Guidelines for Writing Case Studies

A case study is a focused method used to inspect, analyze, and assess an individual or an institution placed in a unique situation. It allows researchers and students to review steps taken by an individual or organization and to understand the mechanics of how that individual or organization was affected by a number of factors both inherent and environmental. Case studies are special types of research presumed to contain valid, tested information about human behavior and processes. In conceiving, structuring, and writing cases, the writer should consider certain basic and conventional goals. These are described below with illustrations from various fields.

Getting Started

How well the setting is defined in a case study determines its effectiveness. This means that in writing a case study, the writer must provide enough detail across many levels in order to set the stage. At the same time, the individual subject or institution, or “the protagonist,” must be clearly introduced and followed throughout the study.

This step is the first and one of the most important. One key process to consider in beginning a case is the importance of identifying a protagonist. Some case studies focus on an individual in a unique situation while others expand the protagonist to that of an organization acting as a single decision-making body in a well-defined arena.

For example, the writer may choose to write about Sarah Verone, a Financial Analyst with Semicon International. What is essential in this example is not the name of the person or her organization, but how she is presented with some sort of dilemma. Suppose that Sarah Verone has just been transferred from Semicon International’s main office in Houston, Texas to a branch in Puebla, Mexico. What cultural factors might be introduced in the case that illustrate the importance of cultural briefings as a practice for international organizations? By focusing on Sarah Verone’s problems specifically rather than presenting a diatribe of company policies and their pitfalls, the writer will be able to bring to light the important issues at hand in an effective and convincing way.

Determining the Format

A case study may follow any one of several different formats. In fact, cases range from brief two-page studies to 20 or more pages of organized material. All case studies tend to be based on problem situations that developed over time. As such, they often follow a narrative style. A typical case layout includes the following elements:

- Introduction
- Background
- Body/Description/Facts/Data/Evidence
- Problem
- Exhibits and Figures
- References

These elements are described in more detail below. With short cases (one or two pages), there is typically no need for headings for these elements. With longer cases, descriptive headings are useful tools for organizing the text.
**Introduction.** In the introduction, the case writer presents the protagonist in a situation. The dilemma may be revealed at this time but only in a trim and brief form. Below is an example of a case introduction.

In February 1983, many of the 287 members of the National Machine Tool Builders Association (NMTBA) worried about the fates of their companies. Import penetration of the U.S. machine tool market had increased from 17% to 27% in only 5 years. The United States had experienced a trade deficit in machine tools in 1978 for the first time in over 40 years, and by 1982, that deficit had grown to half a billion dollars. The February issue of *American Machinist* magazine estimated a 67% decline in sales for the U.S. producers from 1981 to 1983. The most serious threat came from Japan, which became the world leader in machine tool production in 1982.

Japanese penetration of the U.S. market was most dramatic in the fastest growing market segment—numerically controlled machine tools. Some U.S. producers suspected that they were suffering the consequences of Japanese “industry targeting” and proposed that the American industry consider requesting government intervention. The NMTBA needed to recommend to its CEOs if protection was desirable; which import remedy, such as tariffs, quotas, or voluntary export restraints, might be the most advantageous; and which administrative channels the association should pursue (Yoffie & Gomez-Casseres 1994:425).

**Background.** The background is important to constructing the setting, particularly if the case depends upon chronological factors. Take the Semicon International case for example. The writer may want to show that the organization’s policy towards cultural briefings for expatriates has been undergoing slow change over the past five years as informal reports of disgruntled expatriates have trickled in. In this instance, the writer will want to offer background information that includes details (e.g., Semicon International attempted to provide cultural briefings two years ago, but found them to be too expensive and could not see the benefit).

**Body.** This portion of the case may not be as clearly outlined as the other parts, but it is easily identified by specific information. It is in this section of the case that the writer should concentrate on providing as much descriptive and quantitative information as possible. The aim in providing sufficient data is twofold:

1. To be true to the narrative, the writer should present all the facts. In other words, information should not be withheld.

2. Since writers should not necessarily have a solution in mind when writing the case, it is important to provide the reader with as much information as possible. There is no prescription for discovery, and the reader may find important patterns in the data that the writer would not have anticipated.

**Problem.** This section is often very brief. It includes a restating of the key issues discussed in depth and places them in the context of the specific problem facing the protagonist. This element is presented separately in order to clarify the objectives for the reader. It may include numbered study questions.

**Exhibits and Figures.** Presenting data is essential to case writing, because it provides readers with information that allows them to make determinations on their own as to where the crucial issues lie, what processes should be changed, and how they should be changed. This is the power of a case study for research and education purposes, so ample attention should be given to providing whatever data are relevant (e.g., charts, graphs, financial statements, advertisements, news articles, survey forms).
• **References.** This part of the case study documents all of the sources cited. These include books, journal articles, information downloaded from the Internet, interviews and personal communications. Sources need to be credited or cited in the main text and then listed in the reference section. All sources should be documented using a standard style format such as those provided by the Modern Language Association (MLA) or American Psychological Association (APA). Check with your instructor or editor for preferences in the formatting of the references section. Handouts with instructions for the most frequently used formats are available from the Center for Business Communication.

**Using Primary Sources**

Primary sources contain original information as well as data that are essential to any case study. There is no substitute for primary sources, because they are stripped of external bias. Examples of primary sources are:

• **Journals.** By far, these are the most important sources of information about a specific topic of research. They include any number of professional, educational, and analytical research journals (e.g., *Harvard Business Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*). **Abstracts** are useful when attempting to gather information at a broad level, quickly and conveniently. An abstract consists of a one-page synopsis of an article in a journal, but should not be used as a substitute for reading the article itself. **Indexes** provide a quick overview of where articles are located and include the topic, the author, and sometimes a brief description or listing of key words/themes contained in the article.

• **Financial Statements.** These are useful for certain types of cases that require quantitative material for the development of an idea.

• **On-line Resources.** There are a number of avenues for conducting research that can be found on the Internet. Some of these include: standard search engines (e.g., Yahoo, Alta Vista, and Infoseek), firm summaries and annual reports (e.g., Financial Times at http://www.ft.com/ ), and electronic databases, a variety of which can be found through standard search engines.

**Using Secondary Sources**

Secondary sources are useful in putting issues into a particular framework or context, but they often carry with them some bias and do not contain the specific information necessary for writing a thorough case study. They are useful in supporting arguments and further developing ideas that have already been introduced by the writer.

**Steps to Remember When Writing a Case Study**

1. Manage your time. Give enough time for each step: data collecting, background research and writing the drafts. Also allow time for revising, proofreading and correctly documenting any sources used.
2. Make an outline. This will help you to organize your information.
3. Introductions are often difficult to write. Try writing the other sections first and then go back and write the introduction later.
4. Always keep in mind the audience(s) and purpose(s) of the study.