

Corporate Strategy Jargon Field Guide

Quick reference for high-level ESL learners who need precise corporate strategy vocabulary and executive meeting language

Audience: advanced ESL learners in corporate strategy, business strategy, corporate development, transformation, strategic finance, executive advisory, and related roles

Focus: high-level professional English for corporate strategy workplaces, including strategic diagnosis, where-to-play and how-to-win choices, tradeoffs, industry structure, competitive advantage, portfolio strategy, resource allocation, growth strategy, M&A logic, uncertainty, scenarios, operating model, OKRs, executive narratives, and board-level dialogue.

Designed for advanced ESL learners who work in corporate strategy, business strategy, CEO office, transformation, corporate development, strategic finance, internal consulting, product strategy, commercial strategy, or strategy-adjacent leadership roles.

Teaching stance: corporate strategy English is the language of consequential choice. Learners need to frame ambiguous problems, make tradeoffs explicit, connect analysis to decisions, challenge attractive but incoherent ideas, and communicate uncertainty without sounding weak. This course teaches professional communication and judgment, not a single best strategy framework.

How to Use Strategy Jargon Well

- Use the term only when it clarifies a decision, tradeoff, value driver, risk, or resource implication.
- Pair jargon with plain English for executives outside the strategy team.
- Distinguish analysis from recommendation; a framework is useful only if it changes a choice.
- Avoid generic ambition, activity lists, overconfident forecasts, and unsupported synergy claims.

Nomenclature and Jargon

Teach these terms as working vocabulary. Learners should be able to define the term, use it in a realistic sentence, ask which evidence or definition applies, and explain the consequence for a decision. Strategy terms are often used loosely; the learner's job is to make them useful.

Strategy foundations

Term	Working meaning
Ambition	High-level performance or market position the company wants to achieve.
Diagnosis	Explanation of the strategic problem, its cause, and why it matters now.
Strategic choice	Decision about where to focus, how to win, what to build, and what not to do.
Tradeoff	A deliberate decision to deprioritize one attractive option to make another choice coherent.
Strategic thesis	Argument for why a course of action should create advantage or value.
Issue tree	Structured breakdown of a problem into analyzable questions.
North Star	Single guiding objective or metric that aligns strategic direction.
Activity system	Reinforcing set of activities that makes a strategy harder to copy.

Market and competitive analysis

Term	Working meaning
TAM	Total addressable market; full demand opportunity if all relevant customers were served.
SAM	Serviceable available market; portion the company can realistically reach with its offer and model.
SOM	Serviceable obtainable market; share the company can reasonably capture.
Profit pool	Where profit accumulates across segments, value chain positions, or business models.
Five Forces	Framework for industry structure: entrants, suppliers, buyers, substitutes, and rivalry.
Barrier to entry	Structural obstacle that limits new competitors.
Substitute	Different product or service that meets the same underlying need.
White space	Underserved market, customer need, or value-chain position where the company may compete.

Portfolio and resource allocation

Term	Working meaning
Core business	Current business central to revenue, profit, capabilities, or strategic identity.
Adjacency	Growth area near the core by customer, channel, capability, geography, or value chain.

Term	Working meaning
Horizon one	Current core businesses that deliver most present profit and cash flow.
Horizon two	Emerging opportunities that may become significant future businesses.
Horizon three	Earlier options, pilots, or ventures that could create future growth.
Capital allocation	Decision process for assigning capital to businesses, initiatives, acquisitions, or returns.
Divestiture	Sale, exit, or separation of a business, asset, or product line.
Opportunity cost	Value sacrificed by keeping scarce resources in a lower-priority use.

Growth, M&A, and partnerships

Term	Working meaning
Organic growth	Growth generated from existing business activities, customers, products, or channels.
Inorganic growth	Growth through acquisition, merger, joint venture, or investment.
Market entry	Plan to enter a new geography, segment, category, or value-chain position.
Build-buy-partner	Comparison of internal development, acquisition, and partnership routes.
Right to play	Credible permission or relevance to compete in a market.
Right to win	Credible basis for outperforming alternatives in that market.
Synergy	Incremental value from combining businesses, assets, capabilities, customers, or costs.
PMI	Post-merger integration; work required to combine and realize value after a deal.

Value creation and financial logic

Term	Working meaning
ROIC	Return on invested capital; profit relative to capital invested in the business.
WACC	Weighted average cost of capital; benchmark return required by capital providers.
DCF	Discounted cash flow valuation based on expected future cash flows.
NPV	Net present value; value of future cash flows after discounting and subtracting investment.
EBITDA	Earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization.
Margin expansion	Improvement in profitability as a share of revenue.
Sensitivity	Analysis showing how results change when key assumptions change.
Value driver	Factor that materially affects enterprise value, such as growth, margin, capital intensity, or risk.

Uncertainty and risk

Term	Working meaning
Scenario planning	Structured analysis of plausible futures and their implications for decisions.
Residual uncertainty	Uncertainty remaining after strong analysis has been completed.
Trigger indicator	Signal that shows which scenario may be unfolding and when to revisit a decision.
No-regrets move	Action likely to create value across multiple plausible futures.

Term	Working meaning
Strategic option	Limited investment that preserves future ability to scale, pivot, or exit.
Big bet	Large commitment that could create major upside or major loss depending on future conditions.
Risk appetite	Amount and type of risk leadership is willing to accept to pursue value.
Resilience	Ability of the strategy and organization to absorb shocks and keep creating value.

Execution and governance

Term	Working meaning
Operating model	How structure, roles, processes, governance, incentives, and capabilities support strategy.
Decision rights	Clarity on who recommends, decides, executes, and escalates.
OKR	Objectives and key results; goal-setting system linking outcomes to measurable progress.
KPI	Key performance indicator tied to a strategic objective or decision.
Roadmap	Sequenced plan of initiatives, milestones, dependencies, and owners.
Governance cadence	Regular rhythm for decision, review, escalation, and accountability.
Transformation office	Team coordinating large-scale strategic change and value delivery.
Board narrative	Concise strategy story for oversight, alignment, and decision-making.

Common Meeting Moves

Problem framing and diagnosis

- What decision will this analysis change?
- The issue is not only growth; it is whether the growth creates attractive returns.
- I would separate the symptom from the strategic cause.
- Before we build the model, we should align on the decision question.

Strategic choices and tradeoffs

- This is a choice, not just a priority statement.
- If we choose this segment, what are we explicitly not serving?
- The strategy becomes clearer when the tradeoff is visible.
- We can do both only if the operating model supports both.

Market and competitive analysis

- Market growth is attractive, but we need to test value capture.
- Which force puts the most pressure on industry profitability?
- The competitor move matters only if it changes economics, access, or customer behavior.
- The profit pool is shifting, but not necessarily toward us.

Portfolio and resource allocation

- Equal funding is not the same as strategic funding.
- What role should this business play in the enterprise portfolio?

- The resource shift should follow market attractiveness, advantage, and strategic fit.
- We should define the minimum investment to protect the core and the option funding for future growth.

Growth, M&A, and partnerships

- Attractive market does not automatically mean right to win.
- Build gives control, buy gives speed, and partner gives optionality.
- The synergy case needs source, timing, owner, cost, and confidence level.
- The acquisition thesis should explain why we are the best owner of the asset.

Uncertainty and executive communication

- The future is uncertain, but the decision does not have to be vague.
- Which trigger indicators would cause us to revisit the plan?
- This is a no-regrets move across the scenarios we tested.
- For the board, I would lead with the decision, recommendation, risk, and resource implication.

Fast Contrast Pairs

Do not confuse	Working contrast
Strategy vs plan	Strategy is a set of choices; plan is the sequenced work to execute them.
Ambition vs choice	Ambition says what we want; choice says where we focus and what we will not do.
Growth vs value creation	Growth increases scale; value creation improves economic worth after cost, risk, and capital.
Market size vs profit pool	Market size shows revenue opportunity; profit pool shows where economics are attractive.
Initiative vs strategic move	Initiative is work; strategic move changes position, economics, capability, or options.
Forecast vs scenario	Forecast estimates one expected future; scenario explores different plausible futures.
Synergy vs assumption	Synergy is incremental value with source, timing, owner, and cost; assumption is an input to test.
KPI vs activity metric	KPI informs strategic performance; activity metric tracks work completed.

Source Orientation

- Harvard Business School and Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness resources on Michael Porter's strategy, strategic positioning, tradeoffs, activity systems, and Five Forces.
- McKinsey three horizons framework for balancing current performance, emerging opportunities, and future growth options.
- McKinsey strategy-under-uncertainty materials for residual uncertainty, scenarios, trigger indicators, options, big bets, and no-regrets moves.
- McKinsey resource-allocation research for capital allocation, reallocation inertia, and linking resources to strategic goals.
- BCG growth-share matrix resources for portfolio management, relative market share, growth, investment, harvest, and divestiture language.
- SEC Management's Discussion and Analysis guidance for public-company discipline around management perspective, material information, known trends, uncertainty, and disclosure-oriented strategy language.

- The learner's own company strategy process, board calendar, investor materials, financial planning rules, governance model, and approved terminology.