Some Tips on Writing Up Phonology Problems

1. Goals of problem-set solving

- Get command over the crucial ideas and theory being taught by using them in an analysis
- Get practice in linguistic expository writing
- Get ready for possible future write-up of journal submissions

2. Starting in

It is usually good to give an *overview* of what it 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. Order of presentation

It's usually best to go **one phenomenon at a time**. Ponder the phenomena and decide which are best understood after you've covered some other phenomenon — then you will have a sensible expository order.

4. Interleaving data and analysis

As you add phenomena, present examples from the data that are needed to illustrate the phenomenon, then augment the emerging analysis to handle the new data. The protocol commonly used is to say "Such-and-such happens, as the following examples show."

…

"We can treat these cases if we do this, analytically …"

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.

5. 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").
- Where useful, an explicit **formalization** of the rule in the theory being used. *SPE* notation can be helpful for this.
- In all but trivial cases, a **prose restatement**.

All reference to rules or constraints in the later presentation should use the full name of the rule, not an abbreviation. The purpose of this is that 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 is should be straightforward for the reader, after having read your formalism and prose statement, to able to decide how many times a given form violates the constraint, and come up with the same answer that you intended.

6. The preferred position of illustrative derivations and tableaux

I suggest:

- Small, pithy tableaux illustrating main points interleaved with text.
- If you have used software: big, full tableaux as appendix, to show all is well.

7. Strategic redundancy and cross-references

Linguistic systems are often 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 as 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.

8. 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.