The course web site also includes a template file, with instructions, for including feature matrices in Word documents.