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ON WRITING CASES WELL

How does one know what makes a good case? As American poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson once queried: "Is the reader the one who decides?" Perhaps. More likely, it will be the classroom experience that determines whether or not the material fits the definition of a good case study. Although the idea of what constitutes a good case may be debatable, there are several characteristics that good case studies have in common.

The distinguishing feature of a case study is that it describes, or is based on, actual events or situations. Good cases provide the element of realism to help readers identify how to use and apply their knowledge. More than that, the case study invites students to develop analytical techniques that they can draw upon when faced with the messy, unstructured kinds of situations the real world presents. An effective case has these attributes:

- ambiguous;
- full of conflict;
- leaves important issues unresolved;
- complex to allow multiple levels of analysis;
- introduces a tension between alternative courses of action;
- ends with more questions than answers;
- forces a decision.

Instructional Objectives

A case is not just a story. Each case must have a definite teaching purpose in mind. So at the case development stage, serious consideration should be given to the teaching purpose. During this stage, think about the type of course for which the case is intended. Will the students who read it be undergraduates, MBA students, executives, or PhD candidates? Where will the case be positioned in the course curriculum—early in the module or near the end of the course? And what theoretical concepts might be considered?

Once you determine the case use, some consideration to the case difficulty is appropriate. If the case is intended for use early in a course, the writer may want to avoid unneeded complexity. Introductory cases tend to be more structured and methodological. Cases developed for use later in a course are often rich on implementation issues and less focused. Those cases force readers to draw threads of information together and rigorously apply analysis. There are essentially three levels of difficulty in case analysis:

1. Include the problem and the protagonist's solution, and have the students analyze whether it worked.
2. Present the problem, and have students provide a solution or alternatives.
3. Describe the situation, and have students figure out the problem/solution/alternatives.

Finding Leads

Case opportunities surface in many ways. A story in a newspaper or magazine may grab your attention. Your school is also an excellent source. Tapping into the university's alumni, executive education, and your own colleagues can also be fruitful. Friends, family, and acquaintances are often rich with business experience and case study material. Carry business cards with you when you travel and speak to people about themselves. Sitting next to a "road warrior" on a plane or train provides a gold mine of contacts and networks. And then there are cold calls. Be confident and simply make a call. The worst that can happen is they refuse to talk to you.

Before you commit to anything, check with others at your school to see if an existing relationship exists with the company about which you want to write. This step will avoid embarrassing situations such as finding out that a colleague was already discussing a project with the same company. Additionally, your case-writing efforts could help build relationships between your school and company leaders.

Once someone agrees to speak with you about the possibility of writing a case study, you must build credibility. Introduce what you do and who you are, describe the case method, provide examples of your work (or an example of a good case if you have not written one yet), and your contact information. Contacts may or may not know what a case study is. To provide your contact with a clear understanding of what a case study is about, use a case-writing project overview (see an example in **Exhibit 1**).

Background Research

To ensure you are capable of having an informed and meaningful discussion, find out as much information as possible before you interview your case's protagonist. Create a research plan and identify your primary sources of material (see **Exhibit 2** for a research plan). Look for information about your decision-maker's company through what it says about itself (annual reports or company Web sites), what others say about the organization (analysts, politicians, scholars), and what the public reads (major newspapers and other media). Not only does this legwork suggest that you are serious about the case-writing commitment, but it avoids wasting valuable time during your visit to learn about the company. You want to use the interview as an opportunity to find answers to new questions—not as a chance to find out about the topic. And your research provides material for one section of the case.

Interview Questions and the Interview

Face-to-face interviewing is the primary method for harvesting case material. If limited resources or other valid issues prevent this approach, conference calls or video conferences are acceptable alternatives. With help from your company contact, compose a list of additional interviewees who may help by providing their perspectives on the situation. Prepare your interview questions well in advance. During the interview, be curious, ask why, and pose leading questions such as:

- Students would be interested in knowing why your organization decided to take a certain action. Could you tell me about that?
- How do you feel about a key event or development?
- Were there disagreements?

Conducting interviews is like dancing, someone will lead and someone will follow. Skilled interviewers will initiate the questions and gauge the flow as they go. Some people quickly bore of your questions and will provide a richer story if you let them set the agenda. Jotting down questions to ask during a lull allows you to go back and ask for clarification or elaboration. To encourage an interviewee to elaborate on something he or she just said, you could say: “I don’t understand; could you please explain that further?”

The initial interview should be scheduled for about an hour. If possible, interview the case protagonist first, continue with others in the organization, and follow up with another interview with the protagonist. During the second interview, protagonists will be much more relaxed and eager to fill in any gaps they (or you) have found. They also usually want to know what you learned from other interviewees. Be mindful of confidences if you let them know.

In some instances, interviewing several participants using a “roundtable” setting is effective—particularly if some time has passed since the event you are describing in the case took place. Having all the interviewees together allows them to feed off each other’s memories and circumstances so that their responses become clearer. That approach can be highly effective.

If possible, have someone accompany you on interviews. That approach allows one person to ask questions, while the other one takes notes. The use of digital recorders ensures accuracy, but technological glitches could mean you leave with nothing. So even if you use a digital recorder, take notes as well.

Assure protagonists that anything they tell you, all your notes, and what you eventually write, is considered *confidential* until they read the final copy and sign the release approving the case. Be true to your word. Do not go out for cocktails and tell friends about the "executive" you just interviewed. It is a trust relationship and important to the integrity of others in the case-writing field.

While this may seem overly routine, gather school material to take with you, such as the current alumni magazine or recruiting glossies. You may want to provide a small token, such as a pen embossed with the school's name or keychain, to present to the protagonist when you meet with him or her. Remember that his or her time is valuable and he or she is contributing to the education of management. Be professional and prepared with:

- your business cards;
- more than one pen or pencil;
- at least two writing pads;
- a digital voice-recorder. You must ask your protagonist first before using it (bring along extra batteries).

If you are visiting on site and the protagonist mentions that he or she will get you "a copy of that," be sure to remind him or her after the interview. Obtaining those materials is much more difficult once you have left the interview site.

Starting to Write

Despite your vast business knowledge, research capabilities, interview skills, and the protagonist's compelling story, nothing is gained unless the case is written—preferably well-written. Good writing is clear and doesn't come naturally. And no matter how well you believe you write—very few sentences will come out right the first time. Cases should be easy to read. The writer who makes the reader work too hard will give rise to the *case skimmer* (someone who breezes over the material).

The opening paragraph is an important window to the case and pulls the reader into the situation. We want the readers to put themselves in the role of the case protagonist. There should be six key pieces of information in the opening paragraph:

- the decision-maker's name;
- his or her position;
- the company or organization's name;

- the date, which can either be general—"the spring of 2006"—or it can be the exact date;
- the firm's location and type of business;
- the statement of the problem or trigger (often in a question format).

This last statement acts as a guide for the case analysis. One useful tool is to learn how to change teaching objectives into the form of questions. If you were writing a marketing case on positioning it may look like this: "Was Jane Doe doing all she could to establish the desired perception of her product in the minds of target customers?"

Case Structure

After developing your case's focus, use an outline to continue writing. Good cases are written in a funnel format (**Exhibit 3**) and provide information the decision-maker had at the time of the case situation. This means combining your research and interview material to start your case with general information such as industry background. As the case progresses, it becomes narrower in focus with material about a specific area of interest, such as the company and/or protagonist, and then including the problem or events leading into the problematic situation. Sort through your material to figure out what works for each section of the case. Once you have a solid outline, add good quotes obtained from your interview material.

The last paragraph is as important as the first as it draws the reader back to the issues at hand. It should present the case issue, trigger, or situation from the first paragraph, but stated in a different manner. So, for example, if the opening paragraph read:

> Not a seat was empty in the drafty cafeteria that early February evening in 2006. Charles L. Grace and Jerome L. Hicks were seated beside each other at a meeting. Michael Miller, president of Lotz of Money Bank Delaware, headquartered in Wilmington, had called. Grace and Hicks had more than their middle initials in common. They were both financial associates at Lotz of Money and members of the Urban Bankers Coalition. As the pair listened to Miller's speech, they were staggered to hear him say, "We need more people to become involved in our community enhancement programs—dedicated employees like Charles Grace and Jerome Hicks, who helped Lotz of Money be named bank of the year for two years straight." That sentence lay like an unexploded bomb between Hicks and Grace. They were aware that all eyes had turned toward them. The pair had previously sensed that some of their colleagues and superiors were uncomfortable with the relationship they had with Miller. This would be the icing on the cake. What kind of fallout could they expect and what should they do about it?

The closing paragraph should look something like this:

> Miller had invited the entire Wilmington organization together to reveal the direction in which he planned to move Lotz of Money in the upcoming year. "A full house meeting" was how Hicks described it. The assembly was to commence at 6:30 p.m. Grace and Hicks were on the elevator and still on their way down to the cafeteria at that time. As the elevator doors opened, Miller and his vice president were standing in front of the tardy duo. Miller complimented Grace on his eyewear—an inside joke between the two of them. They spoke to each other briefly and then Grace, Hicks, Miller, and the vice president of Lotz of Money Delaware all walked together into the packed room. Grace and Hicks sat down and did not say much until Miller was through talking. When Miller publicly complimented Grace and Hicks, they only stared straight forward. The moment was awkward and they could tell everyone in the place was staring at them. "When Mr. Miller finished talking, Jerome and I got up to get something to eat and we could just feel the negative energy," Grace said. "There was hostility from other people, especially our superiors—I can't put my finger on it, but there was an attitude I could feel."

Any case exhibits should follow the closing paragraph of the written text and often can include financial data, historical information, geographical details, diagrams, charts, tables, and graphs. Exhibits are numbered and noted within the case body (see the examples on the previous pages). More difficult cases often place highly relevant information in the exhibits to force the students to draw it all together.

An aspect of case-writing convention involves using an individual's full name once, then only the last name throughout the rest of the case. Be attentive to your language use. The issue of gender neutrality in your word choices can be a thorny one. Definitely avoid using phrases such as girl, chairman, or spokesman. Instead try female, chair, and spokesperson. The pronouns he and she are problematic. For example, "every employee should decide what *he* thinks is the best approach." Adopting the plural use, in some instances, avoids this because he and she become they. "All employees decide what *they* think is the best approach." An alternative, if appropriate, is to use the word "the" instead of he or she.

Another case-writing principle requires that all cases be written in the past tense. Although initially awkward, that technique ensures that cases will remain relatively timeless. Mastering that writing form may take time, and consistency is key. You may, however, use present tense for scientific or natural facts (i.e., caffeine simulates).

Case Disguises

As you proceed, you may need to give extra consideration to the case's protagonist and the company when it comes to uncomplimentary or sensitive issues. While undisguised cases are the most powerful in the classroom (students prefer real managers and company experiences), sometimes disguising material allows for the inclusion of richer information. Those writing in the ethics or organizational behavior functional areas will run into a need to disguise material more frequently than someone writing in finance or accounting (although there are certainly unflattering financial issues some companies don't want others to know about). Sometimes assigning a fictional name to the protagonist is all that is necessary. As one executive told me, "I just don't want my buddies reading this at some executive education class and teasing me." Other firms will ask that the company name or company data be disguised. If you change the numbers, choose a method that allows the relationship to stay the same between the figures, while the scale is hidden. The most challenging disguise is changing the executive, company, and industry. To avoid confusion, I usually write the first draft with actual facts (company and participants) and then begin to rework the case using disguises. That technique avoids confusion.

In the End

One of the most important tasks is *getting the story straight*. After achieving that goal, concentrate on your writing. Expect to write several case drafts. Good case writing is a process. The task demands using outlines for organization, including accurate interview material and research, revising to communicate the story, and revising again after examining your structure paragraph by paragraph. Is there a transition sentence? Does each paragraph have a topic sentence? What does the grammar look like? Skilled editors will improve your writing, but having pride in the material you send them is very, very important. Circulating a draft with "confidential" on it to colleagues for feedback is another part of the process. Be realistic about the number of drafts good case writing demands. After all, the writer's best friend is revision, revision, revision!

Business school cases may be described as "living, breathing" documents. After a case is taught once or twice, material that works well, and some that doesn't, will surface. No doubt you will find numerous ways to improve on your case to make the material more compelling. Not to mention that some cases have several updates (A, B, and C cases) that include problematic situations that arose from the first solution or act as epilogues—where the company or protagonist is now. To ensure success, there needs to be a long-term relationship between the author, case protagonists, and cases. Case revision is worth the effort. Writing well means *making* yourself write well.

Exhibit 1

ON WRITING CASES WELL

Case Writing Project Overview

Company Name Here

A business school case is a description of a business situation someone in an organization faces. Cases generally contain relevant data about an issue or issues available to the key person in the case plus background information on the organization. Good business cases enable students to put themselves in the shoes of actual managers to learn about decision-making. The students analyze situations, develop alternatives, choose plans of action and implementation, and communicate and defend their findings. Cases are used to test students' understanding of theory, to connect theory with application, and to develop practical insight, or wisdom. Your willingness to provide material for a case is, in a sense, your contribution to the process of continued improvement in management education.

Case Confidentiality

Each case requires the consent of the organization and the individual(s) about whom the case is written. Throughout the case-writing process, strict confidentiality is maintained. None of the material provided will be disclosed without first obtaining permission. Any proprietary information, including interview notes and company documents will be held confidential. A first draft of the case will be submitted to interviewees and provides an opportunity to verify the accuracy of the case's content. When satisfied, a designated person in the organization signs a release form permitting the school to use and/or sell the case.

Case Study Preparation

The initial groundwork will draw on public information from places such as annual reports, corporate press releases, newspaper articles, and securities analysts' reports. Generally, short industry and company backgrounds help both the researchers and students understand the business climate at the time of the case.

Professor X and Case Writer Y will conduct interviews on a date mutually agreed-upon during a visit to Company Z. The on-site data gathering will involve talking about the situation with prearranged members of the organization. The purpose of the interviews is to invite people to recount the events from their own standpoints, particularly offering interpretations of those events. Gathering data is also appropriate at this time so any information the organization is willing to provide—company memos, reports, or industry studies and articles—would facilitate the case-writing process.

Exhibit 1 (continued)

Timeline

____________________ will write a first draft and strive to represent faithfully the different viewpoints about the events in the case. The writer's purpose is to provide students with a factual foundation. At this time, the writer may need to contact interviewees to ask additional questions or to further clarify. Once the rough draft is completed, it will be submitted to ________________ at Company Z. This will allow a review and check for accuracy, comments, editing changes, and initial approval of the case.

The revised and edited case will be presented to the designated person in the organization to sign the release form permitting use of the finished case. Each interviewee will also be provided a copy of the completed case.

The Business School Team

Add interviewers' bios here.

Exhibit 2

ON WRITING CASES WELL

Case Research Plan[1]

I use this research plan as my initial case outline to keep information organized. This should include research and protagonist interview materials.

Titles/subtitles

1. Background information

2. Area interest

3. Specific issue/problem

4. Exhibit material

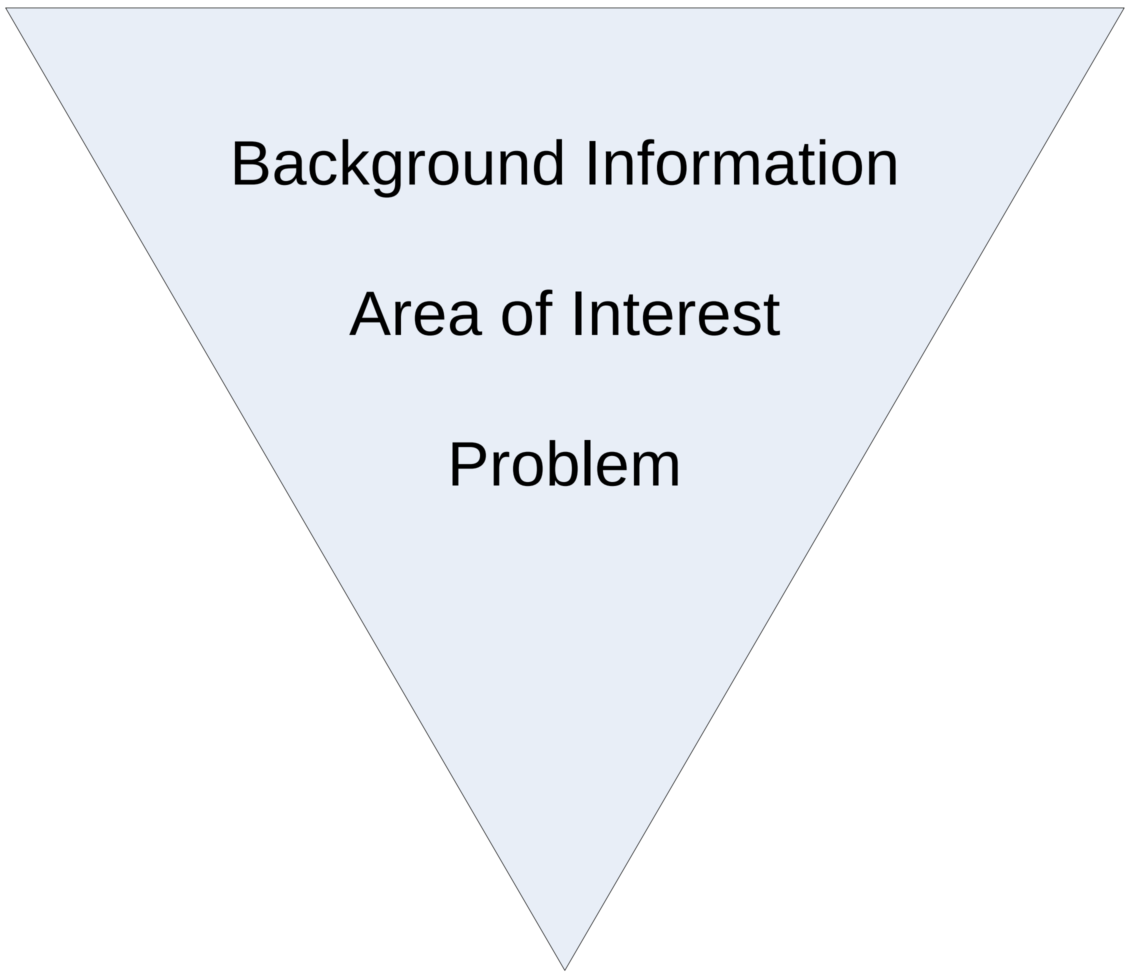
[1] Based on the author's notes from a case-writing workshop at the Ivey Richard School of Business, University of Western Ontario, Canada, (April 1998).

Exhibit 3

ON WRITING CASES WELL

Case Structure[1]

OPENING PARAGRAPH



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