

# SPICE Business Case Method

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The output of our project – the study material – will be in the format of case-studies. The most well-known example of this format is the Harvard Business School Case Method. This paper gives a short introduction to the art of writing these kind of cases and provides many references to relevant sources.

## **What is a business case?**

A business case is a detailed account of a real-life business situation, describing the dilemma of the "protagonist"—a real person with a real job who is confronted with a real problem. Faculty and their research assistants spend weeks at the company that is the subject of the case, detailing the background of the situation, the immediate problem or decision, and the perspectives of the managers involved. The resulting case presents the story exactly as the protagonist saw it, including ambiguous evidence, shifting variables, imperfect knowledge, no obvious right answers, and a ticking clock that impatiently demands action ([www.hbs.edu](http://www.hbs.edu)).

In other words, cases are narratives, situations, select data samplings, or statements that present unresolved and provocative issues, situations, or questions. As a teaching/learning tool, cases challenge participants to analyze, critique, make judgments, speculate and express reasoned opinions. Above all, although information can be real or invented, a case must be realistic and believable. The information included must be rich enough to make the situation credible, but not so complete as to close off discussion or exploration. Cases can be short for brief classroom discussions, or long and elaborate for semester-long projects. Cases are important for bringing real world problems into a classroom or a workshop—they ensure active participation and may lead to innovative solutions to problems ([www.iub.edu](http://www.iub.edu)).

## **Formats for cases**

Cases can be presented in different formats. Whatever the form the case may take, it usually has three common elements (<http://tlt.its.psu.edu>):

1. **Real-Word Scenario** - Cases are generally based on real world situations, although some facts may be changed to simplify the scenario or "protect the innocent."
2. **Supporting Data and Documents** - Effective cases assignments typically provide real world artifacts for students to analyze. These can be simple data tables, links to real URL's, quoted statements or testimony, supporting documents, images, video, audio, or any appropriate material.
3. **Open-Ended Problem** - Most case assignments require students to answer an open-ended question or develop a solution to an open-ended problem with multiple potential solutions. Requirements can range from a one-paragraph answer to a fully developed group action plan, proposal or decision.

## **Typical structure**

Cases are written in a narrative style, which is a story-telling format that gives details about actions and persons involved in a problem situation. There is no standard structure for business cases, however the basic structure seems to be:

1. Introduction of broadest question.
2. Detailed description of the specific situation.
3. Controversial issues and alternative solutions.

Usually the case description does not provide standard instructions or questions. However, the teaching material related to the case should give prescriptive instructions and questions. This means that they should be formulated in such a way that they can be translated to the specific needs of the teaching context.

### **Case assignments**

Case assignments are usually designed as instructions for discussions for small groups: 3-6 students is an ideal group size for setting up a discussion on a case.

The instructor should provide a series of written questions to guide small group discussion. Pay careful attention to the sequencing of the questions. Early questions might ask participants to make observations about the facts of the case. Later questions could ask for comparisons, contrasts, and analyses of competing observations or hypotheses. Final questions might ask students to take a position on the matter. The purpose of these questions is to stimulate (but not dictate) participants' observations and analyses. The questions should be impossible to answer with a simple yes or no. Some examples:

- *What is the situation—what do you actually know about it from reading the case?* (Distinguishes between fact and assumptions÷critical understanding)
- *What issues are at stake?* (Opportunity for linking to theoretical readings)
- *What questions do you have—what information do you still need? Where/how could you find it?*
- *What problem(s) need to be solved?* (Opportunity to discuss communication versus conflict, gaps between assumptions, sides of the argument)
- *What are all the possible options? What are the pros/cons of each option?*
- *What are the underlying assumptions for [person X] in the case—where do you see them?*
- *What criteria should you use when choosing an option? What does that mean about **your** assumptions?*

These questions can be answered in many different ways. For example, students could be assigned roles to play in a scenario. For an overview of different kinds of assignments see: <http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/cases/casewhat.html>.

At the end of the assignment, the outcome is usually presented and debriefed together, so that the different outcomes can be compared. The role of the instructor is to help the whole class to interpret and understand the implications of the different solutions.

### **Case Writing**

A lot has been said and written about writing cases. For this project we use the *Guidelines for Case Writing* (1999) of the Schreyer Institute for Innovation in Learning as a starting point (see copy).

#### *Guidelines for Case Writing*<sup>1</sup>

- A case should appear authentic and realistic
- Use an efficient and basic case structure in writing (see above)
  - o Open up with the broadest questions

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<sup>1</sup> Almost all American Universities provide their teachers with guidelines for case-writing. Interesting example can be found at <http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/teaching/good-case.html>. This guideline is part of an interesting collection of articles about the case-method by Clyde Freeman Herreid.

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- Introduce the specific situation
- Close with full development of specific issues
- There must be a fit of the case with students' educational needs, and the needs in practice
- A case should not propound theories, but rather pose complex, controversial issues
- There should be sufficient background information to allow students to tackle the issues
- Write the case in a well-organized structure and in clear language

### *Activities in the Writing Process*

#### 1. Planning

- a. Identify the purpose of the case.
  - i. What are the learning objectives?
  - ii. How is the case used in terms of instructional sequence?
- b. Identify the learners.
  - i. How much do students know about the subject?
  - ii. What are the functions of students in the case study?
- c. Decide what information should be put into the case.
  - i. Where is the source of the materials?
  - ii. What makes a case?

#### 2. Organizing

- a. Structure in a narrative style
  - i. What does the narrative consist of?
    1. what happened?
    2. who was involved?
    3. when did it happen?
    4. why did it happen?
    5. how did it happen?
  - ii. How is the narrative organized?
    1. chronologically?
    2. importance?
    3. actual event?
- b. Present the nature of the complexity of the case problem
  - i. How should the case reveal the different aspects of the problem?
    1. how will the plot be unfold?
  - ii. How does the case show different perspectives?
    1. make room for different interpretations, judgments, decisions and consequently different actions to take.

#### 3. Drafting

- a. Develop ideas
  - i. What is the central idea of the case?
  - ii. How should the central idea of the case be supported?

#### 4. Revising

- a. Identify and judge the writing elements in the case
  - i. What are the major case components?
  - ii. What are the criteria to evaluate the case?

### **Teaching material**

The teaching material provides background information and teaching instructions related to the case at hand. At a minimum, the teaching material should include (1) the suggested student assignment questions, and (2) the answers to these questions.

Traditionally the *teaching note* is prepared after the case has been written. However, it is suggested that the teaching material is prepared early in the writing process. The purpose of “front loading” the teaching material is to test for data completeness (O’Cinneide, 1998; Leenders and Erskine, 1989). It is suggested that the content of teaching material includes:

1. The purpose of the case, its justification and target niche.
2. Key points, issues and medium/long term considerations
3. Suggested student assignments, prior to class discussion
4. Suggested analyses which could provide answers to the questions formulated in the assignments
5. Recommended additional readings/references and audio-visual/computing aids
6. Suggested approaches to facilitate class discussions

### **Benefits of case studies**

The advantage of teaching the case method is that students are confronted with a **real life context**. Not only do students see how the course material applies to the world outside the classroom, but they get to see how data is often ambiguous or not clearly defined in many situations. Another benefit of the case method is that it provides the possibility of **exploring problems from multiple perspectives**. Important learning objective of this method is to learn to deal with these different perspectives. A third benefit of the case method is that students can **practice critical thinking and analysis**. Since most assignments are open-ended, students can practice choosing and applying appropriate analytical techniques. Finally the case method helps students to **synthesize course content**. The complexity of real life situations makes it possible to apply information and techniques from different areas of the course (<http://tlt.its.psu.edu>).

### **Sources**

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