

A Word from the Editor ...

An Anchor in Time...

When students read a case, they need to know *when* they are reading it. Students themselves may not realize the need, since to them, they are reading the case now whenever “now” is. Students always start from their current experiential position. Given the chance, they will always analyze a case retrospectively, maintaining themselves in the present—comfortably distant from the decisions and the people in the case.

As case teachers, however, we usually want our students to identify with the people and the problems the case describes. We want them to feel what it’s like to be in the case situation, faced with the ambiguities and stresses the case characters see. When we establish a problem focus for the case, we know what we want the students to think about. It is also up to us as case writers to help position the students in time—to see when they should think about the case dilemmas.

Many manuscripts arriving at the Case Research Journal offices are written in the present tense. It is natural for researchers, particularly those unaccustomed to the case medium, to describe an organization or a problem as they see it while gathering the data. Thus researchers in 1989 might have written, “IBM is the unchallenged leader of the world computer industry, with an unbroken record of earnings increases and employment security for its people.” While undeniably true in 1989, the words are manifestly foolish in 1995 when IBM is not unchallenged, not growing, and not secure. A student reading the case in 1993 (or later), knowing of IBM’s plight in the changed computer environment, would put no faith in anything the case says. Because those 1989 researchers wrote in the present tense, they condemned their output to uselessness in the future.

If they had said, “In 1989, IBM was the...” those writers would have given students an anchor point for reading the case in the future. Students would know when they were examining the computer industry, and could compare its present condition (whether in 1995 or 1997) with what the case authors and IBM people saw in 1989. Without that anchor in time, students will read the case in their own *now* and evaluate it accordingly.

Because the future is unpredictable to us as we write, but known to students when they read our material some years hence, we must anchor our cases in identifiable time. We must avoid time-biased words like “currently” and “two years ago” and “now.” All of these words and phrases assume the students are sitting at our shoulder, reading the case at the same time we write it. They are relative time references, assuming the students are in the same *now* as the writers. They are not, however.

All these wordings are proper of course, in quotations from the case characters, who always have their own “*now*” and tell us what they see and feel in it. Their present-tense statements can actually help the students of the future identify with the time period and environment of the case. But it is usually important that the descriptive material of the case be couched in the past tense.

There will always be exceptions to this rule, fortunately, but they will still allow students to form a clear picture of *when* they are analyzing the material. Edward R. Murrow’s dramatic device for bringing history to life in the present tense - “It is July 4th, 1776, and *you are there*” - always

began with the date. Our aim as case writers may be to present situations for analysis with 1993 methodologies, but only by preserving the temporal context of the data do we make it real to the reader. In effect, our students become time travelers, carrying today's analytic techniques (whenever today is) into the past for application.

Few cases are time-independent, but there are some classic examples of situations so fundamental that the year of their occurrence is irrelevant and can be omitted from the case. *The Rose Company*, in Business Policy, is an example; its environment is vague enough to fit in any kind of economy, with any kind of technology, and still ring true. Even *The Rose Company* is written in the past tense.

Students in the future are the customers of case writers today. We must put ourselves in their shoes, to look backward from their vantage point at the business situations we document today. We must give them anchors in time, in order to gain their respect and attention.