

ADM4317 Group Project: Case Writing Guidelines

(Adapted from UWO Ivey HBA with thanks to Dr. K. Schnarr)

How Do We Write a Case?

A lot has been written on case writing and you are welcome, of course, to research the process on your own. You may also, however, simply follow the directions in this guide. The process has been broken down into four project assignments that will be due based on timeline below that will increase your likelihood of a solid draft case, presentation and final case. Instructions for completing each of these project assignments are included in this guide (see below).

Case Component	Due Date	Grade
<i>Company background</i>	<i>October 6th</i>	<i>10%</i>
<i>Industry background</i>	<i>October 20th</i>	<i>10%</i>
<i>Case Questions</i>	<i>November 3rd</i>	<i>10%</i>
<i>Draft Teaching Note (TN)</i>	<i>November 17th</i>	<i>10%</i>
Draft Case (to class)	November 23 rd	20%
Case Presentations (in class)	November 24 th or Dec 1 st	20%
Final Case and TN Submission	December 10 th	20%
Total		100%

Your first step is to take a few minutes to look at some example cases (e.g. the cases assigned for this course and others you've been exposed to during the BComm Program). Spend a few minutes thumbing through these cases. Pay attention to how they are put together (formatting, content, etc.). You may also take a look at one of my cases (and the associated teaching note) which will be posted on BBL.

Length & Formatting

Good business cases vary in length. Length depends on a number of factors, including (but not limited to) the complexity of the decision context, the amount of required background information, and the number (and type) of questions raised by the case.

As a general rule, at least for this group project, a good case should be approximately 7500 words (around 15 pages), including appendices, tables, figures, exhibits and endnotes. I may require an explanation if cases deviate by more than 2500 words from this target (that is, if a completed case is less than 5000 words or more than 10,000 words). The case should not exceed 20 pages and the Teaching Note should not exceed 5 pages.

For formatting guidelines, consult the author resources posted on the Business Case Journal site: <http://www.sfcr.org/bcj/> (one of the journal published by the Society for Case Research). Download

the SCR Manuscript Guidelines for Authors from this page. Focus on the “Format for Case or Critical Incident and Teaching Note” section (bottom of page 2 through the top of page 5). You can ignore everything else. Note that this journal uses APA 6th Edition, with a few exceptions.

The Editorial Policy page on the North American Case Research Association site may also be helpful (<http://nacra.net/crj/Pages/edpol.php5>), but the formatting required for their journal (the Case Research Journal, or CRJ) is a little different. I recommend you stick with the formatting guide on the Society for Case Research site, but either one is fine (just be consistent).

Choosing a Topic

You should put some effort into choosing your case topic. Keep the following in mind:

1. You should do your best to find an approach or context that is interesting to you (and that you’ll enjoy researching and writing about).
2. Business cases usually focus on an important decision or problem encountered by a particular for-profit business, although cases can also focus on different entities or institutions, such as non-profits, universities, industries, or even countries.
3. You should be able to write down one “big” question that you want readers of your case to answer. You should then write your case so that readers will feel obligated to answer that question. Because this course is about Leadership, Strategy and Sustainability, this “big” question should be related in some way to this topic.
4. Companies come in all different sizes. I strongly suggest that you either choose to focus on a small company or a large company. Medium-sized companies are generally a bad idea. This is because small companies will generally talk to you (i.e. you can get access to key decision-makers) and sufficient information about large companies is often publically available or accessible in different databases. Medium-sized companies, however, generally will not give you direct access and there probably is not enough publically-available information to write a sufficiently detailed case.
5. Do not be concerned if you are unable to think of a great topic right away. Start by choosing an interesting company or industry segment and then spend a couple hours researching that company or segment. Ask yourself questions like the following: What sustainability issues are currently being addressed by analysts or debated in industry publications? What environmental, social or ethical issues are top managers most concerned about? Is there anything interesting about the competitive environment that might impact the industry in the future? Do the most sustainable firms in this industry have some type of competitive advantage? Why or why not? How are things likely to change over the next five or ten years? Why?
6. You do not need to know the answer to your case’s “big” question before you begin. You must, however, know enough about your big question to have a clear idea of how it might be answered.

Additional Resources

Two additional resources will be provided. These resources are:

1. The Case Writing Workbook : A Self-Guided Workshop (2013) by Gina Vega is available at

the Management Library on Reserve (can be checked out for 2h at a time).

2. A PDF of a guide to “SWIF” (Student-Written, Instructor-Facilitated) case writing, by Paul Michael Swiercz has been posted to BBL.

None of this material is required reading. For those of you looking for additional guidance, however, it may be helpful. Note that you will most likely be writing what is described as a combination of a company/industry profile case and a decision- making episode by Swiercz.

Sources of Information

The Management Library at Telfer has extensive resources available related to industry and company information. Start with the following library guides:

- Company Information: http://uottawa.libguides.com/friendly.php?s=company_information_en&hs=a
- Industry Information: http://uottawa.libguides.com/friendly.php?s=ind-info_en&hs=a

The library also subscribes to a number of business databases that can be accessed through the management library’s website. These databases will have historic information about companies and after the company’s own website (once a company is selected), will serve as a wealth of information to assist in writing in the case. You can also do online searches on the company to discover media articles on the company in question. Just ensure that any information you use is properly cited in a consistent format.

Case Assignments

Case Assignment #1: Company Background (10% of grade, due October 6th)

Your first assignment is to tell the story of your company. Your work should be structured in a narrative form. The questions below are designed as prompts. You shouldn’t feel obligated to answer these questions in order or to answer them all, although if you do a good job of things, you will end up answering most of them.

If you have any reservations about your choice of company, and want my opinion, please email me.

1. Tell the history of the company (start at the beginning, hit the highlights). You might spend a little time (usually just one or two paragraphs) on how the idea for the business was generated (or some other interesting anecdote from the company’s founding).
2. Explain how the company is currently structured. What resources does it have? Where, geographically, are these resources. How many people does it employ? Where is it based? What businesses are it in? Who is the CEO? What does the organizational chart look like? Who are its primary customers? Who are its primary suppliers?
3. Describe the company’s basic business model. What resources does it require, where does it get

these resources, what does the company do with these resources to produce products and/or services, etc.

4. Talk about significant inflection points in its history (Note: This is a slight variation on #1). This could include information such as when it IPO'd or major changes in leadership (e.g. Jack Welch taking over (and then later on retiring) at GE would be a major inflection point).
5. Talk about the company's vision and mission statement. How have these evolved over time? What significance do these statements have for the company now? If you look at a current annual report, how does the company present itself to its shareholders?
6. Describe the corporate culture. How does the culture influence how the company behaves in the market place? How does it shape the way employees see the company and their contributions to it?
7. Does the company think that it has a competitive advantage? If so, then what does it think it is? If not, how does it intend to develop one? What are the company's strengths? Weaknesses? How does it decide what businesses to enter (or what businesses not to enter)? [Note: This isn't about how you, as the author of the case, perceive the company, this is about how the company perceives itself, or if you can't find that information, then it should be about how others in the industry (analysts, competitors, etc.) see the company.]
8. What are the biggest social or environmental sustainability challenges facing the company right now? Why? What do different industry experts think about these challenges? [Note: You may want to include contradictory opinions.]

This type of information should be similar to the type of information that you would need to conduct a thorough internal analysis of the company. Take a look at the example cases and pay attention to how these cases present company background information. Please DO NOT submit information you have copied directly from the corporate website (or other similar source). Make sure to cite everything that is not your own writing (and include complete reference information for cited material in your endnotes).

A good target length for this assignment is 3000 words (but this is just a general guideline). Feel free to deviate from this target as you see fit.

Case Assignment #2: Industry Background (10% of grade, due October 20th)

Your assignment is to tell me about the industry (and specific industry segment) your company is in. Your work should be structured in a narrative form that makes sense based on your particular company and segment. The questions below are designed as prompts. You shouldn't feel obligated to answer these questions in order or to answer them all, although a good description of most industries will involve answering most of them. Keep in mind that the larger objective is to provide an accurate picture of the industry and industry segment in which your chosen company operates.

1. How is the "industry" defined??
2. How large in the industry (based on different measures)?
3. What are the different market segments?

4. Who are the major players? Can you briefly describe them?
5. What does the value chain look like?
6. How do industry participants interact (raw material suppliers, manufacturers, subcontractors, retailers, etc.)?
7. What is interesting about the industry from a sustainability perspective?
8. What are the primary demand drivers?
9. How do industry participants compete? On what product dimensions (price, quality, brand name, etc.)? How does sustainability fit in?
10. What about the threat of new entrants? Substitute products? Supplier power? Buyer power? Based on Porter's five forces, is this an attractive industry now? What about in a resource constrained future?
11. How has the chosen industry evolved?
12. How has climate change affected your industry?
13. What about other sustainability considerations (new regulations, new industry associations)?
14. How do you believe the industry will evolve over the next five years? Ten years?

This should encompass the type of information you would include when conducting an external analysis of a company. A good target length for this assignment is 2000 words (but this is just a general guideline). Feel free to deviate from this target as you see fit.

Case Assignment #3: Case Questions (10% of grade, due November 3rd)

The first two project assignments involved gathering background information (on your company and industry, respectively). In this assignment, you'll focus on generating case questions. These questions will help you structure and focus your case. Please do the following:

1. Describe the central "problem" of your case (i.e. the central question, issue, or decision point). In other words, what is the "big" strategy/sustainability question you want readers of your case to answer, think about, debate, or otherwise address?
2. Explain why the central question of your case is interesting? What strategy/sustainability theories (or frameworks, or approaches, etc.) do you expect students to rely on in order to answer your case questions? What will readers learn by using these theories to address the problems you pose in the case?
3. Write three or four case questions.
4. For each case question, put together a list of information a hypothetical reader would need in order to provide a satisfactory response (bullet points are fine). Be specific. Note: These lists will dictate what you need to include in your case.

You can complete the first two assignments without having a clear vision of the case you want to write. That's not the case with this assignment. By the time you finish this assignment, you should have a pretty good idea about how your case is going to be structured, the information and data that

will need to be included, and the questions you anticipate readers of your case addressing.

Please note that you may use any of the frameworks or analytical tools discussed in the class (e.g. Natural Step, the Strategy Diamond, Porter's five forces, the value chain...) You can assume that potential readers of your case will be familiar with (and/or have access to) these and other analytical approaches.

Case Assignment #4: Draft Teaching Note (10% of your grade, due November 17th)

For Case Assignment #4, please do the following:

1. Write detailed and thorough answers to each of your case questions. Your answers should utilize only information you intend to include in your case. Pretend that you have been asked to analyze the case you are writing and that your answers to these questions represent an assigned case analysis. Do not distance yourself from your responses by answering them in third person (e.g. by writing "If we were answering this questions, we would say that. . ."). Answer the questions directly (as though you were the one doing the case analysis).
2. Based on your experience answering your case questions, if you feel you need to amend your questions, please do so (and submit a revised list of questions, each with an associated list of required information).
3. Write a one-page outline of your case.

Draft Final Case: 20% of your grade, due November 23rd

In order to teach the case to the class, you will need to assemble a complete draft of your case by November 23rd. You should rely on the material you've generated in previous project assignments. Here are some general steps you should follow:

1. Write an introduction (or frame) for your case. A typical introduction is usually less than a page in length (a paragraph or two) and introduces readers to the protagonist. If you have been able to secure interviews with an existing company, the protagonist would be the decision maker in the case and you would use the opening paragraphs to set the context of the case (industry, company, time frame, and/or pending decision). You may also use a fictitious individual that is somehow involved in the case to "introduce" it. For example, the reader might be introduced to a consultant that is thinking through a particular issue in preparation for a presentation, or an executive that has to make a decision in the near future, etc. Alternatively, a case may start out by positioning the primary problem of the case in a larger social context. For example, a case that addresses going paperless in the college textbook market might start out by describing recently introduced legislation about moving to a waste-free Ontario. Take a look at the cases that you have seen in this course and others to generate ideas.
2. Include a section (or two) that artfully introduces company and industry information. You should have already generated most of this information in Project Assignments 1 & 2.
3. Write the "issue" section of your case. In this section, you should describe, in detail, the central problem, issue, or dilemma that you want readers to address. Be careful to keep this section

descriptive. In other words, you shouldn't provide explicit answers to the problems, decisions, or issues you present. You may "frame" things in particular ways, or provide a set of possible alternatives, but the objective of this section is leave your reader immersed in the details of a particular issue or problem (and to leave the issue over problem unresolved).

4. Finally, write a few concluding paragraphs. If you opened with a particular frame (a sustainability consultant preparing for a presentation, or a manager deciding whether or not to implement a particular sustainability program, etc.), then you may want to close this frame, although not all cases follow this pattern. Depending on how you've structured your case, it may be appropriate to remind your readers of the issues or questions they should consider in their analysis.

Keep in mind that these points represent a general outline. The actual number of sections and the specific headings (and sub-headings) will depend on your specific case.

Along with the draft of the case, include a revised (and nicely formatted) set of your case questions (with ideal answers) in a separate document; this will be considered to be the teaching note. Please include the words "teaching note" in the file name of this document. The draft case as well as your 3 or 4 assignment questions will be posted on BBL 24h before class on November 24th. I will keep the Teaching Note itself confidential (that is, the solutions you suggest will not be posted on BBL).

Case Presentations: November 24th or December 1st (20% of grade)

During the class of either November 24th or December 1st you will be required to teach your case to the class. You will have a total of 30 minutes to engage the class in a discussion of the issues that you have researched, following your suggested Teaching Note. Appendix A of the SWIF article by Swiercz provides a good checklist for what makes a good case and good case session. The objective of running the case once in front of your peers is to 'test' the usefulness of the case, as written, to illustrate the theoretical frameworks that you have chosen to teach. This can be a daunting prospect, however, should be taken in the spirit of continual learning and improvement. We are looking to put together a series of interesting cases that Telfer students would find useful and engaging in the future and so some trial and error should be anticipated.

Final Case and TN Submission: 20% of grade, due December 17th

You will have several weeks after the class presentation to revise your final case. For example, the first time a case is taught, students will often ask questions that the case writer did not anticipate. These should be noted both in the Teaching Note, and, if significant and material to the key decision, the case should be revised to help future instructors ward off any concerns. This is your opportunity to reflect on the feedback of the instructor and your peers and polish your case. At this stage, the case should resemble a document that could be submitted to a publishing house or case writing journal (e.g. as a textbook case, an Ivey/HBS case or a Case Journal)¹.

¹ You should keep future publication in mind when writing the cases. I make an effort to write a case or two each year and may be willing to work with the best group projects and team members to edit, revise and submit the cases for publication after the course has been completed.

Plagiarism

You are reminded that plagiarism (representing another person's ideas, writings, etc., as one's own) is a serious academic offence; the penalty can be as severe as expulsion. Academic Fraud offenses are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes Academic Fraud, at the following website: <http://web5.uottawa.ca/mcs-smc/academicintegrity/home.php>