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## ANSWERS TO YOUR QUESTIONS ABOUT CASE WRITING

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*This paper was prepared by Professors Roy A. Cook, Fort Lewis College; Peter Goulet, University of Northern Iowa; and Ed Leonard, Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW) in response to a series of questions that been posed to the editor of the Business Case Journal (BCJ) over the last few years. Collectively, the authors have many years of experience as editor of either the Business Case Journal or Annual Advances in Business Cases. The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Society for Case Research. The authors' views are based on their professional judgments and over 100 years collectively of involvement with using and writing cases. Copyright © 2006 by the Society for Case Research. No part of this work may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means without written permission of the Society for Case Research.*

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**QUESTION: How do we get more members of the academic community to take a more serious look at case writing as a significant component of their intellectual contributions portfolio?**

**RESPONSE:** AACSB International (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) has provided impetus for business educators to search continually for ways for "*improving instructional effectiveness and assuring overall student achievement, with an emphasis on converting scholarship to practice.*"<sup>1</sup> Further, AACSB's Management Education Task Force reported that "to maintain relevance in the global dynamic marketplace, traditional schools need both strong scholarship and a deep connection with current business issues."<sup>2</sup> Clearly, case research that culminates in the publication of a case with applicable teaching notes is one vehicle for achieving those purposes.

When AACSB broadened the research requirement for accreditation purposes into three categories - basic research, applied research, and research relating to instructional development - the door was opened slightly for case research to receive increased recognition from peers and administrators in tenure, promotion, and salary decisions. It is generally acknowledged that case research is an acceptable activity as long as it is accompanied by a comprehensive teaching note. Regardless, it has been our observation that case research carries minimum weight in schools that define their primary mission and focus as teaching.

It is obvious to us that the value placed on case writing and development of instructional material varies greatly from institution to institution. Our institutions have generally supported case and pedagogical research but that was not always the case. It is most disappointing to us that there are very few faculty actively involved in case research organizations (SCR, NACRA, WACRA, CASE) from those institutions listed as the "top tier" Best Undergraduate Business Programs.<sup>3</sup> We can only speculate as to why that is.

Generally, as case writers we have failed to demonstrate that we are engaged in applied research. We say it among ourselves, but fail to publicize the fact that case teaching notes must be based on extant literature and therefore either confirm or refute primary research. We may be our own worst enemies by not making this a specific requirement of the evaluation process when

reviewing teaching notes. We intuitively know to look for this as reviewers, but do not enforce extensive teaching note documentation through citations in the final published documents. This small step could go a long way in demonstrating to our colleagues and accrediting bodies the significance of case research.

The *Business Case Journal* requires that all submissions must be "field-tested" prior to review. A statement describing and detailing the author(s)' experience in using the case in the classroom is required. To add significantly to the value of the case, we suggest that authors have someone from another institution use the case in his or her class and provide the author(s) with feedback. Much can be learned from this process.

**QUESTION: Why doesn't the Society of Case Research (SCR) publish fictional cases if the learning objectives are relevant and valid for the learning experience?**

**RESPONSE:** The answer to this question goes back to the original question posed. Fictional cases are nothing more than creative writing; or to put it more pejoratively, they are a contrived accumulation of impressions devoid of facts. There is no way to test/verify the accumulated literature of an academic discipline with fantasy; we must use reality.

During the past several decades, business education has been engaged in a process of self-assessment, which, in our opinion, has resulted in minimal change. Faculty are often accused of being more interested in publishing their research findings in some arcane and obscure academic journal read by perhaps a handful of other researchers than in conducting research and applying theoretical concepts to improve management (business school) education. We believe that the benefits of case research as a viable intellectual contribution can only withstand the historic criticism if we view the process as an archeological dig. Case research, the resultant case and the teaching note should be the result of a systematic study of the organization and its operating environment, not the result of information that can readily be gleaned from the popular press.

As stated almost 100 years ago by Harvard Business School Dean Edwin Gay:

In the courses on Commercial Law the case, method will be used. ... Visits of inspection will be made under competent guidance to various commercial establishments in Boston and in the neighborhood manufacturing centres of New England.<sup>4</sup>

Dean Gay encouraged faculty to integrate real-world concepts and experiences in what and how they taught. In our opinion, it has never been more critical for business school faculty to engage students in real-world experiences. There are hundreds of organizational opportunities waiting for faculty to conduct case research.

**QUESTION: Why should an author get permission (authorization) from the organization to publish the case?**

**RESPONSE:** The answer to this question comes down to the basics - ethical behavior and professionalism. First, authors should request permission to allow the target organization or individual to check for accuracy, or putting it more simply, to make sure that the facts are correct. Second, there are legal issues involved if the author is not dealing with publicly available information and permission provides a shield from possible legal actions from slander to

dissemination of trade secrets. Even if a case has been disguised, it usually doesn't take much effort to pierce the disguise.

Increasingly, we find that authors are having great difficulty gaining "afterthe-fact" permission. We suggest that you prepare an outline of your strategy for researching and presenting the case, including a list of the learning objectives and related discussion questions that will be in the teaching note. Get a preliminary approval from the appropriate organizational official before you invest too much time going down a trail that leads nowhere.

**QUESTION: When should I disguise a case?**

**RESPONSE:** There are several good reasons for disguising a case. First, small business owners may express a preference for anonymity so that proprietary information is protected. This is when competitors would love to have access to financial and other information not normally available as in the case of publicly held corporations. As case authors, we all have disguised the name of the organization, the names of employees, and the location, but not the financial information or industry since altering the latter would preclude in-depth student analysis of the industry and competitive environment.

If one were to write a case about Health South, Enron, Boeing, or Hewlett-Packard, certain individuals in the case could be portrayed in an unfavorable light. All of these are high-profile situations and would not be worth the time and effort to disguise.

The potential "richness" of the case can be destroyed when cases are disguised. Sometimes, in an effort to disguise a case, authors move from reality to fiction. We suggest that you use disguise only as a last resort. Of course, if you decide to disguise the case, you run the risk of not being able to get permission to publish.<sup>5</sup>

**QUESTION: If using material / concepts and theories found in any basic text, (e g., strategic management, marketing, finance, organizational behavior), does the material need to be addressed in the case?**

**RESPONSE:** The basics always need to be covered as case teaching notes expand and "verify" the literature. As case writers, we must never forget that our research can be used by a wide audience ranging from senior professors to graduate students and trainers. Some users may be familiar with the material, but it may be new to others.

**QUESTION: What are the key criteria for publishing a case in the *Business Case Journal*?**

**RESPONSE:** As detailed in the paper, "How To Review Cases: A Primer," there are several major factors used to evaluate a case's potential for publication in the *BCJ*. The three most important criteria are: (1) having a complete and effective teaching note, grounded in research; (2) having well-defined learning objectives which the student may achieve through reading and analyzing the case; and (3) having a well-defined introductory "hook" to capture the readers' attention and define the problem(s) in the case.

While teaching notes are not published in the *BCJ* for security and other reasons, they are often the most important part of the review process. Many seasoned reviewers read the teaching note for a case before reading the case so they can be certain what the author(s) intended to accomplish with the case and whether or not the effort was successful.

Noted author Peter Drucker raised the question: "What business are we really in?" And one of Stephen Covey's habits encouraged one to "begin with the end in mind!" To be effective, a case should have one or more clear objectives and an educational focus. What should the case contribute to the learning of students in the course for which it is intended to be used? What should the student learn from this case? The case should also include the information necessary for the student to achieve the case objectives. All too often, cases are submitted that are written in such a way that they will not facilitate the achievement of the desired learning objectives and permit the students to answer the questions posed. As reviewers, we have been frustrated because the author has used 'generic' questions where the student can answer them without ever having read the case. Thus, many submissions fail to garner a full review because the teaching note is wholly inadequate.

Finally, a case cannot be effective if no one reads it. If the case cannot grab the reader's interest early, the impact will usually be lost. The first paragraph or two must present a problem or situation of interest quickly and set the stage for the narrative to follow. Generally, the case should also wrap up with a problem summary or other ending that brings the case full circle with the introductory hook.

Occasionally, a submitted case will fail to meet one or more of the above criteria but would be of interest (fill a literature void) and have publication potential if revised extensively. In such circumstances, the editor will make pointed and constructive suggestions for revision and encourage the author(s) to continue the development of the case. Recommendations may include a suggestion that the authors take the case to the SCR Case Writer's Workshop, where it will be constructively reviewed and additional suggestions made before resubmitting to the *BCJ*.

**QUESTION: How long does it take to get a case published?**

**RESPONSE:** Obviously, if the submitted case and teaching note clearly include the necessary ingredients and need little revision, the time from submission to publication is significantly shortened. Not long ago, we had a case submitted in November that was published in the Winter Issue of the *BCJ* — a submission to publication time of less than four months. Much of that was also the result of an author who heeded the suggestions and recommendations of the reviewers and editor and made a very quick turn on the revision.

If the submitted case is deemed worthy of further review beyond the initial review by the editor or associate editors, it is sent out to three members of the Editorial Review Board. We ask that they constructively review the case within 30 days, complete the review forms, and offer suggestions for improvement. As academicians, we realize that the demands on our time will vary during the academic year. During certain times the initial review process has taken much longer. It must be pointed out that we receive over 100 submissions per year to the *BCJ* and, at best, we might publish 16 to 20 of them. What happens to the others?

We encourage authors of those cases to participate in the SCR Case Writer's Workshop where they can continue to develop and eventually publish their submissions in SCR's Annual Advances in Business Cases. Generally, cases presented at the summer workshop are published within the next 12 to 14 months by Annual Advances.

To reduce the time from submission to publication, the *BCJ* requires that the case be "field tested," preferably by faculty other than the authors. This allows others to raise questions and concerns that the authors can address prior to submission to the *BCJ*.

**QUESTION: Based on your experiences as editors, what are the key factors that prevent a case from being accepted for publication?**

**RESPONSE:** The preparation of a case and teaching note requires the author(s) to conduct a thorough investigation and analysis of the organization and its operating environment. Their inability to demonstrate that they have done their homework is the primary reason for rejection. The following are also reasons for rejection:

- A. No clearly defined learning objectives. Learning objectives are not relevant or adequate for the case submission. Case does not include sufficient information to achieve the desired learning objectives
- B. Inadequate or poorly written teaching note. Teaching note inadequately presents relevant research to ground the case in the literature.
- C. Lack of a "hook" or the case is boring.
- D. No decision point or issue readily apparent.
- E. Poorly written.
- F. Failing to respond to reviewer suggestions or concerns.
- G. Author's unwillingness to put forth the effort to revise the case or teaching note pursuant to the editor's or reviewers' suggestions.
- H. Inability of the author(s) to meet timelines. Several years ago, the editor tentatively accepted a case if the author would revise according to the suggestions of the editor and the Editorial Review Board. The editor imposed a reasonable (60-day) expectation for when the revision was to be accomplished. Almost a year later, the author resubmitted his case and so much had changed in the industry environment that the editor rejected it. In the interim, there had been much pleading for the author to revise and resubmit the case. The inability of authors to meet time schedules is the primary reason for non-acceptance in the Annual Advances.
- I. Case does not fit with the needs of the *BCJ*. On occasion, we will attempt to devote an entire issue of the *BCJ* to cases in a particular subject matter area. For example, the winter 2006/2007 and summer 2007 issues will focus on marketing strategy and entrepreneur cases. Of course, the editor can usually find room for a really good case that would interest our readers; provide student-learning opportunities; and have a high probability of being selected for inclusion in textbooks or course packs.
- J. Out-of-date case or too many cases already written on the subject situation.
- K. Too many submissions — only so much space! Authors should remember that the *BCJ* publishes two issues a year and thus only accepts 12 to 20 cases per year out of the 100 or so that are submitted.
- L. Ego — In about one of every four submissions, the author(s) believes that the case should be accepted "as is." Some authors are unwilling to put forth the effort or take the time to write a "good" case.

**QUESTION: What are the key steps to case writing?**

**RESPONSE:** Identify a situation or a target organization that will provide learning opportunities and be interesting to your students. Ask yourself this question: "What is it that the organization has done or is doing that can be used to illustrate or tie together concepts, theories, or trends in my academic field?"

- A. Identify the primary teaching/learning objectives for writing the case.
- B. Develop a strategy for gaining access to the organization and its key decision makers.
  1. Make data and information needs clear up front.
  2. Check on non-disclosure/prior review agreements before publication.
  3. Identify who will sign off for the organization.
- C. Collect data through field research (obtain permission to publish) and/or secondary sources.
- D. Write a brief overview of the case including objectives and target audiences (this will become part of the teaching note).
- E. Write the case to meet the needs of target audiences based on previously identified objectives.
- F. Complete development of the teaching note with questions, answers, and discussion citing relevant literature.
- G. Provide a copy of the case to the organization for factual review and final permission (Note: The teaching note need not be submitted for permission).
- H. Try the case out in the classroom to identify and correct potential problems as well as to discover possible omissions of needed facts or additional questions or discussion topics for the teaching note.
- I. Take the case and teaching note to a case writer's workshop where you will receive constructive suggestions and additional guidance.
- J. Revise your case and teaching note and submit for possible publication.

The *BCJ* accepts both cases and case studies. Historically, the student was put into the manager's (decision maker's) shoes and asked to make recommendations (a decision) appropriate to the context of the situation (a case). We have defined a case study as a description of a real situation. Authors must provide sufficient background information such that the student can evaluate how effectively or ineffectively the situation was managed.

There are inherent problems with both approaches. In some classrooms the first time the student has heard of the organization is when the professor assigned the case. We then ask the student: "If you were the CEO, what would you do?" In all likelihood, the student will not know about the decision style of the CEO and will not possess the same skills, knowledge, abilities, or emotional attachment to the problem. Case studies must present enough detail to challenge the students to think outside the box. We have found that the typical student will go online and find out what the organization has done since the case was written and the problems the organization has encountered rather than develop his or her own critical thinking skills.

**QUESTION: How does a novice (I want to be a case writer) learn about case writing?**

**RESPONSE:** It is our belief that one can learn to be a better case writer by reading some of the very best cases. Writing cases is much like learning how to ride a bike, swim, or ski. It takes practice, coaching, and experience. Beginning case writers are often unsure of themselves as few graduate programs encourage case writing. The way that a prospective case writer uses cases in the classroom can also influence his or her willingness to engage in case writing.

There are several ways a novice can learn how to write cases.

- A. Reviewing the leading texts in your field and identifying those textbook cases that are

the most effective for providing student-learning opportunities, (i.e., learning to write good cases by reading good cases.)

- B. Teaming up with an experienced colleague as a mentor or co-author,
- C. Taking a case and teaching note to a case writing workshop for review and critique,<sup>6</sup>
- D. Attending a case writing workshop as a participant,
- E. Reading books and articles on case research and writing,<sup>7</sup>
- F. Accessing web-based resources such as those found on the SCR Web site ([sfcr.org](http://sfcr.org)), and
- G. Attending and presenting at regional and national conferences that contain a case research track.

**QUESTION: Is there light at the end of the tunnel?**

**RESPONSE:** Currently, AACSB International sponsors teaching effectiveness seminars with a focus on the creation and delivery of relevant, student-focused courses. Among the expected learning outcomes is "to learn to actively engage students in the learning process, provide feedback, and encourage collaboration and cooperation."<sup>8</sup> We can think of no better way to engage students in their learning process than through the use of cases.

**ENDNOTES**

1. See AACSB International (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) (September 2003) "Sustaining Scholarship in Business Schools," *Report of the Doctoral Faculty Commission to AACSB International's Board of Directors*; and AACSB International (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) (2003) "Why Management Education Matters."
2. See AACSB International (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) (April 2002) "Management Education at Risk," *Report from the Management Education Task Force*.
3. See "Best Undergraduate Business Programs: 2007 Rankings," *U. S. News & World Report* (August 28, 2006). Annual Report America's Best Colleges. Also see "The Best B-Schools," *Business Week* (October 23, 2006), pp. 56+.
4. Quoted from Barnes, L. B., Christensen, C. R., and Hansen, A. J. *Teaching and the Case Method: Text, Cases, and Readings*. 3rd Edition. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1994), pp. 39-40.
5. The Society for Case Research panel discussion "Case Writing: To Disguise or Not to Disguise?" (March 17, 2005) reached the following conclusions regarding the disguising of cases: (1) Disguise a case only as a last resort — avoid doing so if at all possible. (2) Disguise to the minimum extent possible — changing only the names of individuals is better than changing the names of both individuals and the organization, which is better than changing the names of the individuals and the organization and masking the industry as well. (3) Get permission from the proper authority to present or publish the case to minimize any possible repercussions, particularly should the disguise fail at some point.

Panel participants included: Kay Hodge (current editor of *Annual Advances in Business Cases*), University of Nebraska at Kearney; Bill Stratton (current program chair and editor, *SCR Annual Meeting Proceedings*), Idaho State University; and Joe Thomas (former editor of the *Business Case Journal*), Middle Tennessee State University.

6. The Society for Case Research 2007 Case Writer's Workshop is being hosted by the College of Business & Economics, University of Wisconsin — River Falls, July 12— 14. Contact Professors Claire Kilian (Claire.m.kilian([duwrf.edu](mailto:duwrf.edu)) or Jude Rathburn (jude.rathburn@[uwrf.edu](mailto:uwrf.edu)) for information. The 2008 workshop will be hosted by Northern Kentucky University. Workshop co-chairs are Kenneth Rhee ([rhee@nku.edu](mailto:rhee@nku.edu)) and Tracey Sigler ([silgert@nku.edu](mailto:silgert@nku.edu)).

The Richard Ivey School of Business ([www.ivey.ca.workshops](http://www.ivey.ca.workshops)) also hosts Annual Case Writing and Case Learning and Teaching Workshops. Ivey is a very large producer and distributor of cases. Also see [www.nacra.net](http://www.nacra.net) and [www.wacra.org](http://www.wacra.org) for additional information about case writing opportunities.

7. See the following:

Anderson, L., and Krathwohl, D. R. (2001) *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. (New York: Longman).

Barnes, L. B., Christensen, C. R., and Hansen, A. J. (1994) "Next Steps: Writing Cases for Your Own Teaching Seminars," in *Teaching and the Case Method: Text, Cases, and Readings*. 3rd Edition. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press), pp. 285-295.

Bloom, B. S., and Krathwohl, D. R. (1955) "Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals" in *Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*. (New York: Longman, Green).

Blumenthal, J (1991) "Use of the Case Method in MBA Education," *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 4, pp. 5-13.

Blunden, R. G., and McGuinness, N. W. (1993) "The Real Case Method: A Response to Critics of Business Education," *Case Research Journal*, 13, pp. 106-119.

Freedman, C. (December 1999/January 2000) "Cooking with Betty Crocker: A Recipe for Case Writing," *Journal of College Science Teaching*, pp. 156-158.

Lawrence, P. (1953) "The Preparation of Case Material," in K. R. Andrews, editor, *The Case Method of Teaching Human Relations and Administration*, pp. 210-232. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Naumes, W., and Naumes, M. (1999) *The Art and Craft of Case Writing* (San Francisco: Sage Publications).

Wylie, D. (2003) "What is a Good Case and Teaching Note," CMI—Case Method Institute, Babson College. There are many good monographs found on the CMI home page. CMI also offers a comprehensive range of case-teaching and case-writing faculty development workshops.

8. See AACSB Conferences & Seminars (<http://www.aacsb.edu/conferences>) for the complete list of learning outcomes and dates for the Teaching Effectiveness Seminars.