MICHIGAN
ROSS SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

William Davidson Institute
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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Note on How to Write a Business Case

A business case is a document that illustrates a business or policy situation to be solved and includes information for classroom discussion and other study. The situation does not have an obvious solution. The case provides information to stimulate an educated conversation concerning possible outcomes.

Each case has one central decision point, dilemma, or angle. The nature of the situation is clearly apparent within the first two paragraphs.

The writing in a case is precise and nuanced, yet always ***clear and concise.*** It is neither colloquial nor stuffily formal. It is also engaging and interesting to the reader. It is imperative for a case writer to always be objective—***a case is not a marketing pamphlet for the featured organization***, though the writer may portray biases that the protagonist may have.

Writing styles may be unique to the individuals developing a case, yet almost every successful case employs the following structure:

Title and Introduction (½-2 pages)

- For the title, in fewer than 10 words make clear what is special about this particular case.
- Within the first paragraph, identify the case's central person and business or organization, and provide a sense of the situation the person is in.
- Within the first two paragraphs, present, from her or his point of view, what the central person sees as the decision point or dilemma. Identify other major players if relevant.
- In this section, provide the context for the situation. Include the situation's time frame (at least the year), the location and purpose of the company or organization, relevant important business factors, and the goal or aim of the central person.

Background on the Company, Industry and Competitors (3-7 pages)

- Begin this section with the first subhead. If the section is long or relatively complex, use more than one subhead within the section to organize separate aspects.

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- Often the best method for writing this section is to organize the information chronologically, with a very brief history of the company or organization.
- Provide the essential company, organization, competitor, and/or industry information that the central person had at the time of the case. What and where are the major products or services and their customers?
- Include enough background information for the reader to analyze the decision point presented in the introduction. Revenues, profits and losses, and other financial valuations may be crucial.
- Do not simplify or weight the background section to lead students to an easy decision.
- Include, as appropriate, historical information, trends, direct quotations from participants and analysts, and simple and/or essential tables and figures. The section can also include references to exhibits placed in the appendix, though the references should be clear and complete enough that the reader can continue without having to turn immediately to the exhibits.
- Consider depicting the culture of the company or organization if relevant.
- What are the important challenges and responsibilities of the central person?
- Are certain portions of the person's career particularly important to the current situation?
- Connect the background in this section to the current situation, including underlying causes and current results.

The Decision Point in More Detail (1-5 pages)

- Begin this section with a subhead. Within it, use more subheads if appropriate.
- Go more deeply into the context and possible consequences of the decision point, dilemma or central angle. Include the consequences for the career of the central person as well as for the person's company or organization.
- Show, if true, how the decision point or dilemma differs from the one initially perceived.
- Include the degree of urgency involved in the decision-making, or the timeline for the decision to be made.
- Conclude the text with alternatives available to the central person.

Exhibits and Endnotes (4-10 pages)

Use a subhead before any exhibits and before any listing of endnotes. Use a small title with each exhibit, beginning "**Exhibit 1**:"

Exhibits can include financial statements, time lines, diagrams, charts, tables, pictures, and graphs. In some cases it is possible to include or link to multimedia supplements such as an interview video with the case's central person.

An endnote is needed for anything mentioned in the text for which a reasonable reader would want to know the source of the assertion, quotation, or apparent fact. The endnotes are referred to by number in the text and the notes themselves appear in order, all together, after the exhibits. An exhibit can have an endnote or its sourcing can appear as part of the exhibit.

Typical Steps

Usually a case begins with a professor or case writer-developer desiring a study on a specific situation. The case writer-developer then works with the professor to agree on the case's decision point or angle, as well as the teaching objectives. Teaching objectives can be found by answering the following question:

After discussing this case, students will be able to...

The first draft can be written in an exploratory way (anticipating there will be later deletions and shaping) and can include notations about facts to be filled in later, but the writing needs to be clear, grammatically correct, spelled correctly, and properly punctuated. It should include sourcing. The first draft is a tool for discussion.

The second draft is crisper, focusing on making the material and the writing itself relevant. It ensures financials and all other facts are consistent within the text and with the exhibits. The sourcing is complete with finished endnotes.

At this point a director may desire review by another writer or editor and/or professorial review. A third draft may occur to make the case even more audience-focused, more interesting, and more impactful.

Copy editing and formatting occur before publication.

Research

Sources may be primary or secondary but should be authoritative. Financial information should be the most accurate and/or official available. Note that information on Wikipedia is not verified.

Interviewing people in the company or organization being written about usually leads to more authentic and interesting cases.

Audience

Cases should satisfy professors and students as well as the businesses, organizations, and people that the cases are about. Although at certain points, from time to time, these interests might appear in conflict, ultimately a case that is written with fairness and intelligence will receive the respect of all sides.

Many companies agree to participate in the preparation of case studies only if they can exercise control of the document's wording. Case writers who encounter such a situation should:

1. Inform their supervisor as soon as possible.
2. Agree to negotiate wording with the company at a time between a final draft and the editing for publication.
3. Propose the company's review of the final draft be one-time and complete rather than intermittent and piecemeal, and be done by a certain date.

The audience is global, so idioms familiar only to some Americans should be avoided. For example, to an English speaker born in another country, "step up to the plate" might be misread as an encouragement to eat. That said, the case should be in standard American English.

WDI Style Particulars

Cases are written in past tense, even when the situation being written about is present-day. This is because good cases are used for many years to come. Even if something about a company appears everlasting at the time of writing, when the case is read a few years later reality may be quite different. Consider, for example, how ludicrous it would be to now read an Enron case in present tense.

With discussion, exceptions can be made. Sometimes present tense can be effective in a case's first and scene-setting paragraph. If so, the last paragraph – the one presenting possible solutions to the decision point or dilemma – probably also should be in present tense.

Simple past is preferred over other forms. For example: Mansfield Plumbing Products was founded in 1924 (not: Mansfield Plumbing Products had been founded in 1924). Despite the structure of certain sentences in these guidelines, WDI prefers active voice in case writing.

Cases are written in accord with the style manual of the Modern Language Association. MLA style guides are available in print and online. Endnotes, normally consisting of citations, are numbered consecutively with standard superscript (,2, etc.) without repeating a number. Endnote contents appear together at the end of the case. If a case needs footnotes to clarify aspects of the text, they take Roman numerals and go at the bottom of the page on which the reference occurs.

Bylines/credits

In published form, the names of the case developers appear in an italic sentence at the end of the first page. For example:

This case was prepared by Research Associates Nancy Drew and Perry Mason under the supervision of Professor Robert Einstein at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business.

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The William Davidson Institute's (WDI) Research Associates collabrate with faculty from Michigan's Ross School of Business to produce teaching materials for top business schools. WDI is a nonprofit, independent, research and educational institute that creates, aggregates, and disseminates intellectual capital on global business and policy issues.

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