

B-Preparing & Compiling Your Case

SECTION 1

BEFORE YOU START

Preparation of cases is commonly referred to as case writing, (though a variety of other terms is also in use), but you should not assume that all cases consist entirely, or even mainly, of written material. Audio, visual and computer-based materials can be included and may sometimes form the great majority of the material in a particular case. We shall use the term case writing, though, to cover all the formats in which the case may eventually appear for use.

You need not necessarily write the entire case: you could find one already existing which meets your requirements; you could find one which you can adapt to meet your needs; you might be lucky enough to have some material broadcast on radio or television which you could use as the basis for your case - and so on. The possibilities are wide, but don't get too fond of the material you prepare yourself; always look at it with a critical eye, and be prepared to take the sometimes necessary but always hard decision to discard any parts which aren't appropriate.

As is emphasised in the section on cultural effects (see p. 52), cases tend to be written in different ways and for different purposes in differing educational cultures, and some such bias will no doubt also be evident in this booklet.

Cases are most commonly used in managerial, medical or legal studies, but they are applicable for any area of study which involves the solving of problems - more usually, creative problem solving.

Cases are one way of providing a simulated environment in which to practice and develop these problem-solving and decision-making skills. Being simulated, participants are under little pressure; a wrong decision has no more realistic effect than a right one, which has been a major weakness of the case method, and gave rise to the live case method.

The degree of reality of cases in a simulated environment can vary depending on the technique for developing cases. As you change your methods from collection and ordering of published material; to observation; to research, or consultancy, or the live case method, the increasing amount of insights that these give you can have considerable benefits on your case writing.

Case writing can be regarded as a skill which is similar to other kind of writing. Most writing is underpinned by some form of basic structural design and shape which the writer will in part follow, in part deviate from according to ability, need, or the unexpected events that go with the act of writing. Planning, though, must be a deliberate forerunner of the writing.

The main constraint generally emphasised is the need to ensure that all the material included is as factual as possible, and does not include the writer's ideas, thoughts, perceptions or interpretations of events.

Whether the case is invented, or formed from the collation of published material, from observation, from research, or from consultancy, it is generally assumed that there is a need to maintain an objective rather than a subjective stance. As these types of derivation tend to give increasing reality to cases, the maintenance of this objectivity can cause considerable difficulty: the case also tends to become more and more culturally specific, (a factor which is mentioned again on page 52), and perhaps limited in the subjects and language considered as suitable:

.....the writers of cases are usually drawn from the intelligentsia.....the effect.....cases which reflect humanistic values, responsible business ethics and suitably serious and complex subjects for analysis. It is only on relatively rare occasions, however, that cases are written on the subjects of alleged unethical behaviour by organisations....or of supposed graft and corruption. But these cases are usually written from secondary sources, with academic caution and selectivity on the issues included in the text. On issues which are considered indelicate, such as blackmail, fraud, grossly immoral behaviour, the press assumes the role which the case writer could perform if he wanted to

portray a representative range of all the many facets of business. Also the language and format of cases reflects such values of high mindedness: the reality of a business deal might well be not dispassionate prose, or well ordered polished factual exposition. (Tixier)

Despite the interest that some of the above types of case might create, they do pose especial problems for anyone coming new to case writing. The difficulties of avoiding bias, separating fact from rumour and gossip, and if necessary getting agreement from contributors to use such a case make it probably much better and simpler for you to stick to the conventional type of case.

Before the writing can start, though, the planning must be done. You will have considered the training needs of your participants, and the ways in which these can best be met. No doubt you will consider a variety of techniques, one of which is the use of the case method.

Cases require the participant to do a lot of hard work. But, because involvement is usually very high, far more effort is often put into cases than is devoted to other training methods -so great care must be taken not to waste this effort. Participants must be helped to learn the skills necessary to analyse cases, but must also understand why the case method is being used, and what they should get out of each case as far as their own development is concerned.

If this stage is neglected, some participants will learn some of the necessary skills, and some none at all - they may become bored, frustrated, angry, and unable or not willing to recognise the very real benefits which can come from using the case method.

Thus, you have a responsibility to those participating not only to prepare your cases as well as possible, but also to use them as effectively as possible.

When planning your case, then, you should be clear as to what the participants are to get out of it. Then you can start work on how you are going to devise a case which meets your, and their, needs.

PREPARING AND COMPILING YOUR CASE - SECTION 2

GETTING YOUR MATERIAL

The process of researching situations or problem areas for the purpose of creating cases involves developing case ideas, and then obtaining the relevant information. This can come from many sources such as from organisations, from interviews, from your own activities and researches in the field, from archive material (e.g. reports, journals, newspapers, books, and other print material; off-air recordings from radio or television; film and video; promotional materials; etc.), from informal discussions with friends, colleagues, consultants - your sources are really only limited by your ingenuity. The only source which it is probably advisable to avoid is yourself. Don't write a case from your own experiences - at least, not until you have had a considerable amount of experience in case writing - and don't put yourself in a case.

The personal interview is one commonly used technique to obtain the information that you need for your case, but in using it, there are some difficulties which can occur. Perhaps the main one is that the information derived from the interview may have some bias, and this can arise from two sources.

The first source of bias is the person whom you are interviewing. The distortion of facts may be totally unconscious - people often tend to provide either a better or a worse picture of a situation than that which actually exists, particularly if they are not in a position to have a grasp of the entire picture. This may also be a deliberate effect, for reasons of their own. You must be alert to the possibilities, and equipping yourself with as much background knowledge as possible before the interview can help in this. Using that can provide questions which allow you to probe further should you suspect that the responses you are getting do not agree with your prior information.

Alternatively, you may have formed opinions about the person, topic and/or organisation from your sources; you may take a dislike to the person you are interviewing, or suspect that you are deliberately being given faulty

information, both of which can colour your approach, questioning, interpretation and recording; and unless you do your writing up immediately after the interview, your memory may be selective - as time tends to distort information, the case writer always has to assess the reliability of the reporting. Data may be affected internally and externally by impressions, assumptions and biases of the case writer or the person being interviewed.

Simmons has given some useful hints to be borne in mind by anyone who intends to use interviewing as one of the data collection techniques:

1. Arrive at the interview on time and be prepared.
Prior information on the operations of the organisation is important since it provides a basis for asking intelligent and carefully worded questions.
2. Inform the interviewee of the purpose of the interview.
Since the interviewee may not be in a position to supply all the information you require, this will give the chance to refer you to others within the organisation who may be of greater assistance.
3. Give the assurance that the interviewee's comments will not be used or published without written permission.
4. Ask your interviewee whether you can take notes or use a recorder.
5. When taking notes, don't be so engrossed that you fail to give your full attention to the interviewee. The recording of key points surrounding the issue is advisable.
6. Give your full attention to the interviewee.
Make it evident that you are doing so. You are there to listen, not to say what you need.
7. Always remember not to express your feelings or to offer suggestions. Report what is actually being said rather than what you think has been said or what you want to hear.
8. Don't argue with the interviewee - this may bring an abrupt end to the interview, and also spoil your chance of obtaining another interview in the future.

9. Listen - don't talk - unless on a point of clarification.
10. Summarise what the interviewee has said and present it back for clarification. This is useful since it not only provides you with a clear picture, but may give the interviewee an opportunity to include any further important details that may have been overlooked the first time around. It also provides you with a chance to ask key questions pertinent to the underlying issues which may not have been touched on, or were evaded by, the interviewee.

Data collection also involves the use of all sorts of print material. This provides a vast resource, which may often be the main source for many case writers, particularly in countries where case writing has no established basis or is an unusual teaching/training technique. Some examples are:

- Daily newspapers, local and national;
- Weekly newspapers, local and national;
- General interest magazines and journals;
- Specialist magazines and journals;
- The cuttings libraries of all the above;
- Cuttings services;
- Encyclopaedias;
- Books;
- Government reports;
- Annual reports of organizations;
- Prospectuses;
- Special reports;
- Theses;
- Advertisements;
- etc.

but again this is not intended to be a comprehensive list and you should add your own ideas to it.

Many of these types of sources will need to be cross-checked if at all possible, as they may have been edited or presented so as to give a particular angle, and thus will contain bias or distortion. Further, it may often be advisable to find out whether the material you gather from these sources can be used by you - check either with the (e.g.) newspaper whose report you are using, and/or the organisation that the report is about.

Observations can be made, and information gathered, directly by you being present and recording in one or more of a variety of ways whatever takes place. This is a flexible but difficult technique to use. The flexibility arises from your ability to note subtleties and nuances in behaviour or events, and to concentrate on particular aspects. Against this, though, there may be either too little happening, or too much, so that you miss information and you are left with an imperfect record that you try to complete at some subsequent time.

As with the interview, though, there is often no objection to making some sort of audio and/or visual record of the event. This may be, for example, a photographic, audiotape, film, or a videorecording technique, each of which can provide a less biased but two-dimensional record of the part of the event that they focus on, but which do not give a complete indication of everything which occurred. In fact, bias may be introduced because of imbalance between what they record and what they miss; they are dependent on what their operators regard or are told is important, unless a multi-unit or multimedia unit is arranged which will give as complete a record as possible.

Providing some form of record other than that dependent on an observer's written notes and memory does have considerable advantages not only for allowing you to analyse the events at leisure, but also for allowing your participants the same opportunity. Recordings can form a part of your case for them to work on, with the advantage of increasing the involvement. Such use is not yet common, but is certainly increasing - either on audiotape or, more commonly, on videotape.

Other advances in technological aids are increasingly being used when developing and running cases, and these are touched upon in the relevant section (see p.67).

PREPARING AND COMPILING YOUR CASE - SECTION 3

PUTTING YOUR MATERIAL IN ORDER

Your case presents a problem to the participant, with the intention that the participant solves that problem. There may be one 'right' answer, or there may be "better" answers among a variety of possible solutions. So, as with any other type of problem you present, you must ensure that there is sufficient information in your case for the participant to decide what is the (main) problem which needs solving, and what information the participant needs in order to analyse the situation and reach a decision.

This information should be presented in such a way as to allow the situation to be clearly understood: the opening paragraphs are important since they set the scene for the case. Many case writers start with a statement of the issue; if there is no clear issue, giving a lead in the first paragraph to the theme of the case will act as a useful guide to what the complete case is about, a point of reference to give meaning, direction and relevance to what follows. An example from Luck and Walsham might be their introduction to their "East African Railways" case, which starts;

The Mombasa Area Manager of the East African Railways Corporation is concerned about the delays in the Mombasa marshalling yard. He considers this to be a costly waste of time and resources. He has raised his concern with the Chief Engineer who is responsible for the design of a new marshalling yard. They have agreed that the Operational Research unit should look at the planned design and give their advice.

The O.R. unit has been requested to produce a preliminary report based on the existing system. The report should examine areas of concern and should advise whether further detailed work and data collection and analysis is needed to improve the design of the marshalling yard.

The O.R. manager has assigned you the task of preparing and presenting the preliminary report to the Mombasa Area Manager and the Chief Engineer.

You should yourself be very clear as to what the fundamental issue is, and whether there are any secondary issues which have a bearing on the main problem. Unless you are clear yourself what the main and sub-problems are, so that you are able to ensure that they are all included clearly, useful analysis and effective solutions are less likely.

The main problem and any sub-problems can then act as foci for the various items of information needed. The problem may not be presented quite so plainly at the start as it is in the "East African Railways" quoted above: for example, another case from the same source opens:

Walimu Consultants, management consultants based in Nairobi, Kenya, have been asked to carry out a study for the Wageni Agricultural Cooperative into the potential for horticultural development of the Chakula Estate.

Further aspects are introduced gradually, increasing the complexity of the case and providing possibilities for alternative proposals which need to be compared and evaluated.

Probably your most difficult decision when writing your case is how much information to include, and the way in which it is to be presented. Having perhaps taken a great deal of time and trouble to gather your information, you are understandably reluctant to discard any of it, but it is vital that you are selective with your provision.

It is very unusual in any real-life situation to have available only the facts which are necessary to solve a particular problem. There are generally far too many facts available, not all of which are relevant: or, a decision may have to be taken when there is really insufficient relevant information either available or possible to get, and an intuitive leap may need to be made. Avoid the latter with your first case - too much information, though time-wasting if carried to excess, is preferable to too little. You can progress to types which need intuitive leaps perhaps once you - and more particularly the participants - have got more accustomed to the method. Part of the task when reading your case will be to decide which facts are relevant and needed for a good decision and which are not.

The facts can be presented in a variety of ways - verbally, numerically, statistically, visually, aurally,

using the range of print and non-print media available to you. But not only must the facts directly relate to the problem be included: you will generally also have to provide participants with the background information that they need so as to be able to set the problem into its context.

Again, how this is provided is for you to decide, but too much infilling can have an offputting effect on the reader - you need to keep a reasonable balance between informing and overloading. Rather than providing written information, you may be able instead to give some references which will allow the background to be researched by the reader.

Presentation of your data will be eased, both for you and for your reader, if you group your information into a logical order. There can be no comprehensive guide to this, because the grouping will be very dependent on the type of problem, on your preferred way of writing, and on the type of sequencing you use. Because writing is such an individual skill, it is very difficult to suggest firm rules about the ordering and presentation of a case.

Your case is probably best written in several separate sections, each dealing with a particular aspect, which are then welded together to form the complete case. A structural unity should be aimed for, and in putting your materials into order, the following types of sequencing have been suggested:

- historical, or time, sequencing;
- event sequencing;
- logical argument sequencing.

Within any of these sequences, a variety of substructures has been proposed by authors. For example, Towl mentions

Time structure: because a case or decision takes place in time, there must be a fairly clear perception on the part of the student of what the time sequence was of the events taking place in the case.

Narrative structure: the things that happened and the circumstances of their happening must be narrated in some kind of understandable pattern.

Expository structure: the events and issues contained in a case must be explained so that the learners will have a comprehensive understanding of the situation and the meaning of the various concepts to assist them in their analyses.

Plot structure: the case writer must be able to capture the imagination of the audience without damaging the believability of the case.

The issue or issues: there must be a question of what should somebody do, what should somebody have done, who is to blame for the situation, what is the best decision to be made under the circumstances.....etc.

The more these can be interrelated, the more they will contribute to the interest and effectiveness of your case.

During all this, remember to keep your writing objective. One purpose of the case is to allow the participants to make the judgements, not for you to give yours. Your job is to present that case, not to interpret it or present your own opinions about it. Use adjectives sparingly, if at all, because they can introduce aspects of value judgements by you.

This does not necessarily mean that the you should avoid having people represented in your case; on the contrary. It is often easier, and makes for a livelier case, if you can include some convincing characters who may well be required to give opinionated information in the case - but these should be opinions culled from your research, quoting what you have gathered from interviews, etc. They are not included to be mouthpieces for your opinions.

It is generally assumed that cases are written and presented in the past rather than the present tense. Don't suppose from this that the present tense is never used; it can bring a great sense of immediacy, realism and vividness, particularly when quotations and conversations can be included. However, cases written in the present tense may soon age and lose their realism, and once this happens the lack of realism can become significant and divert participants from the purpose for which the case is being used - more time is spent trying to find faults in the information than in using that information for analysis and proposed solution(s).

PREPARING AND COMPILING YOUR CASE - SECTION 4

GETTING IT RIGHT

There is no edict, no hard and fast rule, about how long a case should be. If you aim for

clarity,
coherence,
completeness

and conciseness,

you should find that the length more or less controls itself. Cases can, though, vary from one written page upwards, and the longer they become, the longer it takes the reader just to absorb in the material. Where writers have given some indication of optimum lengths, this seems to be in the range 10-15 pages - above that, the feeling seems to be that their effectiveness decreases.

Help participants to sort out the material in your case by ensuring that every item has a reference number, and that a listing of all the items they should have or should refer to (e.g. a videotape which is held by the library) is included in the case paperwork. In this way they can check that they have everything they are meant to have; you can put charts, tables, etc., in appendices rather than bulking out the main part of the case; and you can indicate clearly what items they will need to refer to which are not in the main case pack, and where those items are to be obtained.

There is no merit in having unnecessarily long appendices: the function of these is to provide necessary information which does not readily fit into the main body of the case, but which is essential to the understanding of the case and the solving of any problems posed.

Once you have written your case, put it aside for a while - a day or two, perhaps - and then read it again. Read it critically, put yourself in the position of participants and see whether they would get out of it what you originally intended. Does it meet your objectives? Most writers find that they have to revise their original product, to refine it, and a second, third or fourth revision may be needed. This will pay off, though, when you try the case out for the first time,

So, keep your first case short. As you and participants get practice with the technique, you can become more ambitious. Good writing is hard, and needs a lot of care, and this applies to writing cases as much as to any other sort of writing. Unfortunately, there is no way of improving your case writing other than by writing, and then trying out, your cases.

SUMMARY

Know what you want to use your case for. Your information sources can include

- collecting and ordering published material
- observation
- research, e.g. interviewing,
- consultancy
- live cases.

Start your case by setting the scene and theme; give sufficient information to allow useful work and learning; present the information in a variety of ways but with coherent structures and sequences: make it factual, objective, as unbiased as possible, and write it in the past tense.

No particular type of style is needed other than to convey effectively the information, issues and problems that are to be dealt with in a problem solving/decision making process.

Use technological aids in preparation and presentation if they are helpful. Revise and refine as necessary.

SOURCE REFERENCES

Those with reference numbers marked with an asterisk, e.g 029*, have abstracts given in the 'Abstracts' section of this booklet

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