Guidelines for writing solutions to homework problems

The main goal in writing up a phonology homework problem is not simply to provide a solution that works for the data provided (though this is, of course, important), but to provide the best solution that is simple, concise, makes no false claims, and ideally, makes generalizable predictions about the rest of the language as a whole beyond the limited data set that you’ve been given. Therefore, your write-up should defend and argue for the solution you provide with supporting evidence for your claims. This means briefly describing how you came to your decision and including crucial demonstrative forms from the data to illustrate and support your claims.

At the very outset of your write-up, you should provide a simple description of the problem you are solving. This informs (or reminds) the reader of the problem at hand and sets up what your solution will address. Next, you should state your claims about the non-/contrastive status and distribution of the sounds in question. While we will discuss in class how listing the individual contexts of each sound is a good starting point for determining the distribution of sounds when devising your analysis, it is rarely appropriate to include all of this in one’s final write-up except in an instructional teaching solution such as what you’d see in a textbook. (Note that Hayes effectively only does this once on p. 41.) It is simply bulky and not reader-friendly. Instead, a few illustrative examples (e.g., of minimal pairs when claiming contrastive distribution or of forms that demonstrate the complementary distribution of allophones) should be sufficient to support your claims.

When you state the rule(s) that account for the patterns found, you should always name them and provide them both in formal notation (e.g., $A \rightarrow B /C\_D$) and in prose (e.g., “$A$ becomes $B$ between $C$ and $D$”). Your discussion of your rule(s) should give evidence for why you chose the formulation that you did using illustrative examples or simply sound argumentation. You should also discuss why your solution is better than an alternative (e.g., why you said $A \rightarrow B$... instead of $B \rightarrow A$...). The majority of the time, this will be because the opposite rule will not be able account for the data, and you should demonstrate this. But it may simply be that the alternative is less insightful and/or more complicated. Remember: a phonological rule is a hypothesis of sorts. As with any hypothesis, it should minimally provide a sound explanation for the patterns observed in the data. But it should also strive for simplicity (Occam’s Razor), as well as generalizability. A good hypothesis makes predictions about why things happen as well as what might happen given other factors in the environment.

Style: The goal of these write-ups is for you to learn how to write in a professional way rather than as student-to-teacher. That doesn’t mean that it must have flowery, formal language. It simply should be clear and readable. To achieve the right tone, you may wish to think of how you would explain the problem and solution in the same way a good textbook writer would, or as you would explain it to a fellow student who missed an example discussed in class. In the real world, most of the writing you do is intended to explain something to someone who doesn’t already know the answer, or even the general phenomenon in question. You want to be concise, but you want to put in enough information to make it clear to the reader what is going. Done right, your write-up should allow someone (with access to the data) to reconstruct the problem and understand why the solution given is best.

Your write-up should not...
... be one-paragraph with the “correct” answer but no support.
... be a giant exhaustive essay on the history of how you arrived at your solution, including false starts.
... repeat/recopy all of the data from the problem

Your write-up should...
... be typed, double-spaced, 12-pt font, stapled
... be clear, concise, use simple words
... be reader-friendly (i.e., summarize distributional facts, use representative examples when relevant, have named rules, etc.)