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How to Write a Case-Based Essay

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How to Read, Discuss, and Write Persuasively About Cases

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CHAPTER 9

HOW TO WRITE A CASE-BASED ESSAY

Writing about a case is very different from talking about it. You collaborate with others in a discussion, bringing to bear everyone's background and case preparation along with the instructor's knowledge and facilitation skills. But you usually work on your own when writing about a case. You have to perform the entire analysis yourself as well as organize and express your thinking for a reader.

However, the difference between talking and writing about a case runs deeper still. Audiences have much more exacting expectations of a text than they do of spoken comments. Logical gaps and the back-and-fill tolerable in a discussion are a major problem in an essay, confusing readers and undermining the writer's credibility. Audiences don't want a transcript of the writer's thinking as it evolved. They want to know the end product of the writer's thinking, expressed logically and economically.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A PERSUASIVE CASE ESSAY

Writing about a case builds on the process of analyzing a case. The case situations described in previous chapters can be used to organize essays. An essay arguing a decision is organized in a different way from one offering a problem diagnosis. The structure of problem, decision, and evaluation essays is described in chapters 10 through 12, respectively. The chapters also include cases and sample essays about them. The essays are based on the writing of MBA students.

To convince a reader that a conclusion about a case is valid, the writer must offer credible evidence linked directly to the conclusion. This fact helps explain the characteristics case-based essays have in common:

1. Answers two questions—What? Why?—and often a third—How?
2. Makes a position statement (What?)

3. Uses evidence to persuade the reader (Why?)
4. If needed, provides an action plan (How?)

Three Questions

Contrary to what many MBA students think, most professors don't want essays filled with lengthy case summaries and lists of insights and observations. They don't want you to prove to them that you have read the case carefully by telling them everything you know about it. They want you to answer whatever questions you have been asked about a case—and to answer them as efficiently as you can.

The parts of a case essay can be organized around three simple questions: What? Why? How? The position statement responds to What? and the argument answers Why? How? refers to action: How should the recommended decision be implemented? How can the problem be fixed?

Exhibit 9-1 sums up the organizing questions for a case-based essay.

Position Statement

A sharply focused position statement organizes the entire essay. Without one, the essay has no purpose or direction as far as the reader is concerned. The most common failing of the case exams I have seen over the years is that the writers try to look at a situation from all angles, suggesting many meanings but committing to none. I use only one negative example in this book, but it's instructive to look at an essay that complicates the reader's task from the beginning. It was written as a response to the decision situation described in "General Electric: Major Appliance Business Group (Abridged)," a case used in chapter 11.[1]

EXHIBIT 9-1

Case-based essay Q&A

Question	Answer
What?	Position statement (expresses a conclusion)
Why?	Argument
How?	Action plan

A. Decision

I recommend that the Project C (PJC hereinafter) management team go to the board of directors and ask for an additional capital authorization structured as follows:

> *+10% = $2.8 million for the management information and support systems, which don't require formal approval.*
>
> *+5% = $1.5 million for the skills training in technical problem solving, which would require formal approval.*

Moreover, I recommend that the PJC team not drop the $1 million investment in the integrated computer control room, as it is crucial for the division's processes.

I would not support the additional capital spending of $1.5 million in the factory environment because it doesn't bring direct benefits. I see it only as an attempt to get union buy-in. The union's support can be gained differently, by reinforcing job enhancement and enrichment programs.

I am also against adding an additional iteration in the product development (PD hereinafter) process. This will only delay the process without clear benefits, setting the precedent for further delays from the engineering teams. Strict deadlines will encourage innovation and commitment.

The case is about the development of a new GE dishwasher. The two previous machines have missed their sales targets. Jack Welch has challenged the managers of the product development process (Project C) to set a benchmark for a world-class operation and introduce a product that beats the competition. The managers have to decide which, if any, of five additions should be made to the project and how much more investment and time they will require. The opening you have just read renders a decision on each of the five proposed additions, but the decisions don't seem to have anything to do with one another, and the writer's reasons for advocating or rejecting them are either vague or not stated.

The first paragraph of another essay on the case is a revelation: it relates the decisions to a larger issue. This writer recommends five different decisions, *but* they are linked together.

The Project C management team should persuade senior management and the board of directors to increase the budget by 15 percent, or $4.2 million, and extend the time for completion by four months. Four of the five changes should be added to the project, leaving improvements in GE's management information *and support systems for a later stage. The strategic importance of Project C to GE's success in the dishwasher industry demands meeting all of the project objectives, and the four changes are critical to meeting them. Failure to do so would put at risk the initial investment and overall competitiveness in the dishwasher industry.*

When you finish this paragraph, you have no doubt about what the writer thinks. This excellent example of a position statement also asserts a single reason for all of the decisions.

Stating your position at the beginning has several advantages. First, the reader expects you to answer the question you have been asked. Why make the reader wait for it? Second, critical readers evaluate an argument as they go along. Professors do this in order to award a grade. Others do so to judge how convincing the argument is and what implications it may have for their thinking and for action. Readers can't evaluate an argument, however, until they know what it's trying to prove. If your conclusion appears at the end of the essay, they must go back to the beginning and compare the proof to the position. Their reading will be more efficient if they know the position before the proof. Finally, and probably most important, a position statement at the beginning of an essay provides a statement of intention for the reader—and for you, the writer. That statement of intention can be your reference point as you compose.

In this paragraph, the writer states a position and expresses an intention about the organization of the essay:

Rogers took over an organization that rewarded the politics of self-interest and expected leaders to be virtually dictatorial. They had lost Bennett, the tyrant who made the division work. The market is also changing. The division's problems stem from three sources: a lack of a new vision, Rogers' leadership weaknesses, and a misaligned organization.

The last sentence gives both the reader and the writer an agenda for an argument: prove that vision, an individual's leadership weaknesses, and misalignment are the primary causes of an organization's troubles.

Opening with a position statement does have a downside. It can be difficult to write the conclusion of an essay before you write the essay itself. Depending on your writing process, starting with the conclusion may be a problem because you develop one as you write. However, that is a high-risk way to write when time is short. Better to write a partial position statement to get started and then add to it, e.g., name two causes of a problem that you are sure of and then add the one or two more that become clear later. A second disadvantage of an early position statement is that it can make the writer seem aggressive and arrogant to readers. On certain occasions and in certain cultures, it may be best to defer a position statement until you have proved it. However, there are many situations in which you can reasonably assume that knowing your conclusion will help the reader. A case-based exam is one of those situations. If you have any doubts, ask the professor.

Evidence

Using evidence well is probably the most crucial skill for a writer of case essays. Illustrating how to use evidence is difficult, though, because it requires familiarity with the case that furnishes the evidence. I hope to provide enough of the case context so that you can understand how each of the following examples of evidence works.

The first example uses qualitative and quantitative evidence. It is discussing one of the five proposed additions to the dishwasher product development effort called Project C described in "General Electric: Major Appliance Business Group (Abridged)." The value engineering cycle needs more time and money, both touchy issues at GE since late rollouts and quality problems have plagued prior models. In fact, sales of the Project B machine were 30 to 40 percent lower than expected because of the bad quality of the A model. The first sentence is the recommendation.

> *(1)* After PermaTuf A and B failed to meet the desired goals, one additional prototype cycle or iteration before market rollout seems to be a very sound measure. *It will ensure high product quality and will also lower warranty and service costs. The most critical part of implementing this change is the project delay of three to four months. However, the value engineering cycle would increase product quality, lower costs, gain market share because of product improvements, and ensure that Project C does not run into the same problems as A and B. Although it is possible to delay this change for one or two years after the launch, by then it might be too late. The product's reputation could already be jeopardized, and it would be extremely difficult to convince both the sales force and customers that the product is the improved version they expected in the first place. In addition, senior management has been very clear: "Do it right the first time."*
>
> *The total cost is $1.2 million. By year 3 (1985), the added cost of the proposals will be recovered through additional contribution from Project C. By year 7 (1989), Project C by itself will increase contribution 70 percent compared with total contribution in 1979. With each year after the launch of the new model, more and more of the increased revenue from the project will fall directly to the bottom line.*

Exhibit 9-2 summarizes the evidence in the paragraph. The author cites many advantages of value engineering, and there is quantitative confirmation that it will increase contribution over the long term. The two paragraphs are a good example of how qualitative and quantitative evidence can be used to reinforce each other.

The second example uses primarily quantitative evidence. One lesson of the example is that merely citing numbers will not persuade a reader; writers have to tell the reader what they mean in the context of the argument. Another is that several numbers that align with a similar conclusion are more persuasive than one or two. In some situations, you won't have much quantitative data to work with. In those instances, every piece of quantitative evidence has a high value. If you have a finance background, this second example will be familiar ground. If you don't, the context will help you follow the logic of the paragraph. The case is about a manufacturer and two retail customers that owe it a substantial amount of money. An analyst is assessing the likelihood that the retailers will be able to repay the debt. The evidence (in brackets) backs the conclusion (not italicized).

Liquidity: Smyth & Company has a [current ratio of 2.53], and the [acid test shows that its current assets minus inventories can cover 1.26 times its current liabilities]. This is a good sign that the company can cover its short-term liabilities, such as the accounts payable it owes Mercury Enterprises. Nevertheless, when we look at the accounts receivable, the collection period has worsened. In 1998, Smyth & Company took on average [82 days to collect its accounts receivables] versus an average of [62 days in 1996]. At the same time, the [days payable measure also increased from an average of 53 days in 1996 to 70 days in 1998], a good sign. However, the [accounts payable did not increase as much as the collection period], putting pressure on the company's cash flow since [the gap between the time Smyth & Company gets paid versus

EXHIBIT 9-2

Project C: yes on value engineering

Disadvantages	Advantages
• Imposes delay in launch	• Addresses major problem with Projects A and B
• Adds cost	• Reduces warranty and service costs
	• Creates greater customer satisfaction
	• Increases sales force confidence in product
	• Eventually increases market share
	• Pays for itself and increases contribution

> *the time it needs to pay its bills increased from 9 days to 12].* Although currently the acid test and current ratio show good liquidity, key liquidity measures like accounts receivable and accounts payable are deteriorating and will start to impair Smyth & Company's ability to pay its short-term payables with Mercury Enterprises.

This part of the essay makes clear, authoritative use of numbers. The author states evidence favorable to the retailer (the acid test and current ratio), compares the positive data to the negative, and finds the negative more compelling. The acknowledgment of evidence contrary to the author's conclusion doesn't weaken the argument but enhances it (and the writer's credibility) by assuring the reader that all of the relevant data has been considered.

Case-based essays use the results or outputs of specialized methods as evidence to prove conclusions. In the example above, the words in brackets express the outcomes of the quantitative tools the writer has employed. The paragraph is constructed around significant calculations and what their results mean. Without financial tools, the writer would have nothing meaningful to say about liquidity.

The final example employs only qualitative evidence. The overall argument concerns the organization featured in "Allentown Materials Corporation: The Electronic Products Division (Abridged)," the case discussed in chapter 5. The evidence (in brackets) supports the first sentence.

> The current organization cannot succeed because it is [misaligned], and Rogers has to take much of the responsibility. *He made organization [changes that ran counter to the division's past and were not guided by a clear vision]. New product development has suffered because Rogers made [changes that did nothing to fill the void left by the brilliant but controlling Bennett]. He moved the division headquarters to corporate, which has a [very different culture from the political and conflict-ridden division]. Sales and marketing were separated with [no consideration for their complementary nature. Sales is not simply selling, but the source of market information]. The marketing people can't collaborate effectively with sales, because [they do not have the skills needed to do their job (they are all recent graduates or have one or two years of experience)], yet [he is not coaching and helping them]. They need the market expertise of sales.*

The paragraph is worth rereading to understand how the writer accumulates evidence sentence by sentence, all of which points to the conclusion expressed in the first sentence. Students have sometimes criticized paragraphs like this as being mere catalogs of case facts. This one isn't for three reasons. The facts have been carefully selected from various parts of the text; they are combined with inferences that connect the facts to a conclusion; and they all support the same conclusion.

The paragraph above uses methods very different from the quantitative ones employed for the analysis of liquidity, but they are used for the same end: to prove a conclusion. The primary concept of the paragraph, misalignment, is derived from organizational behavior. The bracketed words are the products of leadership and organizational behavior frameworks.

Please note one more feature of the three examples of the use of evidence. Each contains a sentence telling the reader the conclusion the evidence justifies. That sentence controls the meaning of the other sentences and is, in effect, a position statement for a paragraph. The sentence can occur at any point in a paragraph. The safest place to put it is at the beginning. The statement can also come in the middle or at the end, as it does in two of the examples. In both, though, the preceding sentences anticipate the content of the position statement, which pulls together all the statements and thus ensures coherence.

Action Plan

The action plan complements and completes the argument of a case-based essay by answering the question How?

- How do you solve a problem?
- How do you implement a decision?
- How do you improve a performance?

Exhibit 9-3 shows the division of labor between an argument and an action plan. The general purpose of action plans is to improve or advance the situation as it is presented in the essay through a coherent series of actions.

EXHIBIT 9-3

What action plans do

Case situation	**Argument**	**Action plan**
Problem	Prove cause-effect relationships that account for problem	Solve problem: fix weaknesses and reinforce or increase strengths
Decision	Recommend best decision	Implement decision: show the best pathway to achieve desired outcome
Evaluation	Provide detailed evaluation of performance, act, or outcome	Improve performance or outcome; implement or change decision

The argument of a case-based essay precedes the action plan because there is nothing actionable until there is a fact-based understanding of what is to be done. In other words, the argument creates both the necessity for action and the actionable content. Aside from different content, there are two specific reasons for separating an argument from an action plan: organization and reader comprehension.

A case argument and an action plan have entirely different organizing principles. Logic determines the order of an argument. An argument for a decision, for instance, is organized according to the reasons supporting the recommendation. On the other hand, an action plan is *chronological*—it unfolds in time. There is no way to reconcile these two very different organizing principles—and there is no reason to try, although many students do. When a writer tries to combine an argument and action plan, something has to give. Either the logical structure of the argument has to be thrown out in favor of chronological order, which makes no sense for an argument; or the chronological order of the action plan has to be sacrificed to the logical plan of the argument, which then makes it impossible for the reader to know the order of the proposed steps. The second reason for the separation is the reader. Moving back and forth between argument and action destroys coherence and thus the reader's ability to understand the argument or actions.

ELEMENTS OF AN ACTION PLAN

An effective action plan has these five characteristics:

- Sets goals based on the argument
- Addresses the actionable content of the argument
- Consists of specific steps
- Has realistic short- and long-term steps
- Identifies and responds to the major risk to the plan

Goals

An argument doesn't provide explicit goals for action. A diagnosis argues the principal causes of a problem but doesn't say how those causes can be acted upon to improve the situation. An argument for a decision doesn't say how the decision is to be carried out. A goal statement at the beginning of the action plan summarizes the desired end state of the plan. The goal can be simple and have one or several parts:

- *Goal:* Transfer production to an appropriate vendor as soon as possible, with a target of one year to begin transfers and two years to complete them.
- *Goals:* Corcoran's team should persuade senior management to accept the recommendation, align stakeholders, and execute each proposal.

A goal statement can be more involved:

- *Goals:* His short-term objective should be to develop a clear vision, redesign the organization to enable it to realize the vision, and create a clear plan for getting there. Long term, he needs to create a customer-facing organization. He needs to reestablish stability rooted in a vision and culture of continuous improvement and cooperation.

The last objective is typical of essays on problems and evaluations. Both usually specify multiple factors that require some kind of action. You should be wary of complex goal statements, though, for they can quickly become too complicated to be useful.

Actionable Content of Argument

The argument is the source of all the actionable content. The plan translates that content into tangible action. Every major actionable issue in the argument should be represented in the action plan. An argument that asserts three major causes of a problem should have an action plan that deals with all three causes. But an action plan shouldn't deal with an issue that isn't addressed in the argument. This is an easy mistake to make. While drafting an action plan, writers can come up with ideas that haven't been covered in the argument (e.g., a new criterion for a decision) and insert them into an action step. The discrepancy is readily apparent to readers and suggests to them that the argument is incomplete.

Steps

A plan consists of a series of actions to be taken over a period of time. To be useful, the steps need to provide specifics. Here is the first step of a decision implementation plan:

> *Establish a rock-solid consensus among senior executives and agree on transition dates and process. Form a multidisciplinary team to vet vendors and manage the transition.*

The next example is part of a plan in a problem diagnosis essay:

Next, they need to create a vision—a vision that is simple, important to all the groups, and easily acted upon. Manufacturing is only concerned about low cost while other groups are concerned about new products, causing conflict when they work together. The vision needs to be measurable to allow short-term wins. For example, measurements of delivery and service can show that a vision focused on customer needs is working. Next, the vision needs to be communicated throughout the division. The conflicts in the division take place at all levels, and it is important to get everyone aligned and committed.

The description of actions should strike a balance between generalities and excessive detail. A generality doesn't tell the reader enough:

Select manufacturing partners.

This statement doesn't answer questions such as, What kind of partner should be considered? What are some of the criteria for making the decision? On the other hand, an action step can indulge in unnecessary specifics:

To select manufacturing partners, Stott should schedule a meeting with Whistler's manufacturing managers in the next week to discuss the criteria to be used for partners. He should prepare an agenda in advance that covers considerations like the track record of potential partners in outsourced manufacturing, how well their manufacturing experience matches up with Whistler's needs, and how well their management team works with Whistler's. Stott should give a lot of thought to how Whistler can quickly research track records of companies in South Korea. What contacts does Whistler have to investigate the companies? How much importance should it give references? Is there anyone in the country who is reliable and equipped to do the research?

As a guide, ask yourself what readers want to know. Vague steps give readers no idea how they would be implemented. Minute details bog readers down and cause them to lose sight of the important details of a step.

Organization

Action plans are carried out in time. Some steps come first, some come later, and others come much later. You have to show the reader the order of the proposed steps in time. An action plan isn't a to-do list, which records items randomly. Most substantial action plans need both short-term and long-term steps. Some may even require a medium-term category. Exhibit 9-4 lists criteria for deciding where a step should fall in the time sequence of a plan.

EXHIBIT 9-4

Criteria for action plan steps

Position in sequence	Criteria
Short term	• Urgent • "Low-hanging fruit" (easy) • Necessary for longer-term steps
Long term	• Dependent on prior steps • Complex, need time to accomplish

The short-term part of a plan begins with the most urgent actions. What is the first thing that needs to be done to implement a decision or improve a performance or solve a problem? The first step tells the reader a lot about the attention you've paid to the sequential logic of the plan. Short-term steps can also be actions that are easy to perform. Is there something the protagonist can do quickly and easily that will immediately improve the situation? Finally, short-terms steps can be the foundation for later steps.

Long-term steps almost always depend on short-term steps. There will be no implementation of a proposal requiring senior management approval until they are convinced that it is the right thing to do. Winning their approval is therefore a step that comes before any steps to put the proposal into effect.

Be *realistic* about the time it takes to achieve actions and make that clear to readers. Actions that are complex, sensitive, or involve a large number of people are usually long term. Changing the entire incentive system of organization will take months or years. Even some fairly simple actions, such as a single change in a company's strategy, may play out over a long period of time.

Risk

Every action plan has an element of uncertainty and risk. *Nothing* ever goes entirely as planned. You are well advised to identify the chief risk to the plan and propose measures to manage it, but don't agonize over the risk of every step. Rather, ask the question, What's the worst thing that could go wrong with the plan? Then ask, How can the risk be contained or eliminated?

NOTE

1. "General Electric: Major Appliance Business Group (Abridged)," Case 9-693-067 (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 1992).