WRITING A PUBLISHABLE CASE: SOME GUIDELINES

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Over the last four years in my capacity as the Associate Editor of the Case <u>Research</u> Journal I have reviewed numerous cases. Many of them had considerable potential but were poorly developed. This is unfortunate because even though there is no standard formula for writing effective cases there are certain guidelines which I believe consistently lead to better cases. Therefore, at the request of the North American Case Research Association, the purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the guidelines I use when reviewing cases. I will organize my discussion around the four criteria the Case <u>Research Journal</u> uses for evaluating cases: (1) case focus, (2) case data, *(3)* case organization, and (4) writing style.

CASE FOCUS

In my opinion, a case is not a case unless it has a focus. Even a well—written, well—organized case with all the data one could possibly desire cannot be published in the <u>Case Research Journal</u> if it does not have
a focus. By focus, I mean the key decision or decisions facing the managers of the organization during the time in which the case is set. Whether or not to make an acquisition is a focus. How to turn around an unprofitable company is a focus. What to do about a problem employee is another, although much narrower, focus. But a case which merely describes the existing situation of an organization without orienting it to a specific decision or set of decisions has no focus. In fact, as I alluded to above, I do not consider such papers to be cases. In my view, a "case" without a focus should not be written!

Not all focuses are equally desirable. Cases with timely, important, unique, and provocative focuses are obviously always preferable to those without them. For example, all else held equal, divestiture cases are better than acquisitions cases simply because there are fewer of them around. However, there is always room in the <u>Case Research Journal</u> for another well—done acquisition case.

Despite what some may think, having a focus does not preclude the case from dealing with hidden issues nor does it mean that the reader will automatically know what to do with the case. What the focus does though, is to alert the reader to the problems that managers of the organization are trying to solve, thereby putting the reader in their shoes. Since the decision—maker may not totally understand the situation, the focus of the case might reflect the wrong problem or merely the symptoms of an underlying problem. Nonetheless, a good focus allows the reader to put the situation in perspective, giving them a frame of reference around which to relate the various pieces of information they encounter while reading the case.

Since the focus provides a basis for the reader to mentally organize the data presented in the body of the case, it should appear in the introduction. This is hardly unique to case writing. Any good journal

article, novel, or newspaper story does the same thing. Likewise, the conclusion of the case should bring the reader back, full—circle, to the focus of the case. Besides providing a sense of closure to the reader, it allows them to reflect again on the information contained within the case. Because good cases usually have a lot to say, this helps readers organize their thoughts and avoid unnecessary frustration.

CASE DATA

The best cases I have read, almost without exception, are based on field research. At the Case Research Journal we will generally not accept cases that are not based on field research unless they are extremely well done or provocative. Cases based on field research usually reflect a deeper understanding of the situation because the case writer was there. Spending time talking to managers and witnessing the day—to—day operations of the organization gives the case writer a better appreciation of the situation, an appreciation that will usually come across in the case. The perspectives of the managers, the pressures they face, the related sub—issues they must contend with, and so on, tend to be better developed when some field research has been conducted.

While I prefer cases based on field research, it is possible to develop an effective case from secondary sources. When attempting to write such cases though, it becomes even more important to make sure that the case contains sufficient data for the reader to address its focus.

Although the types of information will vary depending on the focus of the case, as a general rule a good case will contain as much information as possible about the situation facing the company. It will include data on all or most of the organization's major competitors, its suppliers, its customers, and so on. Cases should also provide at least a modest amount of information on the general economic, social, legal, and political environment of the organization. Demographic data and information on the local area environment should also be provided where applicable.

The case should describe, to the greatest extent possible, the strategy, objectives, finances, and internal operations of the company. The products or services the organization offers and the markets it serves are absolutely essential. The functional operations and policies of the organization should be comprehensively described as well. It is also necessary to reflect the unique advantages or disadvantages the organization possesses in each functional area so the reader will understand what the organization can and can not do to deal with the problems it faces.

In addition, the case should provide background data on the organization and its managers and personnel. If possible, it is useful to bring the individuals in the case to "life," so to speak, by providing hints on their personalities and problems. Direct quotes are especially useful in this respect. Such information gives the case a special flavor and helps the reader better relate to the situation.

In my opinion, these data are necessary for all cases to a greater or lesser extent depending on the focus. I fully understand that managers must make a multitude of decisions based on incomplete information. This, however, does not excuse case writers from the responsibility of including all the information at their disposal. This rule holds whether the case is designed for the business policy class or for a functional area course such as marketing or finance. Student should not be encouraged to make decisions based on conjecture, nor should they learn to make decisions in a vacuum. Although I realize that this often happens in practice, I am totally against any implicit suggestions that this is proper. We are not supposed to teach students to be myopic; there will be time enough for them to learn that when they get out into "the real world!"

CASE ORGANIZATION

As I mentioned above the first rule of case organization is to present the focus at the outset of the case and to end the case in a similar vein. In addition, the introduction should provide information on the time period in which the case was written, the location of the company, and the managers responsible for making the decisions. Again, these guidelines apply to practically any sort of writing.

Once the stage has been set there are a few general guidelines which will help organize the case data effectively. First of all, to the extent possible, information should be presented chronologically. Thus, the section(s) immediately following the introduction should provide background data on the organization, its managers, and sometimes even the environment. This is important because it gives the reader a better perspective as to why the organization is in its current predicament.

Second, once the reader is brought "up—to—date" the remainder of the case should be organized from the general to the specific and from the external to the internal. In other words, background data should be followed by a description of the external environment of the organization, i.e. its suppliers, competitors, markets, and so on.

Next, the case should discuss the specific products and customers of the organization. From there it should proceed to the organization's various functional area operations. As a general rule the most important functions are described before those which are less important although there is no one way that will always work best. Usually, I prefer to describe the important line functions and policies of the organization (R&D, manufacturing, marketing, and distribution) before I describe its staff functions (finance, personnel) and structure (organization and management). I prefer this framework for organizing most cases. However, in some circumstances it may be more effective to describe the organization before its environment. Either approach can work. The main point to remember is that the case should never intermingle sections on the organization and the environment.

In most cases once 41 these sections have been completed the only thing that remains to be done is to conclude the case by bringing the reader back full—circle to its focus. However, some cases will require additional sections. For example, a good acquisition case (e.g. Marilyn Taylor's case on "Beech Aircraft") will usually save the description of the company to be acquired till the end. This is quite logical since the acquisition issue is what the case focuses on in the first place. From there the case naturally flows back toward the decision to be made.

The internal organization of each section should be logical and consistent as well. For example, case writers should avoid discussing marketing problems in the section on production operations. Likewise, the section(s) on the environment should not contain a lot of information on the organization itself. Doing so just makes it that much harder for the reader to understand the situation and find needed data for conducting the analysis later. While a good case should force students to dig deep for acceptable solutions they should not be forced to re—read the entire case to find each tidbit of information they need. I would rather see them spend most of their time analyzing the data instead of just finding it.

Exhibits need to be well—organized too. The first few exhibits will normally provide financial data to give readers an early perspective on the severity of the problems facing the organization. Whether or not this approach is taken, exhibits should be referenced in the appropriate section and numbered consecutively in the same order as they appear in the case.

WRITING STYLE

A case is nothing more than a story about an organization and the individuals that make it up. Cases should be interesting and easy to read. Although it is difficult to describe all the finer points that

distinguish well—written cases from ones that are not well—written, there are a few general guidelines that can be offered.

First cases should be written in the past tense. Because the case describes the situation facing an organization at a particular point in time, as soon as it is completed it is dated. As the case gets older it becomes a bit confusing to the reader if it is written in the present tense. This is especially true for cases that deal with well—known organizations. The reader will find it more difficult to divorce what they know has happened from what was happening when the case was composed unless it is written in the past tense.

Second, the case should describe what is going on as objectively as possible. As a general rule references to the case writer's opinions should be avoided. Still, such references are preferable to presenting opinions or observations as facts. Letting the reader make his or her own judgments on the validity of certain pieces of information is part of the learning process cases are designed to facilitate. There is probably no better way to let the reader know what a manager is thinking (or what he or she is like) than to include direct quotes.

Finally, if a picture is worth a thousand words then a good exhibit must at least be worth five hundred. Liberal use of exhibits permits more information to be included in the same amount of space.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have attempted to provide some general guidelines on case writing. Undoubtedly, there are points I have overlooked. Most certainly there will be individuals who will take exception to the points I have included. Nonetheless, while following these guidelines will not ensure that a case will be published it should increase the probability.