

Case Writing Guidelines

Guidelines for Case Analysis: These guidelines have been prepared to assist you in analyzing cases and getting the most from your case experience. They should be particularly useful for those of you who have not yet been exposed to the case method.

A case typically describes a company situation and a set of issues that must be resolved by a manager. Information in the case includes facts, opinions, and prejudices concerning the situation. Good cases describe a major threat or opportunity facing management and the situation of a company under stress in a particular time period. They provide enough information to permit understanding and evaluation of both factual and judgmental information, the development of an explicit conclusion concerning actions that ought to be taken, and the reasons for those actions. Analysis should be confined to careful review of facts and opinions in the case (and seldom requires gathering additional information). In fact, finding out what actually happened should not influence your analysis. Cases are designed to develop your analysis and decision making skills.

In a case, you are asked to assume the role of a decision maker. During your first read through the case you should determine:

1. **who** this decision maker is and what is his or her role in the organization;
2. **what** is the issue that needs to be resolved and what is its significance to the organization;
3. **why** the issue has arisen and why it is particularly important now; and,
4. **when** a decision needs to be made.

At your subsequent reading of the case you should delve into the case in more detail. The following outlines key steps to take in any case analysis:

1. Expand on the issues. Determine what are the surface issues and what are the basic or underlying issues. The immediate issues must be resolved but the basic issues may be more fundamental to the organization and may be the keys to its ultimately achieving its objectives.
2. Determine the strategic importance of the issues to the organization; are they crucial or of limited importance. Also determine the urgency of dealing with the issue. Clearly you want to focus on those issues which are urgent and important.
3. Identify the fundamental causes of the problems and the constraints faced by the organization in resolving these problems.
4. Generate alternative courses of action. Some may be obvious but others will take some creativity to identify. Group discussions/brainstorming sessions may be valuable here.
5. Next determine what criteria you will use to evaluate the alternatives. They may be both quantitative and qualitative. Also try to assign some measure of the relative importance of each. Quantitative techniques useful here are classified as *multi-criteria decision making methods*.
6. Assess the outcomes on the basis of the criteria. Determine which alternative action you prefer and why. There might be a need to take into account some measure of uncertainty which could impinge on the success of undertaking some action.

7. Develop an action plan. It should be specific and include sufficient details for the plan to be implemented under any reasonable contingency. Determine what outcomes may be expected from its implementation.
8. Identify the potential risks and impediments that may be encountered when implementing the plan and how you propose to address them.
9. Note any assumptions you have made and any important information that may be missing from the case.

It is important to recognize that the *process* of arriving at an answer is as important or even more important than the answer itself. There is no right "answer" to any case. This process is intended to be equivalent to what real world managers face in day-to-day management situations. You will experience periods of considerable frustration in case analysis because of the complexity of the forces and factors involved and the uncertainties associated with decision making in this context. The payoff however is the development of important attributes of a decision maker—creativity, critical thinking, the capacity to recognize and distinguish important problems from unimportant ones, the capacity to analyze and reason about complex issues, and make decisions, and the capacity to communicate effectively. The case method is one approach to teaching in which you truly "get out of it what you put into it." What you learn in case analysis is directly related to the effort you are willing to put into it.

Some General Comments on Case Analysis

1. Assumptions. If analysis cannot proceed because the assumptions on which it is based are not explicitly given in the case, it is often useful to create assumptions and state them explicitly. This can unblock analysis and lead to useful insights. Even if your assumptions are wrong, a good analysis which flows from them is better than no analysis at all! Also, be prepared to challenge executive opinions and beliefs about the nature of the problem given in the case and/or data that has been hastily compiled or based on poor research.
2. Integration. Effective integration means that the alternatives should be clearly related to the identified problems, the issues should be critical to the alternatives chosen, and the conclusion should flow logically from the analysis. If alternatives are specified but not evaluated, the analysis is incomplete. If issues are developed which do not aid in the choice of alternatives, the material should not be included in the analysis.
3. Issue definition. Do not specify an issue that is either too broad or too narrow. A problem specified too broadly will result in alternatives for which there are no data on which to base analysis. The choice of a very narrow problem can result in a failure to deal with issues for which case data is available and important analysis can be missed. Keep in mind, however, that a case writer may intentionally or inadvertently include information of little relevance to the problem at hand.
4. Alternatives. Try to select a set of alternatives that are relatively exclusive or allow distinctions in strategy. Alternatives which are too similar often lead to overlooking some important detail or restricting analysis unnecessarily.
5. Do's and Don'ts. You may find the following a useful list of Do's and Don'ts in case analysis:

- Be complete
- Avoid rehashing case facts
- Make reasonable assumptions
- Don't confuse symptoms with problems
- Don't confuse opportunities with taking action
- Deal with objectives realistically
- Recognize alternatives
- Don't be inflexible
- Discuss the pros and cons of each alternative
- Use financial and other quantitative information
- Reach a clear decision
- Make good use of evidence developed in your analysis

At the onset, it is important to understand that a written case report is not the same as a typical consulting report or term paper. Both of these usually provide historical or background information. In a case report, the contents of the case provide this information and it is unnecessary to repeat it. On the other hand, a case report should provide the analytical framework on which a manufacturing plan rests. It is this framework and the logic of analysis and reporting which must be mastered for successful case work.