

Writing Business Cases¹

A business case is a snapshot of an actual management situation; a problem, an issue, a challenge or an opportunity faced by an organization. It compels the student to wear an analytical (or creative) hat and take the role of the decision maker in the organization. A good case has a sharp focus and an interesting storyⁱ. Cases are immensely useful as a teaching tool to build subject knowledge and develop analytical skills. Click [here](#) to access a CTL article on the utility of the case method of teaching (targeted towards students).

This document is designed to give you an overview of the key guidelines which you must consider while writing business cases. First, we point out that it is essential to have a protagonist from the featured company in the case. Second, we talk about how a strong decision point is crucial to the case. Third, we specify the questions you must answer before writing the case and build a concept document as an outline of your case writing process. Fourth, we talk about the value of getting a preliminary release form signed by the featured company. Fifth, we lay out the structure used by most successful case writers. Sixth, we discuss the company release form and the possibilities if the company refuses to sign the release. Finally, we recommend that the teaching note be developed alongside the case.

We have included links to 'writing teaching notes' document, 'style guide' and 'template for IIMB-HBPE' cases towards the end of this document.

1. Protagonistⁱⁱ

A business case confronts students with a real life situation and engages their ability to solve its challenges. This works best when the case centers around an organization or a featured company². Cases have issues/challenges and an end point where the protagonist or the central character must make a decision.

Protagonists such as the Chief Executive Officer, Managing Director or Chairperson may be introduced to allow students to place themselves in the decision maker's shoes and use the case details to make decisions based on the protagonist's perspective. Do give details about the protagonist's roles and responsibilities to help the students assume the role and recommend tactics.

2. Decision Point

The case must have a clear dilemma point that includes specific questions which students will answer through case analysis. The dilemma point should be such that multiple solutions can be developed by students based on their individual experiences and perspectivesⁱⁱⁱ. This will foster discussion and students will benefit from peer knowledge.

A case is a stand-in for a business decision set in the real-world which is characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA³). Accordingly, an effective business case is likely ambiguous and sometimes full of conflict. Most of the critical issues are left without a solution, leaving space for analysis of multiple dilemma points. There is a tension between alternative courses of action, trade-offs that the students must examine. More questions are highlighted than answers given, and the case demands urgent decisions to be made.

3. Concept document/Outline

Before starting to write the case, ask yourself the following questions^{iv}:

- How does the case fit into my teaching?
- What are my teaching objectives?
- What key discussion questions do I want to bring into the classroom?
- What theoretical concepts might be considered while analysing the case?
- Who will be my audience?
- How difficult should my case be?

¹ CTL, IIM Bangalore supports only Harvard Business Publishing - Education (HBPE) cases.

² If you want to write about the evolution of an industry through experiences of a few key organizations, consider writing an 'Industry Note'.

³ The acronym VUCA originated from leadership theories of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus in 1987.

- What is the decision focus of my case?
- Who will be my protagonist? Why is his/her decision urgent?
- Do similar cases already exist?

Do not develop a case because it is an interesting story. It must fit into the learning objectives of your course. Build a concept document that lays out the learning objectives, protagonist, protagonist situation and the challenges of the caseⁱⁱ. To develop learning objectives, complete this statement, “After discussing this case, students will be able to...”

The document should outline the rough structure of the case, opening narrative, company background, industry information, company financial information, details relevant to the strategic questions of the case, and conclusion with decision point. Decide on what mode of discussion best applies to your case – role play, presentation, or discussion. Complete this activity before starting the interviews.

4. Preliminary release formⁱⁱ

Get the ‘preliminary release form’ signed by the featured company. The preliminary release indicates which information will be collected and can be used, as well as which information is off the record and cannot be used in the case, teaching note, or other instructional materials. It is important to get the company to sign off on the preliminary release prior to beginning research, so that there is an understanding with the company before the writer invests time in the interview and research phase.

Please note that the preliminary release form is optional. While it is desirable to get it signed in view of the reasons stated above, it is not a compulsory requirement like the company release form. Click [here](#) to access the preliminary release form.

5. Interviewsⁱⁱ

Plan to interview contacts up and down the corporate hierarchy and across departments to get different perspectives on case issues. Provide the company with the meeting agenda and list of questions for each contact. Leave the interviewee list open so you can add others who can provide useful information and opinions.

Your questions should be relevant to the narrative and should cover issues facing the central characters of the case. Unless you want to verify or ask for latest information, do not ask for information that is already available in the public domain.

You may go into the interview process without having chosen the protagonist. You may do that after interviewing persons central to the case issues.

Once the interview ends, inform the interviewee that you may want to get back to them for further questions, if any. You may send them a copy of your notes and ask for any corrections or suggestions.

6. Case Structureⁱⁱ

Most successful cases employ the following structure:

Title and Introduction

- The title should be crisp. It should focus on the specialty of the case. Ideally, the title should have the name of the featured company.
- Usually the case opens with a paragraph (or two) presenting the dilemma that the protagonist of the case is facing. Be sure to set the time (date) of the case right at the beginning and be careful not to include any instance or information from after this date. Such information appears in the Teaching Note.

Background on the Company, Industry, and Competitors

- Provide information about the company’s background, business model, major products, customers and competitors.
- Present background information before in-depth analysis of a topic to build context.

Business Issues/Challenges

- Break down the problem and provide all essential information available to the protagonist.
- Weave the narrative throughout the case, not just in the introduction and conclusion. Intersperse relevant information about the decision such as what is known and what is unknown, constraints, assumptions, context, resources available, expected decision outcome, etc.

Conclusion

- Close the loop by returning to the protagonist and their predicament. Reiterate the decision which they have to make and present alternatives. The alternatives should draw from earlier sections and be framed in a manner that they can foster classroom discussion.
- Do not present new information in this section.

7. Company Sign-off'

If the case uses insider information, it is essential to get the release form signed by the featured company. (Click [here](#) to access the company release form for IIMB- HBPE cases.) If the company refuses to sign the release form, you may offer to disguise the case partially (names of the protagonists or other officers) or completely (name and/or industry of the company). Undoubtedly, an undisguised case is the most powerful in class. Use disguising as the option if the last resort. If any aspects of the case are fictional or disguised, ensure that you mention this as a footnote in the case itself as well as in the teaching note.

If the company refuses to sign the release you must destroy the case and related material. Publishing a disguised or fictional case (or even examples or data in a book, without sign off) may be a risky move as it may leave IIMB open to potential litigation.

Please note that CTL does not accept disguised or fictional cases. You may have to pursue other avenues to publish a disguised case.

8. Teaching Note

We strongly recommend that you write the teaching note alongside the case. We have developed a separate document specifying guidelines for writing effective teaching notes. Click [here](#) to access the guidelines for 'Writing Teaching Notes'.

Style Guide, Case and Teaching Note Template

- Click [here](#) to access Style Guide, Case and Teaching Note template for HBPE cases.

Role of Case Writers

- Centre for Teaching and Learning, IIMB has Case Writers to assist faculty in writing cases. Click [here](#) to access 'Case Writer Engagement: Role of the Case Writer and the Faculty' to know more.

IIMB Cases published by HBPE

- Click [here](#) to access IIMB Cases published by HBPE.

Additional Readings:

1. On Writing Cases Well, Darden Business Publishing, University of Virginia, available at: <http://dardenbusinesspublishing.com/Syllabus%20Copy/on-writing-cases-well-2.pdf>
2. Writing Cases: Tips and Pointers, Jane Linder, Harvard Business School, available at: <https://store.hbr.org/product/writing-cases-tips-and-pointers/391026>
3. Case Writing Guide, Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence, Penn State University, available at: <https://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/pdf/CaseWritingGuide.pdf>
4. Getting in Touch with the Company & Interview Techniques, available at: https://www.rsm.nl/fileadmin/Images_NEW/CDC/CDC_Getting_in_Touch_with_the_Company_Interview_Techniques.pdf

5. Persuasion, Argument, and the Case Method, William Ellet, Harvard Business Review Press, available at: <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/product/2447BC-PDF-ENG?>

ⁱ How to Write a Good Teaching Case, RSM Case Development Centre, Erasmus University, Rotterdam School of Management, available at: https://www.rsm.nl/fileadmin/Images_NEW/CDC/CDC_How_to_Write_a_Good_Teaching_Case_.pdf, last accessed on December 11, 2020

ⁱⁱ How to Write a Business Case Study, WDI Publishing, University of Michigan available at https://wdi-publishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/How-to-Write-A-Business-Case_8-11-2017.pdf, last accessed on December 11, 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ Best Practices & Preferred Style for Case Study Development, WDI Publishing, University of Michigan, available at: https://wdi-publishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/UPDATED_BestPractices-Style_WDI-Publishing_10.22.2019.pdf, last accessed on December 11, 2020

^{iv} Ten Questions to Ask Yourself Before Writing a Teaching Case, RSM Case Development Centre, Erasmus University, Rotterdam School of Management, available at: https://www.rsm.nl/fileadmin/Images_NEW/CDC/CDC_Ten_Questions_to_Ask_Yourself_Before_Writing_a_Teaching_Case.pdf, last accessed on December 11, 2020

^v Legal Considerations When Writing Case Studies, Darden Business Publishing, University of Virginia available at: <https://store.hbr.org/product/legal-considerations-when-writing-case-studies/UV6817>, last accessed on November 9, 2020