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Case Writing: An Art and A Science

ABSTRACT: The study of management in the food system is undergoing a fundamental change with the growing use of the case study method of instruction. This approach has been found to produce the higher order thinking skills desired in managers. Unfortunately, the number of management cases dealing with the food system is very limited. This article helps address this need by explaining how those interested in writing cases might do so. First the article describes the context of case writing. Then ten characteristics found in most good cases are explained. Finally a process for writing cases is presented which describes how the ten characteristics are developed when a case is being written. Though case writing is presented as a process, it is seen as an art, and a good case is seen as a literary accomplishment.

Appreciation for the value of the case study approach to teaching has been growing in recent years. While the case approach does not transfer knowledge in the traditional sense of stimulating lower-order thinking skills, it has proved very efficient at teaching critical or higher-order thinking skills. It stimulates discussion, promotes analytical thinking, and encourages readers to test hypotheses. Because of the dramatic structure of a case, the reader becomes intrigued with the conflict presented and the possibility of finding an appropriate solution. Moreover, the factual nature of the case material puts readers in the position of real-life managers who must make decisions when data are limited and the people involved in the decision making process have different perspectives.

Successful use of the case approach to teaching rests on two essential elements. First, instructors need to know how to use cases effectively in their teaching. This matter has already been addressed by Harling and Akridge (1998). Second, instructors need to have cases with the requisite features. The purpose of this article is to address this second matter. It presents the issues and problems involved in writing cases so that those who are interested in doing so are able to produce cases which will be valued by instructors.

The article is divided into three principal sections. The first section establishes the context and demands of case writing. It helps the reader appreciate the nature of case writing and explains how the view reflected in this article fits within the broader context of case writing. The second section describes the characteristics of good cases in detail. The third and longest section describes the entire process of case writing. To make this section more readable, the process has been broken down into four stages: Preliminaries, Prewriting, Writing, and Wrapping Up. After this, a few pointers are provided that will help those interested in case writing get started.

THE CONTEXT

In this article a case is defined as a document that describes an actual situation or problem facing management. The document represents an attempt to reflect reality as perceived by those involved, including the case writer. It is a combination of verifiable facts and opinions.

Though rarely recognized, cases are of two fundamental types: the research case and the teaching case. The former is used to test theory and the latter to give readers the perspective of a manager in a situation calling for a decision to be made. While we consider research cases an extremely important research tool, our interest is in the writing of teaching cases. This is not to deny the many features the two have in common, especially in the data collection process, but when the cases are being written, the differences become apparent. Writing the research case involves using evidence to explain a phenomenon, while writing the teaching case involves writing a document which excites readers and provokes discussion. The difference between the two types can be examined by looking at two cases written by Bower using the same data. He presents the research case as the sixth chapter in his book *Managing the Resource Allocation Process* and the teaching case as "Industrial Products," Harvard case number HBS 9-369-019. This shows that the two types are not mutually exclusive. Their similarity is further supported by the fact that researchers have drawn data from teaching cases when building theory. This approach has been promoted by Jauch, Osborn, and Martin (1980) and practiced by Miller (1991).

The unique aspect of a teaching case is that it simulates an actual managerial situation, and it is therefore the closest readers can get to first-hand observation of

real-life situations. It has been said that the case is, “a chunk of reality brought into the classroom to be worked over by the class and the instructor.” The facts of the case provide fodder for a rich classroom discussion focused on a real-life situation rather than on speculation. The result is that readers, by applying analytical techniques and concepts to the case material, develop critical skills and a managerial perspective that will serve them well as managers.

Instructors performing case teaching are critical customers of the case writer. They want cases which deal with issues they think readers should be aware of and which both they and the readers consider relevant. At present the number of cases dealing with companies in the food system is limited. Furthermore, those cases that have been written tend to focus on generic management issues and contain limited industry-specific knowledge. This has been a source of frustration to many who teach management in the food system. Some case teachers have responded by becoming case writers. By generating their own cases, they have been able to provide themselves with what they deem to be appropriate and adequate teaching materials.

Case writers benefit considerably from the writing process. They develop their questioning, listening, and writing skills. They also see how concepts and principles are applied in practice. This broadens their understanding, expands their knowledge, and enriches and stimulates their thinking. On the personal side, meeting and interviewing practicing managers can be sheer fun. But these benefits only come with the expenditure of time, money, and patient effort. Writing good cases is a challenging activity.

The subjects of the case studies, the managers, find that participating in case writing gives them a chance to record their experiences and, in doing so, reflect on what really happened in a particular situation they faced. As the case is written, they may see their experiences crystallize into lessons for themselves. This learning is enhanced by the trained and impartial observations of the case writer, a person who is uninvolved in the conflict or struggle and who has no particular perspective to support. This detachment allows the writer to collect and bring together information from many different sources, producing a picture of reality as it is seen from the different perspectives of the people involved.

Case writers can be either instructors (these are often professors who are also case users), or professional case writers. Instructors have the advantage of having an intimate understanding of what they want and, given the benefits of case writing described above, they can use the writing activity to further their scholarly development. Professional writers come in many guises but are often people with some knowledge of management and good interpersonal and writing skills. The advantage they have in case writing is that their specialization in case writing has given them considerable experience.

Using a professional writer does not eliminate the role of the instructor who is the customer of the case produced. The instructor needs to “scope out” the case by

performing some preliminary work before setting up a contract with the case writer. This involves making broad decisions about the level of difficulty (the analytical and conceptual content of the case), who the audience will be, and what lessons should be supported by the case. In addition the instructor has to make specific decisions about who the decision maker will be, what the decision will be, which issues will be included, and what the organizational context will be. The instructor can also suggest a list of probable exhibits and informative titles for each. With this guidance from the instructor, the case writer is likely to produce a good case. There is a downside, however; the instructor does not benefit from the scholarly development provided by engaging personally in the case writing process.

The goal of case writing is to produce clearly and vividly written documents. The writing itself has to be more than the bare facts. The truth is that case writing bears a closer relationship to journalism, short story writing, and drama than to scientific or technical writing. This makes case writing an art, and, like any art form, it is practiced on many different levels, depending on the innate talent, hard work, and creativity of its practitioners. According to McNair (1971), case writing can be a definite literary accomplishment.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE CASES

Although the success of a case depends largely on the instructional context, good cases appear to share certain characteristics that are responsible, at least in part, for their success. Bennett and Chakravarthy (1978) have identified ten of these characteristics (see Table 1). We present their list and explain, based on our teaching experience, why each characteristic is important. The case writer is advised to keep these characteristics in mind during the writing process and to use them as criteria when evaluating or judging the written document. In the third section of the paper on how to write a case, when and how these ten characteristics are developed will become clear. We will now explain why each is important.

Table 1. The Ten Characteristics of Effective Cases

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1. The case tells a story
 2. The case issues arouse the readers' interest
 3. The case situation is accessible to the readers
 4. The case teaches a managerial skill
 5. The case requires the solution of a managerial problem
 6. The managerial problem in the case has a history
 7. The case includes quotations
 8. The case permits empathy with the central character
 9. The case is set within the past five years.
 10. The case is short and simple
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1. A good case captures the minds of the readers through narrative action, making the case seem almost like a short story. As in a short story, a central theme is presented and sustained through careful selection of specific, interesting details that set up a struggle or conflict. This conflict is enhanced by the use of characters who provide first-hand experience and observations and who represent possibilities for the action to go in many different directions. The dramatic tension created by the conflict helps the readers feel they must step in and attempt to resolve it.

2. The factual details, gleaned from the data collected by the case writer, add reality and relevance to the drama and help hold the readers' attention. The writer involves the readers further by appealing to their emotions, experience, and career goals. Readers are particularly attentive when they are personally interested in something and feel strongly about it. They are also attentive when they can personalize the case material, either because they have had similar experiences already or because they aspire to the positions of the managers in the case. Naturally, the writer's own excitement about the material is a early indicator that the case is likely to hold readers' attention.

3. Comprehension, not confusion, creates interest in the case. Readers who feel they understand the case as they read it find it more interesting. And, because they understand the material, they are in a better position to use their knowledge and experience to construct arguments using the case material. This active involvement stimulates the critical thinking that is the key to the case method and that is necessary for active participation in discussion of the case.

4. Readers appreciate cases that document the process of managing. They have great interest in the actions of competent managers. Working with cases that include managerial information also gives them a feel for what managers know and a model for how they might approach a similar situation in their own future as managers.

5. The typical case poses the need to solve a managerial problem. It takes readers to a point where they have to make a decision and act on it. This structure is dramatic in its own right because it calls on the readers to get involved. In fact, readers are motivated to grasp the material when they are given a sense that doing nothing has serious consequences.

6. A successful case not only requires a solution to the current problem but also provides an opportunity for assessing prior decisions. The very process of solving problems in the past has put new elements or forces in play that may create new problems and constrain the possible solutions to the present problem. Including prior decisions thus adds realism and at the same time allows readers to see the consequences of past decisions.

7. Quotations from company sources introduce personalities and build characters. By using people and what they have said, the writer can introduce different perceptions and values, allow the presentation of biased or judgmental data, and help illuminate the conflict. Quotations also reveal the human side of management

as readers have to evaluate the quality of evidence coming from different individuals. Finally the personal conflicts implied in the evidence are made real by the quotations.

8. Typically the decision maker is the central character around whom the case revolves, though sometimes a group may be making the decision. The central character comes to life as the readers become acquainted with him/her. The readers' understanding of this character, especially a likable one who has realistic and believable goals, encourages empathy. The personal involvement this creates in turn helps readers see the case as "real" and makes it more readable.

9. Readers are most interested in cases that deal with recent events; only the contemporary is seen as relevant it seems. They are right to the extent that there is no doubt about the currency of recent issues. Unfortunately, many readers lack a sense of history, and so they do not appreciate that some things are constant and that history may repeat itself.

10. Although the length of a case may seem of secondary importance, the longer the case is, the harder it is for readers to stay focused and analytical. This suggests that the case writer should produce short, simple cases rather than long, complex ones. In fact, the optimum length of a case seems to be 8 to 15 pages of text plus 1 to 5 exhibits. However, the case instructor has to realize that short cases cover less material than long cases and that although the case instructor can accomplish many of the same results with both, it takes longer using a series of short cases, because readers have to understand the context of each new case.

THE CASE WRITING PROCESS

The case writing process can be described as a series of stages with certain rules and guidelines for each. This structured approach to case writing is useful for writers early in their careers because it cultivates their awareness of what is important, making it easier to develop skill as a case writer. But slavishly following the process will not produce great cases because, as mentioned earlier, case writing is an art. Good case writers understand the process well enough to know when to adhere to it and when not, in order to produce something better than the rules allow. The stages of case writing do provide a useful way of organizing a description of significant aspects of the process.

The total process of case writing can be characterized as having four principal stages (seen Table 2). During the first stage, the preliminaries, the writer has to find a case situation with the potential to provide a good case. In the second stage, prewriting, he/she investigates the case thoroughly. This research stage is a clinical process that involves collecting, analyzing, and organizing data. The third stage is the actual writing of the case and the accompanying teaching note. The fourth and final stage is wrapping up the case so that it can be used in teaching situations. As

Table 2. The Case Writing Process

Preliminaries
Deciding when to write a case
Getting Leads
Establishing contact
Prewriting
Collecting Data
Organizing the material
Writing
Writing the case
Writing the teaching note
Wrapping up
Obtaining a case release
Test teaching the case
Revising the case and the teaching note

the case writing process is described in further detail, suggestions for how to develop the ten characteristics of good cases mentioned above will be included.

Preliminaries

The motivation for writing a new case can come from classroom needs and/or business situations. In the classroom, the need for a new case is clearest when the instructor sees an old case as highly relevant while readers see it as irrelevant simply because of its age. Sometimes a new case is needed when the instructor wants a case better suited to the capabilities and interests of the readers. However, the more challenging reason for writing new cases comes from the desire to reflect the changing world facing practicing managers. Evolution in the economy and the nature of business creates new types of situations for managers, and cases reflecting these are needed. New cases are also needed when new ways have been developed for dealing with particular managerial issues. These reasons for writing cases are not mutually exclusive, and the motivation for writing a particular case may be a combination of them. Whatever the motivation, the instructor interested in new cases wisely keeps a list of situations that he/she would like to see addressed. Such a list is useful because it provides the instructor with clarity and focus when seeking potential case writing opportunities.

Since a case is a reflection of reality and not simply a hypothetical situation, the case writer needs to find real situations to write about, situations that have the potential to provide a good case. The best leads come from business people who are aware of the writer’s interests. Alternatively, the case writer can follow up on incidents that are reported in the press. Some leads may even be provided by students in a course. By being constantly on the alert and following up on promising leads, the writer has a wide range of alternatives open from which the best can be selected.

Once a promising lead has been found, the writer establishes informal contact with someone in the company. This person can tell the writer whether the company

is likely to be willing to participate in a case study and, if so, whether the situation is as promising as it first appeared. Affirmative answers to both mean that formal contact with the company needs to be established. In general, the best people to contact are those at the top of the company's organizational hierarchy because they have the greatest authority and, therefore, can provide the greatest access to and release of information.

In the first meeting with the formal contact person, the case writer seeks formal approval that the company will allow the desired case to be written and be willing to release it. To obtain this approval, the case writer has to be prepared to clarify the scope, including the extent of participation required from the company, and the expected use of the material. The company may need reassurance that all information will be held in the strictest confidence, that the only information released is in the case itself, and that the case will be submitted to the company for review before it is used anywhere. The benefit the company receives by participating in the case study is that it is contributing to the education of future managers; there should be no expectation of reciprocal services, consulting or otherwise. If the company is hesitant at this point, time and effort spent developing a case is likely to be unproductive.

Having received formal approval to proceed with the case, the case writer needs to establish a working relationship with the organization. This includes providing a time line for the case writing process, an overview of the information needed, and a list of the people the case writer wants to talk to within the company. The formal contact person can then introduce the case writer to the appropriate people. It is especially important that the managers know that the writer expects to hear their true feelings and attitudes so that the writer has an accurate appreciation of the situation. The writer holds these matters in strict confidence, withholding direct attribution of comments until the managers agree to their release. If frank discussion is not possible, abandoning the case study may prove the wisest course of action.

Prewriting

Collecting and organizing what one needs in order to write is often called prewriting. In this process the writer analyzes the dynamic context of subject matter, audience, and writer. The writer must come to an understanding not only of the issues of the case, the background and needs of the audience, but also of the analytical and interpretive function of the writer. Unless the case communicates clearly focused issues to a well-defined audience minus any intentionally or unintentionally encoded messages by the writer, the case will not be a successful teaching tool. The prewriting stage is therefore crucial to writing a good case though it is time-consuming.

The case provides an accurate description of a managerial situation from the perspective of a competent practicing manager. Consequently, the writer will want to collect all the data on the situation such a manager would have. In principle, the

writer may expect the manager to disclose all these data, but in reality this may not happen. At worst, the manager may not be competent, but even a competent manager may not be able to recall information without prompting, and different managers may have different perceptions of the situation being discussed. This means that the writer must know what data are needed from the managers.

The writer is ready to collect data from managers once he/she has a good sense for the relevant ingredients of the case situation. The writer who has limited familiarity with the type of situation the case deals with might choose first to review the relevant academic and professional literature. In such a review, the writer identifies the types of facts that are pertinent to the situation, the relationships among them, and their probable implications. The goal of this review is to make the writer sensitive to what data are relevant, not to provide a rigid structure for data collection. The experienced case writer knows that data collection is a dynamic process in which the need for data is in part revealed as the research is conducted.

Once familiar with the case type, the case writer can focus on the case situation being studied. The writer usually starts by collecting relevant secondary data from numerous sources, including the business press, trade magazines, television and news reports. Secondary data give facts about the company's size, history, location, products, competition, organization and perhaps its prospects. While most of these data describe the context of the situation, sometimes specific data on the situation of interest and pithy quotes from those involved may be found as well.

The process of collecting, sorting, and absorbing as much relevant secondary data as possible before working with the people in the case company provides numerous benefits for the writer. It signals to the managers being interviewed that the writer considers them important enough for him/her to do preparatory work. It also sets the writer up to ask intelligent, probing questions of managers. Such questions may be necessary because some people are so polite that they only answer the questions asked. Specific, targeted questions are needed to draw from them the required data. The overall result of preparation is that the writer maintains control of interviews, gets the data needed to write the case, and is likely to find managers cooperative and willing to engage in conversation at an equal and stimulating level.

The collection of primary data is done once the secondary data have been collected. Primary data are collected directly from the managers involved in the situation and provide the basis for most of the case document. The primary data collected must be sufficient to support the application of particular concepts and analytical tools as well as describe the nature of the case situation and the range of opinions found in management. Some data will be factual while others will reflect experiences, observations, and judgements. When data reveal biased information, the writer tries to collect associated data to allow readers to make inferences about the quality of the data presented.

Most primary data are collected from managers through interviews. Therefore, the writer has to be a good listener, open to the unexpected, and aware of what is left unsaid. The key to good listening is wanting to listen. When the writer appears to be interested in what is said, the manager is more likely to speak clearly and eloquently. The good writer knows when to follow up on a statement and when to be silent so the manager has time to gather further thoughts. The writer must also be aware of the tone in which questions are answered, of nonverbal forms of communication, and of psychological games that may be played during the interview. The writer's awareness of the manager's management style can help the writer interpret the true significance of what is being said. This awareness of emotional as well as the intellectual levels of the interviews is needed because a good case includes both dimensions.

The hardest part of the data collection process is catching some of the "juice" of the situation so that the writer can convey the case situation and the personalities involved in a vivid and realistic manner. Here the writer has to get people to reveal themselves. This can be done by getting managers to recall verbal exchanges and getting them to provide spontaneous quotes.

When interviewing the participants in the company, the writer tries to maintain an open mind and be flexible in his/her understanding of the situation. This allows the uniqueness of the situation, often reflected in subordinate issues, to surface. Data collected this way will help produce a case rich in practical detail. However, such an approach is demanding since the writer has to listen actively, hearing what the managers say and quickly spotting areas that need further exploration.

As the data are collected, the writer tests the material to see whether more are needed. This testing is done by compiling and organizing the material as it is received. Typically data can be sorted into a set of major and minor issues related to the decision that is being explored. For each issue, a set of related facts, some critical and some marginal, can be outlined, and within an issue there may be sub-issues. The writer must be careful to keep his perspective subjective and not try to make the fact prove his point. Putting the data in a meaningful framework lets the writer see what has been collected, and the organization process itself provides an opportunity to evaluate the data. Illogical sequences, implausible statements, factual inconsistencies and needless repetition become apparent. So too do the needs to clarify existing data and to collect more data to fill in serious voids. The writer can then ask the managers to identify who might be approached for needed data.

Once the case writer has collected sufficient primary data to understand the situation fully, it is time to think about what will be presented in the case. The writer is likely to have collected far more data than needed, but this is inherent in exploring the unknown. Moreover, it helps ensure that the writer will have all material necessary because in case writing, data can only be reported, not invented as needed. However, the size of the case must be limited because readers simply do not have the time to dwell on masses of data.

Selection of what material to include in the case is a function of the narrative point of view and the focus or decision point of the case. The writer has to choose a narrative point of view in order to describe the case situation. The chosen perspective determines the angle from which the case is seen. Standard practice is to write in the third person so that the “facts” of the case are presented objectively. This way the voice of the writer seems to disappear behind the voices of the managers involved. Another convention of case writing is to write from the perspective of the one central character who is the decision maker in the case. When following this practice, the writer must select the central character carefully because the choice influences and limits the information revealed in the case. Usually the information given is limited to this character’s knowledge and experiences, though occasionally things of which the character should be aware but is not aware of, are described. However, the choice of the central character is limited because it has to be one of the managers associated with the decision that is the focal point of the case.

Selecting the decision that will serve as the focal point for the case is a challenge. Decisions are made sequentially, and the writer has to decide which one is best for developing the desired lessons. Whichever decision is chosen, the decisions prior to it have helped predetermine the conditions surrounding the focal decision. A further consideration is the stage of decision making associated with the featured decision. Is the decision maker anticipating the decision, making the decision, or dealing with the aftermath of the decision? At each stage, the facts and issues will differ; therefore, the stage has to be selected so the facts known at that point can be presented.

Having selected the point of view and the focal decision, the writer needs to select the data that reflect these choices. This will help limit the amount of material presented; however, the material included has to be even further limited in order to stay within the readers’ cognitive limits and available time. The writer must therefore find a balance between reflecting reality and limiting the case to the material readers can handle. This balance is achieved when readers feel that the case reflects reality and at the same time is comprehensible.

The data provided in the case can be organized into two types: those dealing with the organizational context and those dealing with the decision itself. The first type provides readers who are outsiders with a sense for the context within which the decision is being made. These data can be more sparing than the second type which describe the featured decision. The data on the decision itself must reflect the field of knowledge the competent decision maker has. Sufficient data have to be included so that readers can discover patterns that make the case coherent and perform the desired analysis. The writer is always careful that the data are presented so that they allow analysis rather than simply illustrate concepts. The writer may sometimes choose to provide partially processed data to lessen the analytical burden placed on the reader. Ironically, this can mean that the writer is doing con-

siderable work though readers may feel that they are doing it all. Finally the writer goes beyond simple facts to include the opinions and feelings of managers. These data make the situation seem real and enliven discussion by producing divided opinion.

The data needs for a case are not easily determined, and therefore a few notions have to be considered. The idea "sufficient data" does not imply that the data needed to define the situation completely are included. Sometimes data are limited to less than the decision maker would like, and judgement calls are required. To approximate the situation reasonably well, the case writer includes data that allow the readers to replicate the judgments made by management. This does not mean, however, that the data included in a case are always so complete that there is no ambiguity. On occasion, the case writer may choose to allow ambiguity because it forces readers to appreciate the significance of the data and to formulate contingent actions depending on what the missing data might indicate. The decision not to include all data, especially when readers are expected to use a particular concept or tool, should be a conscious one made by the case writer. The guiding principle is that a case is self-contained and that it contains all the information that was available in the actual situation. If readers have to go outside the case in order to find necessary data, the discussion is no longer limited to the facts of the situation. In our opinion this does not promote rigorous thinking and means the case is unlikely to achieve the particular lessons the instructor had in mind when assigning the case.

Selecting and then organizing the data so that their relevance is evident and understandable will help capture readers' interest and create understanding. And the more work the writer does selecting and organizing material before actually writing the case, the easier the writing process is.

Writing

In the case writing process two separate documents are produced: the case itself and an accompanying teaching note. The case study, distributed to the readers, poses a managerial problem in need of a solution while the teaching note, available only to other instructors, suggests a way of teaching the case. By producing the teaching note, the case writer ensures that there is at least one way to teach the case successfully and that enough data are found in the case to accomplish this. In this section we describe how to use the selected data to tell a good story, and then we explain how to write the teaching note.

Writing the Case

Structure is the most fundamental characteristic of a case, and finer aspects of writing reveal themselves within structure. For this reason the discussion will first consider the broad structure of a case and then the finer features of structure. Hav-

ing done this, we will focus on the presentation of facts, the use of characters, the reporting of dialogue among them, and finally the choice of verb tense and diction.

Building drama into the case is always on the writer's mind as structure is developed and facts are presented. The structure of the typical ten-page case has four parts: an introduction, contextual data, the body and a conclusion. The introduction includes a clear statement about the decision from the perspective of the decision-maker. The reader is assumed to take on the role of this person. The introduction also provides a brief overview of the context in which the decision-maker operates. The goal of this section of the case is to whet the reader's appetite, provide a sense of direction, and give the reader a point of reference when reading the rest of the case.

After the introduction, the case returns to describing the context in which the decision maker operates. The reader will read this necessary though less exciting material when it is placed near the beginning of the case and before the dramatic action unfolds. If it is placed later on, the reader may lose interest because it intrudes on the drama. Maintaining the drama is important because it helps the reader stay focused and motivated to make the decision presented in the case.

The body of the case is the major part of the document because it is here that the decision situation is developed. Several different logical patterns can be used for grouping material in this part. One pattern is provided by conceptual structures and models found in the various management disciplines. Another pattern structures the material according to issues that may in turn be divided into sub-issues or smaller problems. Material can also be organized into a series of critical incidents, each of which builds toward the crisis because of its consequences. When the reader has read the body of the case, he/she should feel that the need for a decision has been demonstrated. By ending the case with the decision maker's options, the case writer provides the point of departure for the class discussion: in effect, a call to arms.

Having established the overall organizational structure of the case, the writer fine-tunes material within it. This involves developing a fast-flowing story, selecting and ordering material, and pointing to the significant aspects of the material. A fast-flowing story is essential to developing a sense of drama. This can be accomplished by taking important but complicated technical data and putting them into exhibits (tables, diagrams, and charts) and appendices. A further advantage of these devices is that they are often a more efficient and revealing way of presenting the facts and relationships among them than simply using written explanation. Each exhibit in the case presents a significant point, and a reference is made in the text to the exhibit when it is relevant.

The danger of overwriting a case is ever present. The good writer remembers that the writer has to inform the reader without putting him/her to sleep; brevity is a valuable asset. When there are many issues, the writer may choose to limit the case to the most important ones. Similarly the writer avoids wasting space on

actions and data that do not contribute to a greater understanding of the situation and how to resolve it. And when a critical component of the case is complicated, the writer may choose to keep everything else as simple and as direct as possible so the reader can focus on understanding the complex part.

The material which the writer decides to use for the case is best ordered chronologically whenever possible. Even when descriptive material is being presented, reporting facts and actions sequentially carries the reader along from the past to the present, creating a sense of drama. Doing so also lends authenticity to the case because the facts are presented in terms of the dynamics of actual business events.

The final aspect of fine tuning material is arranging data so that the readers are drawn to their significance. The writer may plant clues which direct observant readers to a particular analysis and to particular facts that help them develop conclusions or see that they have drawn correct ones. These clues can be shown openly if their importance is not obvious, in conversation for example. Occasionally the writer may do the opposite, however, including a "red herring" to test the mettle of readers.

A case is well structured when readers are able to analyze the material and recall the data in class. Even if they failed to appreciate the significance of the data when they read the case, a well-structured case helps them believe the explanations derived in class because they can see that the information was accessible to them in the first place. They will not feel cheated, saying to themselves, "How could I be expected to know that?"

Presenting case facts accurately is a challenge because the writer has to rely heavily on data provided by others. Not only does the writer have to be a responsible judge of fact, opinion, and belief, but he/she must also develop a clear and consistent technique to allow the reader to distinguish among them. A convention in case writing is that any statement left unattributed to a particular person is considered a fact that readers can accept at face value. Opinions, on the other hand, can be attributed to others; for example, "Business associates called him a natural as a supervisor." Beliefs can be attributed to the source this way; for example, "Mary thought advertising was ineffective." Because opinions and beliefs are attributed to individuals, their accuracy is left to the readers' judgment. The writer may include additional data or statements by others to help readers form a judgment.

To avoid encoding unintentional bias, the writer must be careful not to interpret data in the writing process. For example, the writer expresses a fact when writing, "the company had lost 15 per cent of its market share and sold 1,000 units less over the past year," and an opinion when writing, "the company's products were not well suited to the market." The writer can minimize the danger of interpreting data for the reader by using headings or titles to tie the text together instead of transitional sentences.

Using characters in the case adds the human dimension. Characters breathe life into the material, turning it into a story. They introduce the human side of manage-

ment as their behavior reflects personal motivations, values, beliefs, and perceptions. Including characters also allows the inclusion of the organizational aspects of management such as responsibility, authority and managerial style. As attractive as characters are, restricting the case to those who are essential to the decision is necessary to avoid confusing the readers. The selected characters are brought to life in several ways. They can say what they think, reveal themselves through their actions and reactions, and be described by others. The accumulation of this evidence helps create their personalities, making the case interesting and real.

Dialogue among the selected characters is a useful stylistic device in case writing. It suggests that something important is happening. It is a far more effective way of introducing conflict than a description of rising action because it allows both sides of the argument to be played; by letting the characters speak for themselves, the writer lets them reveal their beliefs, attitudes, judgments and even passion. Writing dialogue, however, is especially challenging for the case writer. Sometimes dialogue has to be recreated, and even when it is recorded, it must be massaged since ordinary speech consists of many uncoordinated or unfinished sentences, hesitations, catchwords, repetitions and leaps. People usually speak in short bursts, so the punctuation of anything spoken is arbitrary. The jumble has to be disciplined into something that reads like ordinary speech while conveying the essence of the conversation.

Verb tense is an aspect of style which the case writer must consider when deciding how to present the story. Usually writers use the past tense. Doing so protects the company from censure if the practices described are not “state of the art,” extends the life of the case because the contents are not presented as current, provides surer facts, and is less likely to concern company management because past image is less important than present image. In spite of these advantages, some writers like to use the present tense because it creates a sense of dramatic immediacy and makes the case feel current.

Diction, an additional aspect of style, should not create problems for the average reader. Technical jargon, for example, should be avoided to prevent alienating the reader, and colloquial expressions as well as biased or connotative diction should also be avoided so the readers are able to keep their attention focused on the facts of the case.

Writing the Teaching Note

The teaching note is a document which complements the case. It presents lessons readers can learn from the case and explains how the instructor can develop these lessons through class discussion of the case. This allows the instructor to use the case with confidence because he/she knows at least one approach to teaching the case. However, well-written cases may have such richness that they can be taught in several different ways, creating the potential for several different teach-

Table 3. The Eight Sections of the Teaching Note

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1. Where and when to use the case
 2. Lessons supported by the case
 3. Introductory comments
 4. Synopsis of the case
 5. Study questions
 6. Teaching strategies
 7. Additional material
 8. Follow up to the case
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ing notes. This leads some to say that a good case is like a kaleidoscope; what you see depends on how you shake it.

The teaching note can be broken into eight sections (see Table 3). The first section describes the best place to use the case. This section suggests the type of courses the case is suitable for and where the case fits best in those courses (whether early or later on), what particular conceptual understanding it requires, and how parts of the case may be simplified so that it can be used in a variety of situations.

The learning experiences provided in a case can be summarized as lessons. Section two presents the set of lessons that are developed when the teaching note is followed. Some lessons may simply be the application of conceptual models, and achievement of these is readily apparent. Other lessons are less apparent as the case is taught but plain to see once exposed. Most challenging are lessons that go beyond and above the events in the case and yet grow out of reflection on aspects of the case. Such lessons may be seen almost as fundamental truths of management because they are so general that they apply in many different situations.

The value of the case is presented in the third section. Knowing why a case is relevant helps the instructor select a case. Practical demonstration of its importance can be provided either by citing recent examples of other managers facing the same decision or by citing examples over time which show that the decision is a continuing one facing management. The instructor may choose to use this information either when assigning the case or at the start of the case discussion to sell the readers on the importance of what they will be examining.

A synopsis of the case, the fourth section, identifies the decision maker, what his or her task/concern/problem/dilemma is, and why the situation has arisen. If the decision maker is working against a deadline, the synopsis mentions this. The two or three paragraphs summarizing the case can be used by the instructor as part of the preamble to discussing the case in class.

Questions that help readers analyze the case and prepare for a discussion can be presented in section five. The specificity of the questions depends on the sophistication of the readers. If they are seen as less sophisticated and less experienced, the questions tend to be numerous and specific. With sophisticated and experienced readers, the questions can be as simple as, "What do you recommend the decision maker

do and why?" Preparing questions appropriate for the intended readers requires that the writer of the note has a good appreciation for the readers' capabilities.

The teaching strategy for the case presented in section six builds on the questions the readers have prepared. Here case notes vary with the philosophy of the case writer. Some writers prefer that the instructor determines how to teach the case. These writers only present the major parts of analysis and provide calculations for quantitative aspects of the case. Other writers prefer to present a detailed flow of teaching suggestions that connect with the lessons identified earlier in section two. Detailed suggestions make the case useful to all instructors, and they allow for an acid test of whether the case provides readers with meaningful lessons.

The detailed description of teaching strategies in section six may start with a set of questions that will be used during the class discussion. These may differ from the study questions in section five, but they are the same in principle because their purpose is to direct readers toward the lessons of the case and to provide the flow of class discussion. As each question is answered, the lesson associated with that question should become apparent. The teaching note can point out where to focus attention, in part by presenting a board plan which shows what can be written on the blackboard, and in part by presenting a time line recommending how long the class should spend discussing each aspect of the case.

Some writers feel that additional materials go well with the case materials and help produce a richer learning experience. This material can be identified in the seventh section of the teaching note. It can include articles that expand on the concepts and analysis applied to the case or further illustrations of the situation presented in the case.

The teaching note typically concludes with a section called "The Follow-Up" because it reveals the actual decision the manager made. This section may also state some of the repercussions of the decision. While we can never know them all, "The Follow-Up" provides enough information to give the readers a sense of "closure" to the case.

The writer may wonder whether to write the teaching note before writing the case or after. When written before the case, the teaching note gives structure to the material included in the case, but this also creates the danger of constraining the reality of the case to reflect the preconceived notions of the case writer. When written after the case, the case note reflects the reality of the case but may not produce meaningful lessons because they are not supported by the case. Our view is that the teaching note should be written at the same time as the case, using an iterative process. The case writer should write both at the same time, moving back and forth between the two. Each will inform the other and this process will improve both.

Wrapping up the Case

Once the case and the teaching note have been completed, the case writer enters the final stage of the writing process, wrapping up the case. This stage involves a

sequential process of steps: obtaining a release of the case so it can be taught, test teaching the case, and, finally, revising the case and the teaching note as required.

Obtaining a release is the first thing the writer does in the wrap up stage. A release is a signed statement which says that the case has been reviewed and can be used as a public document. The person signing the statement is usually the formal contact person in the organization the case has come from. This manager must be senior enough to have the authority to permit the organizational data in the case to be reported. Sometimes multiple individuals will want to approve the case before its release. Whatever the situation, the writer needs to identify the power sources within the organization and to devise a strategy for ensuring timely release of the case. The formality of the release process also has the beneficial effect of forcing executive review of the case. Passing such a review validates the accuracy of the case.

The primary role of the release is to protect the confidentiality of the company. The company may ask that some disguise be applied to certain facts in the case. This can include changing the names of people and the company, altering numbers by a constant factor (such as 1.4 or 2.7), or deleting certain facts. The primary consideration when disguising the case is that the important relationships be maintained so that the reader has the opportunity to learn from the business situation just as the original executive did when the problem was first faced. Though disguises are a setback, they have to be accepted when minor, but when they are major, they may destroy the value of the case. This brings us back to the importance of establishing the working relationship with the company at the start of the case writing process.

After obtaining a release, the case needs to be test taught. This is the only way of knowing whether the case works as intended. Teaching a newly written case can be a sobering experience, especially when it does not work well. Yet even when a case seems to work well, modifications may be required. This is especially likely when the case is taught by the case writer. The writer may have fallen into the trap during class of clarifying case material, adding information, and providing explanations not found in the case. The intimate knowledge the writer has of the case situation allows this to happen. This problem can be identified by having an observer sit in class the first time the case is taught.

The writer takes the deficiencies noted while test teaching the case and modifies both the case and the teaching note. Changes to the case include adding or deleting data, clarifying points that leave readers confused or uncertain (unless the intent is to have them uncertain of the particular point), adding more clues and further processing information so that the readers arrive at the desired lessons. The teaching note should also be modified to reflect these changes. Failure to do so means that the case may always be a roaring success for the case writer but fall flat when others try to teach it.

CONCLUSIONS

Use of cases is becoming increasingly popular among those teaching about management in the food system. This has created a demand for more teaching cases which reflect management and industry-specific features. At present such cases are in short supply. This article has explained how to write a good case that will fit this need. Though good cases share particular characteristics, writing them means more than simply constructing a document that contains these characteristics. What is also needed are data that meet three requirements: they are selected according to a guiding principle, they are clearly organized, and they provide sharply defined dramatic images. Writing a good case is therefore a difficult, demanding undertaking which calls for a highly skilled writer. It is a long process that can take weeks, even months during which the writer gathers, analyzes and refines data, then writes and revises the case, and finally views the material from a new perspective when writing the teaching note.

For those who are interested in writing cases, a good way to start is to use case studies in their teaching. There is no substitute for this experience because it makes one sensitive to what is needed to make a case work in a classroom setting. Having taught a number of cases, the potential writer can then take those cases that worked well and analyze their features. Among things the writer should examine are the complexity of the case and the concepts included in it, how characters are portrayed, how the case and its principal sections are organized, and how language is used. This information gives the writer a benchmark from which to work when writing his/her own cases. With this information in mind, the writer can set about writing a case using the suggestions in this article. Those who still feel the need for further information on case writing are encouraged to look at the various notes on case writing produced by the Harvard Business School. Readers who feel a need for ideas on particular issues are referred to *Case Research: The Case Writing Process* by M.R. Leenders and J.A. Erskine (1978).

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