

NOTE: The source of the material in this note is “Writing Cases”, fourth edition, Leenders, Mauffette-Leenders, and Erskine, Richard Ivey School of Business, The University of Western Ontario, ISBN 0-7714-2270-9. It is highly recommended that aspiring writers obtain the complete text.

The Organization or Outline of the Case by Subtitles

“Outlining the case by subtitles has several major advantages. It gives an idea of the information flow of the finished case. It also sets a framework within which the data requirements can be assessed. As a result, the data collection and writing stages will be more orderly and easier to execute.

The usual shape of a case in outline form can be represented as a cone standing vertically on its point. The shape relates to a narrowing down or focusing process, rather than the amount of information to be collected at each stage (see Exhibit 1).

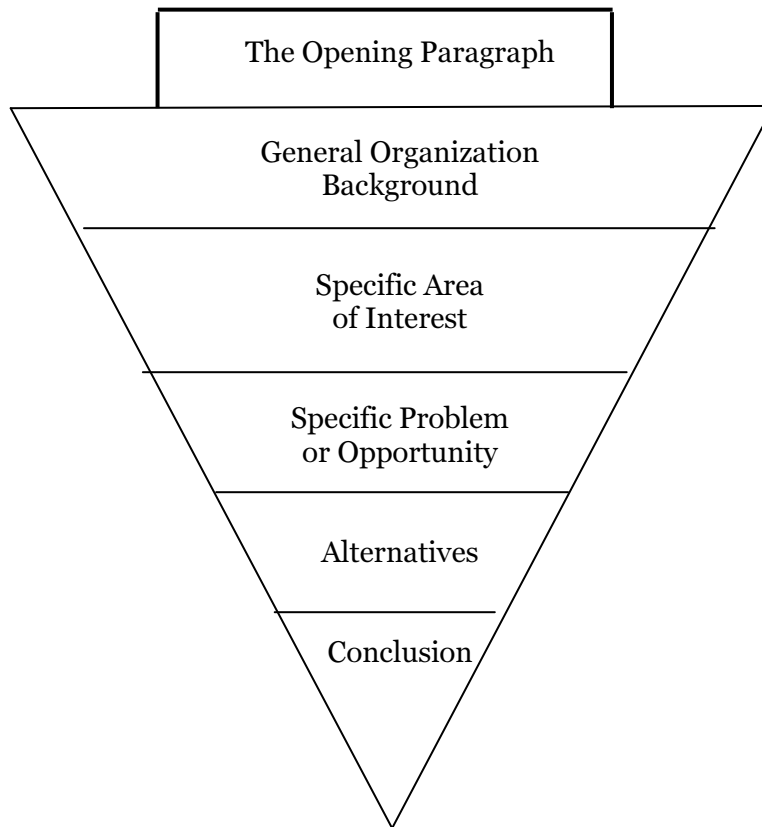
The Opening Paragraph

As shown in Exhibit 1, the opening paragraph forms the eyepiece or lens to the case and sits on top of the cone.

General Company Background

The first subtitle following the opening paragraph could be background, company or the name of the organization. Frequently used other subtitles in this early part of the case include: company or organization history, industry and/or company overview, major product(s)/service(s), the organization’s competitive premise, competition, financial overview, organization, geographical coverage, the parent company, business units or subsidiaries.

Exhibit 1
Proposed Case Outline by Subtitles



Specific Area of Interest

Typically, the next major subtitle starts to focus on the major function or part of the organization in which the key decision maker works. For many cases, the decision, problem or opportunity lies in a particular department or function of the organization. For example, the decision may be in marketing, accounting, finance, production, human resources, information systems or some other areas of the organization. Additional subtitle options in this section may include: the history of the function, recent changes, relations with other departments, main responsibilities, challenges of the function and staffing.

An additional subtitle often used as part of this area in the case deals with the personal background of the decision maker and other key people in the case. Optional subtitles may include: the name of the person, the position of the person, personal background or personal history.

Specific Issue, Decision, Problem or Opportunity

Further focusing takes place by concentrating on the specific issue or decision at hand. The context has been established for the contributing organization and the area within which the decision is placed. The number of potential subtitles under this section will vary with each case. Samples could include: the project, the project schedule, the new product launch, the

production process, the re-organization plan, the bank's offer, the financial plan, the system start-up, the equipment installation, the customer complaint, the accident and the merger proposal. This process of narrowing in as the case progresses can be compared to subsequent shots with a camera with a zoom lens. Starting with a wide angle shot, subsequent shots zoom in on the subject under different sub-titles.

Additional titles may delineate various aspects of the issue. These subtitles might well outline a time frame (for example: Week 1, Week 2, and so on) or they might suggest an event sequence (for example: design, prototype, pilot run and production run).

NOTE: A good case can take one of three dimensions:

1. State the facts and leave the reader to determine if there is a problem/opportunity, and if so, what should be done about it?
2. Identify the decision management made and ask the student to critique it.
3. State the problem/opportunity and ask the student to determine what should be done.

Alternatives

Most important decisions normally involve a choice among two or more alternatives. The case writer chooses whether to provide none, some, or all of these alternatives considered within the contributing organization. The educational purpose and the decision frame cut choice will dictate how many alternatives to include. Alternatives may be identified by capital letters (Alternative A), or numbers (Alternative 1), or by the type of decision (such as The Make Alternative or The Buy Alternative), or by the origin of the alternative (such as Campbell's Proposal and Williamson's Proposal).

Conclusion

Every case requires an ending. For some case writers the last subtitle can simply be the word Conclusion. Often, the case just ends with a paragraph or two following the section on alternatives without a separate heading. Since the ending often contains deadline information, other subtitles like The Next Meeting, The Task Force Schedule, The Customer's Expectations, The Deadline, and The Board of Directors Meetings are typical options.

Data Requirements

The most difficult part of the Case Plan deals with the listing of data requirements under each subtitle. In the first place, it is already a challenge for most case writers to visualize what their final case will look like in terms of major building blocks by identifying the subtitles. Secondly, it is difficult to identify just how much information needs to be included in the case to meet the teaching objectives. Nagging in the back of the case writer's head may also be the worry that the information may not be available in real life. It is probably more appealing to go data collecting "shooting from the hip" so to speak. Nevertheless, it is most important to go through this fourth step carefully to help avoid misunderstandings and to facilitate data collection, provisional release, and the subsequent writing process.

A case writer should not ask for all available information in the company in hopes of finding the relevant and interesting parts later. The data requirements list is a custom designed, tailor

made specification for the necessary information that will allow students to achieve the educational objectives intended through their preparation and discussion of the case.

The data specification should be done so well that another case writer could take the Case Plan and complete the case just the way the original case writer intended. Thus, it is not sufficiently precise to ask for financial statements. Are these the income statement and balance sheet for the latest year available or for the past three years? Do they include all of the auditors' comments and explanations or not?

It is not sufficiently precise to ask for an organization chart. Is this a chart showing all the major holdings of the parent organization? Or is it one showing the top management structure, including or excluding the names of the individuals holding the various positions? Or is it a chart showing the organization of the finance department at head office?

It is useful to start with the absolutely vital information without which the case would be useless. Then, if part of the purpose of the case is to separate relevant information from less relevant data, the decision as to what else to include can be made later.

If the information-specifying task is done well, it makes it much easier for the focal person in the case to indicate: (1) whether the information was available to the decision maker at the time the issue was considered; (2) whether the participating organization is willing to provide such information for the case; and (3) whether the suggested disguise is appropriate.

Therefore, the task is to specify under each of the major subtitles what information still needs to be acquired and what has already been obtained before and during the initial contact.

Therefore, the critical question in specifying the data requirements in a Case Plan becomes: for resolving the decision, problem, opportunity or issue under consideration, what does the reader need to know? What are the necessary details about the company or organization as a whole, about the functional area or position, the key decision maker and the issue itself that the student must know to be able to step into the position of the focal person? What is sufficient information to allow someone previously not familiar with this situation to perform a relevant analysis with some confidence and justification and make a reasonable decision?

The following comments concerning data requirements will apply to the major subtitle areas of any case.

General Company Background

This section tells the reader in broad outline some relevant facts about the organization as a whole. What products or services are offered? What industry is it part of? What is its history? Where is the organization located? What size is it and financially where does it stand? This section is intended to place subsequent information in context. For example whether the company is large or small and whether it is financially well off or not may seriously affect the range of alternatives which can reasonably be considered as pertinent to the decision or problem at hand. Standard information under the heading of General Company Background or its equivalent includes information about the location, number of employees, financial strength, product or service offerings, growth history, future growth potential, and competitive premise.

Does the reader need an organization chart, financial statements, history from the origin to the present of the company, the size of the organization in terms of number of employees, the

product range, the competition, the industry, how long the president has been in office and what his or her personal background is?

The Specific Areas of Interest

It is almost always necessary to provide the case reader with information about the area within which the focal person in the case works. What are the major responsibilities of this area within the context of the business as a whole? How many people work in this area? What is the annual budget? How is this area organized? Is it growing, stable or declining in numbers of people and budget? What are the major challenges facing this area? Is there anything special or unique about it?

It is also desirable in most cases to provide some background information about the position held by the key decision maker in the case. What are the main job responsibilities of this position and where does it fit within the organization structure?

Although it is often not necessary for the purpose of the case, the personal background of the key decision maker may provide a special touch. Since the normal case assignment is, "If you were in the position of the key decision maker in this case, what would be your analysis and plan of action and why?", the personal background of the actual decision maker is not normally required. However, such a background does give the case reader a chance to see how individuals move into various positions on the organizational ladder.

The Specific Decision, Problem, Issue or Opportunity

This section of the case provides the first opportunity to refer to the issue initially mentioned in the opening paragraph. Now the challenge for the case writer becomes to specify the information which, in the case writer's opinion, the decision maker might reasonably have used. Such information will normally include both qualitative and quantitative data relevant to the issue at hand. Included are factual data as well as the opinions of various people involved in the issue. Clearly, such information will range widely depending on the issue, decision, problem or opportunity under consideration.

Teaching Note Headings

1. Case Title
2. Brief Synopsis of the Case
3. Immediate Issue(s) (*the case decision maker's key concerns*)
4. Basic Issue(s) (*the instructor's reasons for using the case in the course*)
5. Teaching Objectives
6. Suggested Student Assignment
7. Suggested Additional Reading/Data Gathering
8. Possible Teaching Aids (*such as samples, advertising material, photos, articles, videos, computer programs, CD ROMs, visitors to class*)
9. Discussion Questions for Use in Class (to use if the discussion dies or to raise issues if not covered)
10. Case Analysis (*the answers to the suggested student assignment questions*)
11. Additional Points to Raise (*beyond the student assignment questions*)
12. Suggested Time Plan (*how total class time might be divided*)
13. Teaching Suggestions
14. Case Teaching Plan (*the instructor's supplement to the Case Preparation Chart*)