



Writing a Case Study

For the better part of a century now, business schools worldwide have used the case study as a principal learning tool in business education. Schools in North America, such as Harvard, Wharton, Darden, Mendoza, Ivey, Tuck and others, have made the case study method a central part of the way they prepare managers to step into authentic business situations, analyze the circumstances they have encountered, and take action.

What is a Business Case?

A business case study is, essentially, a story. It's a narrative tale about a problem, challenge, or opportunity faced by a manager or executive that students are asked to read, think about, and respond to. The contents of a case study – including narrative details, direct quotations from those involved in the events of the case, and attachments – will form the basis for an analytic discussion. Those discussions are often conducted aloud in a classroom, while others are conducted on paper between professor and student.¹

The Characteristics of a Case Study

The stories offered up in a business case usually do not include either direct answers or disclosure of the resolution to the business problem. The point of such documents is to gather as much information as possible to explain what happened to the business as accurately, fairly, and completely as possible, incorporating as many viewpoints as the author can reasonably accommodate. Such cases are never written for the purpose of identifying heroes and villains, but for the purpose of beginning a discussion about business problems.

Case studies are different from case histories in several important respects. First, as noted, a case study does not provide answers, outcomes, alternatives, or resolution to the problems encountered by the managers depicted in the story. Instead, they provide enough detail for readers to understand the nature and scope of the problem, and they serve as a springboard for discussion and learning.

This teaching note was prepared by James S. O'Rourke, Concurrent Professor of Management, as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.

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A case history, on the other hand, often summarizes events, describing not only what happened to create the problem, conditions, or opportunity facing the manager, but frequently revealing the manager's response, in detail. Case histories are usually more focused on managerial responses and solutions than they are on the events leading to a decision point. And, by revealing what the company actually did in response to the crisis or events, such brief, historical summaries often limit student thinking and suppress the wide-ranging, open forms of imagination that case studies are designed to stimulate.

A business case, then, is really a learning tool. It's an instrument that provides a discussion leader with an opportunity to explore issues that do not lend themselves to deduction or memorization. It is designed to promote analytic problem-solving and teach critical thinking.

Case studies are not particularly well suited to training in which learners will be asked to memorize approved responses to carefully defined stimuli. They're really much better at promoting learning in situations that involve ambiguity, uncertainty, and multiple outcomes. If an instructor aims at having all students arrive at a single, correct solution, a case study might not be the best tool to facilitate learning. On the other hand, if an instructor has learning objectives in mind that focus on the process of identifying and analyzing business problems, followed by a discussion in which various possible responses might be implemented, a case study may be a suitable tool.

Why Study Business Cases?

The principal difference between training and education, according to educational philosopher John Dewey, is that – however necessary it may be – training merely modifies external habits of action. Learners are presented with a menu of stimuli and taught to respond with an approved behavior. It's fairly easy to test for learning proficiency, since a trainer can offer a stimulus or situation to a learner who can, in turn, exhibit the approved response.

Education, on the other hand, is designed to provide learners with the intellectual and analytic skills they will need to solve problems they've never seen, and to respond to stimuli they could not have imagined as students. Without a comprehensive menu of stimuli and responses, students must rely on the values acquired during their education. Knowing what they value, what the hierarchy of those values is, and why they have arranged them in that fashion will be enormously useful to a student later in life. Training and education are both essential to our success, of course, but only education can prepare us for circumstances we have yet to encounter.²

Types of Cases

Although each case is different, you are likely to encounter three basic types of case studies, depending on the subject you are studying: field cases, library cases (sometimes referred to as public record cases), and armchair cases.

Field cases. Field cases are written by professors and students of business with the cooperation of managers and executives who experienced the events and problems described in the case. They involve extensive interviews with people who are often identified by name as the narrative unfolds. Information contained in these cases is known best – and sometimes only – to insiders in a business. Newspaper accounts and descriptions of events contained in the business press may play a role in establishing key facts, but the sequence of events, what was said to whom, what each manager knew at the time, and which managerial options were open to the principals of the case are often a mystery to the public-at-large.

Extensive interviews with employees, managers, and executives will often reveal more. Careful examination of business records and data bases can provide background and context for the events. And, frequently, the active cooperation of a company is the only way a case author will ever know exactly what happened with any measure of certainty.

Field cases are often more extensive and thorough than other case types, but present a dilemma for the case writer: what does the company have to gain by granting access to its premises, its records, and its employees? Is this merely an attempt to make executives look good after the fact? Are such cases an attempt at public relations when things go wrong in a business? Often, to gain access to a business, a case writer must have some special relationship with those who own or manage it, and must have a reputation for reporting on events in an accurate and fair manner. One disadvantage of such cases is that, once they are published, they are difficult to modify and may quickly become dated.

Library cases. Unlike a field case, library or public record cases do not involve special access to the businesses being studied. They do not involve interview material or direct quotes which are unavailable elsewhere. And they most often do not include figures, data, or information which are not somehow a part of the public record, available to anyone with a library card, Internet access, and basic research skills.

Companies that have failed somehow – blown a great opportunity, overlooked the obvious, chosen the wrong path, or failed to act when they should – are understandably reluctant to permit case writers to speak with their employees or look at the evidence. If they’ve done something terribly wrong – committed a crime or imperiled the public welfare – a company may do all it can to withhold, obscure, or cover up what has happened. That is precisely the challenge facing most business reporters as they gather information for publication each day. Journalist David Brinkley once said, “News is what you don’t want to tell me. Everything else is public relations.”

Writers who produce library cases, however, have a wealth of information available to them. In addition to stories produced for broadcast, print, and online news organizations, business case writers can look to numerous government documents and other sources, particularly for publicly-held firms. Annual filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission, such as forms 10-Q and 10-K, can be very helpful.

When one company declares its intention to acquire another, or is sued in Federal Court, numerous documents relevant to the issues at hand may become a part of the public record. When a company prepares to launch an IPO or float a bond offering, numerous public disclosures are required. Case writers have a high degree of confidence in the accuracy of such records, since the penalty for falsifying them may involve heavy fines or jail time.

Armchair cases. These are fictional documents about companies that don't really exist and events that have never really occurred. While they bear some resemblance to authentic cases, they are often lacking in the richness of detail and complexity that accompany real events. They may be useful, however, in introducing basic concepts to students or in provoking a discussion about key issues confronting businesses.

Business educators produce armchair cases when they are denied access to the people and data of real businesses, or when they wish to reduce very complex events to a series of simple decision opportunities. Armchair cases are often useful to begin a discussion about change management, the introduction of technology, or a rapidly-unfolding set of events in other cultures. A principal advantage of these cases is that they can be modified and updated at will without securing the permission of the fictional companies and managers they describe.

Selecting a Subject

If you're interested in writing a business case study, you should begin by selecting a topic that is interesting both to you and to your prospective audience. If you have some passion for the subject, you'll be more likely to know what the issues are, who the key players may be, and which sources would be most useful to consult. The subject must also be of interest to a significant number of people in your prospective audience, as well. A case study – no matter how well researched, organized, and expressed – that interests only a few people is unlikely to reach a wide audience and achieve the goals you've set for the project.

In choosing a topic to write about, you must understand the audience for whom you are writing. Will they have the intellectual and professional skills to understand the issues and events in the case? Will they have a working knowledge of the processes, structures, and organizations you plan to describe? Will they understand the vocabulary of the industry or profession you're writing about? The more general knowledge your audience has about the subject, the better. If necessary, you may need to define terms, explain concepts, and provide examples that will help your audience better understand the issues in the case.

It also helps if the events you plan to write about are not seriously out-of-date. If most events described in your case are more than five years old, you might consider switching to a more current topic. Finally, you must have access to accurate, reliable, and current information about the events you hope to describe. It's one thing to select an interesting subject. It's quite another to get informed sources to talk with you about it.

Beginning Your Research

Once you've selected your subject, you must begin preliminary research to make certain you have a viable topic. This would include a review of newspaper files, online databases such as Dow Jones Interactive or NYTimes.com; broadcast websites, such as CNN.com or MSNBC.com; or, other news-gathering sources such as Associated Press and Reuters. You may even wish to pick up the telephone and ask to speak with relatively low-ranking people who may know something about the topic you've chosen.

If you are not yet confident that you have access to enough information to write the case, you should set a firm "go / no-go" decision date, backed up by at least one or two alternative topic ideas. Knowing whether you have enough information is often very subjective, but you'll quickly develop a sense of confidence about whether you're principal problem is too much information and not enough perspective, or too little information and not enough cooperation.

Make some choices. When you are confident that you have a viable topic, you must then select:

- *The perspective* from which the story is to be told. Who is the decision maker in this case? From whose perspective will the reader see the details of the case?
- *The start-and-stop dates* for the story. Each story begins at a moment in time and concludes with a decision point for the manager. You may choose to start at the very beginning of the story, or you may select a relatively recent but crucial moment in the sequence of events, and then move back to the beginning to lay out other details. Either way, this becomes an important decision for you as a writer.
- *The kind and level of detail* that you plan to include in the story. Some issues can be included as a passing reference in the dependent clause of just one sentence. Others will require their own boldface heading and several paragraphs (or pages) to tell in detail. Don't overwhelm your readers with detail that is unnecessary to understand the story and issues involved, but – on the other hand – don't assume that they already understand the finer points, or know who each of the principal characters are.

Make some lists. The next step in your research will involve several issues that you may wish to include in your Teaching Note.

- *Construct a timeline* with key events in chronological order. This may run to several pages, but it will help you (and, perhaps, your readers) to keep people, issues, and events straight. It's easy to forget what happened when, and in what sequence; a detailed timeline will be very helpful.

- *Identify key players* in the story, by name and by role. Explain to the readers who they are, what their background is, and why they're important to the case. Again, an alphabetical list of these people may be helpful to you as you begin writing.
- *Identify the critical issues* in the case, rank ordering them by importance to the executive decision maker. You would not wish to directly reveal these issues to your readers, but you will want to include them in your Teaching Note. This list would include, from most important to least important, those issues the executive or manager will need to think about and address, along with a brief explanation of why they are important. Remember, what seems crucial to one observer may not be important at all to another. This list will be the basis for an interesting and animated discussion.

Consider a spreadsheet. Although it's not essential, a two-axis matrix or text-based spreadsheet (Excel, Lotus, QuatroPro and others) may be useful in tracking the details of your case. Along the X-axis (vertical), list the key events or issues as reported in the public record or documented in your interviews. Along the Y-axis (horizontal), list the source for each of those. Check off each item so that you'll know where you found it and how many sources have reported the same information.

You will, of course, have greater confidence in those facts that are reported by just about every source. You may wish to pay special attention to those items which are "one of a kind," or available to you from just one source. Ask yourself why that is so. Is that one source particularly knowledgeable or well informed? Are you sure it's accurate? If you are unable to confirm (or corroborate) that information, you must decide whether or not you believe it. If you don't believe it, cross it off and do not include it in the case. If you do believe it, you are obligated to explain in your narrative that the information comes from just one source and, if possible, identify that source in the text.

The division of labor. Once you're sure you have a viable case and enough information to begin, it may be useful to assign responsibility for various actions:

- Gathering financial data information about the firm
- Doing historical research on the companies and people involved
- Saving photos and screen-grabs for your *PowerPoint* presentation
- Saving videotape of the evening news, if your case involves ongoing events or breaking news
- Looking for streaming video of press conferences, interviews, commercials, or other products that may be useful in framing a discussion of the case; and

- Scheduling personal or telephone interviews with key figures in the case.

Time to Begin Writing

Once you're sure of your topic, your sources, and your approach to the issues – and you have established the key decision maker's perspective, your timeline, and the start-stop dates – and all team members are clear on their obligations, it's probably time to begin writing.

Your case need not be written in sequence, beginning with the opening paragraph, and it need not be written entirely by one person. But your writing style must be consistent throughout and must flow easily and effortlessly for the reader. You can certainly delegate different research and writing tasks to different members of the team, but one person – preferably the best writer – must be responsible for reading, integrating, editing, and revising the final product.

As you begin, make absolutely certain that you have at least one reliable source (preferably more) for everything you plan to say or include in the case. Insert the footnotes or endnotes as you write, not later on. Don't create additional work for yourself by saying, "I'll come back later and figure out which sources each of these facts and quotes came from." The opportunity for error grows with each draft of the paper. You must be scrupulous about accurately documenting everything.

To make life easier as you write, make photocopies and keep detailed notes. Copy down dates, times, page numbers, volume and edition numbers, and anything else that will help to reveal to your readers where this information came from. There must be no confusion about who said something or about the source of a fact important to your case.

Prepare a First Draft

As you begin writing, it is important to grab the reader's attention directly with an anecdote, a quote, an event, or a revealing fact of some sort. If you cannot convince your reader in the first few paragraphs that the case is worth reading, many of them may give up or simply skim through to pick up highlights. No matter how you begin, you must make the sequence of events clear from the very first paragraph. Don't give your readers an opportunity to get lost or become confused.

Move next to an explanation of the company or organization's history, the industry in which it operates, the products or services it produces, and the annual revenues it generates. You should also give some attention, as well, to the size of the company's employee base and market share.

Having established a big-picture overview of the company and industry, you should next introduce key characters in the case, along with various role players and decision makers. As readers move from paragraph to paragraph, they should develop a very clear notion of who will be responsible for the decisions you will ask them to think about in the final few sentences.

Here are a few suggestions to keep in mind as you get your first draft down on disk and, later, on paper:

- Explain in plain English what happened, when, and how.
- Identify all relevant assumptions.
- Reveal your sources in text, where necessary.
- Don't look for conclusions, causal factors, or solutions just yet.
- Be specific. Quantify where possible.
- Use direct quotes, identifying and qualifying those whom you quote.
- Identify those issues you don't understand and those questions you cannot answer. Save them for the executive or managerial interviews you hope to schedule later.

Consult Multiple Sources

A one-source case is dangerous. Your principal or sole source could, quite simply, be mistaken about things. He or she could have a political point-of-view or an axe to grind that would skew or color the information you receive. The result could be a case study that is simply embarrassing as other important details emerge. Protect yourself and your teammates by consulting as many sources and viewpoints as you possibly can.

Consider front-line supervisors, hourly workers, as well as senior executives for telephone, e-mail, or face-to-face interviews. Remember, though, that each has a point-of-view and a motive for talking with you. Your goal is accuracy, completeness, and fairness in your presentation of the facts.

Read broadly. Consider out-of-town publications, even foreign publications for differing viewpoints. If you can't make sense of all the facts, consider calling a reporter who has written on or covered this story. Ask if he or she will speak with you. Many of them are more than happy to share what they know with sincere, well-mannered students.

Talk to various stakeholders, including customers, suppliers, shareholders, community and civic officials, regulatory agency officials, employees, or competitors. You might even think about speaking with people who live in the neighborhood around the company or others who may have been affected by the events of the case.

If people won't talk with you, be polite and offer to show them the preliminary draft of your work. Offer to let them mark it up or suggest changes. Make them a partner in the process.

Your work is, in some ways, like that of a journalist, but the rules of the game are different. A reporter would never let a source see the story before it's published. You have nothing to lose by showing your work to a source. If the reasons they offer for suggesting changes make sense to you, the case will be better for your having asked.

Prepare a Second Draft

Assemble what you've written. Read it for storyline flow as well as grammar and syntax. Your goal is to make it lively, tightly written, cogent, and correct. It must be interesting to read, but it must – above all else – be right.

Consider including tables, figures, stock charts, diagrams, maps, or other visual devices in the text to help explain the story to your reader. If you devise these yourself, you won't need the permission of a publisher or Internet site to use them. If you download a stock chart from Yahoo! Finance or CNN.com, you'll have to e-mail them and ask if you can use the graphic. Most news-gathering organizations will gladly let you use their work for free, as long as you acknowledge the source and indicate that it was used by permission. Some sources, particularly print magazines, will ask that you pay a royalty for the privilege of reprinting large portions of their work. You'll have to decide for yourself whether you are willing or able to do that.

Don't even think about publishing your second draft. Show it to a trusted colleague, an associate, your professor, or someone whose professional opinions you value. Make certain it's as good as you can possibly make it, and as grammatically correct as you are able. Then, read it again, just to be sure.

Prepare Your Teaching Note

Every good case study includes a Teaching Note. That's simply a document that explains what the case is about, what the issues and options may be, and how an instructor might go about leading a discussion of the case. Most teaching notes are just a few pages but will contain valuable information about how to probe for student thinking, how to time the discussion, and what to expect as students offer various viewpoints. At the least, a comprehensive Teaching Note should include:

- The purpose of this case study.
- A clear statement of the *business problem*. Not the communication or public relations problem, but the central business problem in the case.
- A forecast of the most desirable outcome. If you could write a "Hollywood ending" for this case, what would it be? What do the various stakeholders most want or hope for?

- A statement and rank ordering of the critical issues in the case. You might also briefly explain why each issue is important.
- A list of stakeholders and what's at stake for each of them.
- A list of definitions for specialized or unusual terms. You might also think about issues, concepts, or ideas that students might have trouble with. What sort of things need additional explanation as the discussion moves along?
- A list of possible solutions to the problem.
- A plan for implementing and communicating the optimal solution.
- A plan for teaching the case, including what you believe the instructor should do prior to the discussion to prepare the class, and suggestions on how to spend class time during the first 5-to-10 minutes, the next 30 minutes, and so on. Suggest ways to summarize and wrap up the discussion, as well.
- A timeline of events and a series of five or six discussion questions would also be very helpful.

You need not suggest a specific course of action in your Teaching Note, if you'd rather not, but you should acknowledge various approaches that students may mention in discussion. You may also wish to reveal what actually happened in the case (if you know), but you would certainly not want to include any of those details in the case itself.

Complex cases may include not only a printed timeline, but a glossary of specialized terms, and financial data, such as balance sheets, profit-and-loss statements, or cash statements. You must have permission, of course, to use those documents unless they are made public as part of an annual report or SEC filing.

Prepare Your PowerPoint

Think visually as you prepare your ideas for the big screen. Look for ways to show people what happened. Include visual images that will help carry your message:

- Photos of key characters or company officials.
- Company logotypes, symbols, or trade marks.
- Products, people, events, or other images that will generate visual interest.

Keep background templates clean, crisp, simple, and uncluttered. The less visual distraction, the better. Keep animation to a minimum and avoid sound effects, except under the most unusual of circumstances. Be consistent and straight-forward as you prepare those images. Think, as well, about hyperlinks, streaming video, and VHS news clips from commercial television and cable networks. You're entitled to capture newscasts on videotape and use them in the classroom as long as the use is brief, and not for profit.

Pulling It All Together

Meet regularly as a team. Talk with one another about progress, deadlines, and next steps. Much of your work can be done by telephone and e-mail, but occasional face-to-face sessions will prove helpful. As the process moves along, respect each other and offer to help whenever you can. Your teammates will appreciate that and, in return, give you their best effort.

Finally, as you prepare your publication draft of the case, admit that you may need to update or correct it, and then rehearse your presentation. Your task is to make it all look as sincere and professional as possible. If you've done it right, you'll be rewarded with the attention and approval of a number of important audiences.

1. Barnes, Louis B.; C. Roland Christensen; and Abby J. Hansen. *Teaching and the Case Method*, 3rd edition. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1994.

2. Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1997. Originally published 1916.