

THE
CASE STUDY
HANDBOOK

*How to Read, Discuss, and
Write Persuasively About Cases*

William Ellet

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INTRODUCTION

The Case Study Handbook has emerged from sixteen years of work with business school students. The impetus for it was a void in the guidance I could give them about case essays.

When I first worked with MBA students, I confined myself to conventional writing advice—coherent paragraphs; active voice; essays with a discernible beginning, middle, and end. The advice had an impact, but not as much as I hoped. Eventually, I realized that in case examinations, students often didn't know how to recognize the need for an argument or were unclear about how to write one. (This lack of knowledge isn't the fault of students; it's the fault of the writing instruction they have received.) I immediately placed argument at the forefront of my instruction. I experimented with thesis statements derived from an enthymeme. I tried Stephen Toulmin's syllogistic approach to the structure of an argument. In the end, I kept it simple: conclusion, reasons, and evidence.

Understanding when an argument is needed and how to construct one helped many of the writers. Nevertheless, I remained concerned about the trouble students had with case-based essays. Their writing was often characterized by fuzzy points of view, disjointed discussions of issues, and uneven use of evidence. It took me a long time to realize that these essays were unwittingly mirroring the cases the writers were supposed to be interpreting. Argument therapy was an incomplete solution to this problem. The students needed more, and I didn't have more to offer.

I knew that if there was a solution, it was in the cases themselves—but my jurisdiction was writing. Reluctantly, I sat in on case discussions and read many case exams. I read cases that students were writing about and compared them to the essays written about them. Some students intuitively knew how to respond to questions like these: What is the best decision? Why is this organization performing badly? I marveled at their clarity of purpose, despite the pressure of an exam, the challenge of a case, and the lack of information about the reader's expectations. I learned from the successful essays and those that fell short.

Gradually, the ideas in this book took shape, and I tried them out with MBA students to see if I could finally offer advice that spoke to all their needs.

The ideas weren't confined to writing. I found myself reverse-engineering a method that could be used for analyzing a case. I have been using the ideas detailed in this book for five years, and the results have been consistently positive in class discussion and case-based exams—not as judged by me but by the grades of MBA instructors who know nothing of the method and have no reason to know. I have been especially happy about the students who have been able to lift themselves out of academic trouble.

I make statements in this book that could be construed as a theory of cases. Readers, especially business academics, need to understand what this book is not. It has no theoretical ambitions. It is not a rhetoric or generative theory of cases or a taxonomy with exclusive categories. It does not break new ground on argumentation. It describes a pragmatic method grounded in observations about situations that frequently occur in cases and in students' responses to them. Strictly speaking, this book isn't about the case method because such situations also occur in the real world—not surprising, given that cases mirror the real world. The method doesn't account for every situation encountered in cases or every combination of situations. It simply takes advantage of the fact that many cases *do* involve certain well-defined situations.

Each of these situations has its own logic, and an awareness of it can help students read cases more efficiently, discuss them more effectively, and write about them more cogently. The links between analysis, discussion, and writing are a primary advantage of the method. However, it is *not* a substitute for the theories, frameworks, processes, and quantitative methods taught in business courses. In fact, it is intended to complement and facilitate their use. The method shouldn't detract or distract from them but accelerate recourse to them and focus their application.

The essays and essay excerpts in the book are based on the writing of MBA students. I have disguised the writing to protect the privacy of the authors. Because the original essays were examinations written under time pressure, I have also edited them so that they are better examples of the points made in the book. However, I restrained the editing to avoid the appearance of "ideal" examples. Only a single example of bad writing is used; it is a contrast to a good example on the same case. I think examples of bad writing tend to reinforce bad writing.

All of the cases in the book are from Harvard Business School. To avoid causing problems for instructors, the cases have been carefully researched to ensure that they are no longer being ordered for classroom use anywhere in the world. I use these inactive cases to demonstrate the method put forward in the book. I stress to the reader that my interpretations are no more definitive than anyone else's, and in those interpretations I include open questions

and other ways to look at the case. In other words, I do everything I can to discourage the notion of a “right answer” to a case. Some short excerpts from cases that are still taught have been carefully disguised to prevent a student from gaining an unfair advantage—although it’s hard to imagine that the brief quotations could provide any even if they weren’t disguised.

The Case Study Handbook hasn’t been written with the pretension of being indispensable. On their own, business students develop approaches to cases that work and smoothly adapt to writing case-based essays. Nonetheless, too many students don’t arrive at a reliable approach to cases, and that hinders their learning. The same can be said about writing—too many students struggle with it in business school. With the long-term growth in MBA enrollments and the widespread use of cases, the worldwide pool of students who will encounter the case method continues to expand.

This book is intended for all case method students, current and prospective. My hope is that the benefits will extend even more widely. Everyone gains if learners are better prepared for classroom discussion and written arguments—the student, peers, professors, and future employers.

PERSUASION, ARGUMENT, AND THE CASE METHOD

Each year, entering business school students encounter an approach to teaching and learning new to many of them: the case method. By *case*, I mean the substantial studies from business schools or corporations, not the slender vignettes included in many business textbooks. For novices, the first encounter can be perplexing. A case appears to be a straightforward narrative, but when these students finish reading them, they wonder what point the case is trying to make. A case study of a restaurant chain ends with the president turning over in his mind basic questions about the business. He gives no answers and the case doesn't either. In another case study, a young MBA has accidentally learned of alleged office behavior that could have serious consequences for the individuals involved, including him. At the conclusion of the case, he has a literal and figurative headache—and nothing explicit is mentioned about what he should do.

In classroom discussions of cases like these, instructors use the Socratic method, in which students carry the discussion through answers to a stream of questions. Students can feel vulnerable, and the classroom atmosphere can be strained and edgy, particularly in the first months. Written case-based examinations pose another challenge. In class, the entire group, including the instructor, works collaboratively on a case. Depending on the size of the class, each student is likely to contribute only a small number of comments to the discussion. On exams, students are on their own. They not only have to analyze the case in response to one or more questions but also write an essay that satisfies and persuades an expert reader—all in a limited time.

In class and on exams, case method students are asked questions like these:

- Is the change effort described in the case worthwhile? If it is, why has it failed? How can it be successfully implemented?
- How attractive is the industry described in the case? Are some segments more attractive than others? Why? Identify, analyze, and evaluate the strategy of the company featured in the case.

- Thinking from the perspective of current European Union members, do you agree with their decision to enlarge the EU by ten new members? What are the pros and cons? What is the impact on the world economy?

SKILLS FOR STUDYING CASES

From time to time, MBA students have told me they feel there is a secret to the case method that some people get and some don't. If you get it, you do well; if you don't, you scrape by as best you can, always fearful that you will be exposed.

The case method requires a lot from the student. At the same time, it isn't a secret society in which a few fortunate individuals get it and thus outperform their peers. Case method students need two distinct sets of skills. First, they need to be able to analyze a case, to give it meaning in relation to its key issues or questions that have been asked about it. The goal is to come to conclusions congruent with the reality of the case, taking into account its gaps and uncertainties. Second, students have to be able to communicate their thinking effectively.

This book provides a method of organizing and directing case study and guidance on how to communicate the results. The method should help you use the business concepts that are already part of your working knowledge or are taught in business courses—concepts such as:

- Expectancy Theory (Victor Vroom)
- 5 Cs analysis of marketing situations¹
- 5 Ps Model of Leadership (Mildred Golden Pryor, J. Christopher White, and Leslie A. Toombs)
- Macroeconomics
- Value Chain (Michael Porter)

The combination of a method to organize thinking about a case and business concepts will help you come to conclusions and explain why you think they're valid. In education and in business, your conclusions have little meaning unless they're shared with others. The case method is about stating and comparing opinions and learning from the differences and similarities. In an academic program, communicating conclusions about a case occurs orally, in study groups and class discussions, or in formal presentations. It also occurs in writing, in class assignments, research projects, and examinations. Each type of communication has its own needs and requirements. In class, you have to meld your insights with the overall discussion.

The role of each individual is to advance the discussion and contribute to the collective understanding of the case. Individual or group presentations usually aim at persuading the audience. A case-based essay also aims at persuasion. This book is divided into three separate skills: case analysis (part I), discussion (part II), and writing about cases (part III).

RECEIVING KNOWLEDGE VERSUS MAKING IT

Many entering business school students have been educated in a lecture system. A lecture is an efficient way for an expert to deliver content to many individuals at once. In combination with textbooks, which are lectures in print, this learning model can deliver volumes of content in a short time.

The lecture model is good at transferring information. Like any learning model, it has limitations. One of the most important is that it doesn't encourage listeners to think about the content and apply it. Lectures on organizational development or macroeconomics aren't truly meaningful until the learner can apply the content to issues to better understand organizations or countries. Concepts that are meant to be applied require practice opportunities. The lecture method generally doesn't afford students the chance for rigorous practice, and learners tend to be graded on recall of facts.

When students enter a case-based program, they understandably assume that regurgitation of case facts is a central task. They are surprised when their professors not only expect them to know the facts but to use them to support an opinion about an issue the case raises. It doesn't help that incoming business school students often aren't told what the case method asks of them. A sink-or-swim mentality seems common in professional education, at least in the United States. In the lecture method, learners *receive* knowledge from an expert. In the case method, learners *make* the knowledge with the assistance of an expert. This fundamental shift causes many new case method students to be confused and uncertain about how they should go about learning.

WRITING AND PERSUASION

A graduate once summed up his feelings about writing instruction in an MBA program: "I didn't go to business school to learn how to write!"

Fair enough. But many business school students don't think they have strong writing skills and aren't sure how to write an argument. Graduates of undergraduate programs often have had little practice in writing after a required freshman composition course and very little meaningful feedback on what they do write. Individuals with degrees and backgrounds in science and technology may have done no significant writing since high

school. Yet, quality MBA programs—classroom based and online—require students to write, and the dearth of prior instruction and practice can be a liability. It can also reduce graduates' career effectiveness. The title of a much discussed *New York Times* article captures the state of writing in the United States: "What Corporate America Cannot Build: A Sentence."²

The ability to think clearly and communicate convincingly has always been an important skill for managers and leaders. It is now arguably more important. Rapid globalization, the increase in geographically dispersed work groups, and the Internet put a new premium on text communication. The *New York Times* article just cited illustrates the daily chaos that badly written e-mails cause in companies. In the "knowledge economy," employees are expected to think and act on their own. These skilled and intelligent individuals expect management to explain and persuade, not issue orders. With employees distributed around the world, the most practical way of reaching them is writing. Well-written documents can be a hidden source of competitive advantage.

Persuasion is the art of convincing an audience, listeners or readers, to believe, think, or act as the speaker or writer wants them to. The art has a long history, going back more than two thousand years in the West. It is still as vital today as it was in its ancient forms. Argument and persuasion are necessary to resolve controversy—to assist people with very different views of the same thing to find common ground. That function has particular importance in business, with its emphasis on action. Differences of opinion need to be negotiated so that a company can take intelligent action.

Cases have multiple meanings and thus are always controversial. In a class of forty students, there are likely to be forty different views of a case. To persuade classmates and professors in a case method setting, writers must deal with two obstacles: the shared text (the case) and the critical outlook or attitude of the audience. The audience knows the text and the facts so writers can't afford to make factual mistakes. In addition, because the audience members are familiar with the case and will have their own opinions about it, writers must meet a high standard of proof.

On the other hand, the audience's knowledge of the case is an asset. It relieves writers of having to describe the case situation, define the terms used in it, and other tasks speakers and writers often have to perform when the audience isn't intimately familiar with the topic. Also, most professors are less interested in the position writers take on a case than in how well they can prove it.

There are many ways to persuade an audience—emotional appeals; tricks of logic; appeals to authority; or reasoning and evidence. In an academic or business setting, the best way to persuade is through argument. Academic work is founded on rational, logical thinking and discourse, and argument is essential to both. For business students, learning to analyze a

situation accurately and persuade through rational argument has great importance. Managers and executives need to be able to think logically about the businesses they are trying to run, the people they are trying to lead, and the goals they are trying to achieve. Thinking chronically clouded by emotion, lapses in reason, or an unwillingness to look hard at the facts generally leads to trouble for both managers and their organizations.

Broadly speaking, an argument is a series of logically related statements. The fundamental relationship, the one that matters most, is between the statement of a conclusion and the evidence for it. You make a conclusion about a case—the president of the country is right to default on its foreign debt—and readers nod their heads and say, “Fine, but what can you say to prove it?”³ For the audience to take your conclusion seriously, you need to show them why they should.

Here’s an illustration of the conclusion–evidence relationship:

<i>What? (conclusion)</i>	[because]	<i>Why? (evidence)</i>
The president is right to default on the country’s foreign debt.		Full payment of the debt will destabilize the country.

The statement “Full payment of the debt will destabilize the country” won’t persuade anyone on its own. The audience needs to see the evidence proving that full payment will destabilize the nation.

<i>What? (conclusion)</i>	[because]	<i>Why? (reason)</i>
The president is right to default on the country’s foreign debt.		Full payment of the debt will destabilize the country.

Evidence

1. Debt payments will take money out of the country that is badly needed to support the economy and meet social needs such as education and healthcare.
Evidence includes historical narrative showing that past economic downturns have impoverished the population and created political conflict that worsened the economic situation.
2. National finances are depleted.
Evidence includes data and calculations showing that poor management of the economy has resulted in deficit spending and spotty tax collection.
3. The national economy is just beginning to recover.
Evidence includes data and calculations showing that GDP has increased by 3 percent and 5 percent

the last two years, respectively; inflation has declined 5 percent in a year; but unemployment has risen sharply.

4. The standard of living and other indicators of social well-being are improving, but a downturn in the economy will reverse the gains.

Evidence includes data showing that per capita income has risen slightly (2 percent). Major crime is down 6 percent and the decline coincides with improved economy.

5. A political crisis has just been resolved, but if the economy declines, there is potential for more.

Evidence includes recent political history of political turmoil that has prevented the government from taking the difficult steps necessary for economic growth.

The argument began with a conclusion and a statement summarizing the proof. Arrayed under the statement are other, more detailed, statements. Each needs to be accompanied by further evidence that corroborates it. (In order to keep the outline uncluttered, most of this detailed evidence has not been included.) Note that the evidence is not only specific but is also derived from different sources including economic statistics and political history. Generally, the broader the range of evidence that aligns with a conclusion, the more convincing the argument is.

Keep this simple model of argument in mind, especially in the chapters on case-based writing. Cases constantly invite immersion in the details of fact and data. You want that detail—but you also want a structure that manages the detail and links it to a conclusion.

NOTES

1. See Robert J. Dolan, “Note on Marketing Strategy,” Note 9-598-061 (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 1997).

2. Sam Dillon, “What Corporate America Cannot Build: A Sentence,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2004.

3. Paraphrase of Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 13.

WHAT IS A CASE?

In a case method classroom, both the instructor and student must be active in different ways. Each is dependent on the other to bring about teaching and learning. Instructors are experts, but they rarely deliver their expertise directly. The art of a case method instructor is to ask the right question at the right time, provide feedback on answers, and sustain a discussion that opens up meanings of the case.

To illustrate the pattern of question and response, here is a portion of a simulated case discussion of the Harvard Business School case “Malaysia in the 1990s (A)”:

Instructor: What do you think the prime minister should do? What should he say at the United Nations?

Student A: He shouldn't give in to the environmentalists. The country should be free to do what it wants inside its borders. That's nobody else's business. The environmentalists should worry about problems in their own countries.

Instructor: So he should go it alone, then? Say you were interested in putting your money into the country. Which would you prefer: a government open to discussion and negotiation about issues, or one that takes a hard line with outsiders?

Student A: I guess I would want the government to be willing to talk. But I don't think this is an issue that needs to be discussed.

Instructor: You said you think environmental groups should only concern themselves with issues in their home countries?

Student A: Yes.

Instructor: Does Malaysia have a strong environmental movement?

Student A: I . . . I don't know. The case doesn't say.

Instructor: Let's assume it doesn't. Does an environmental point of view have any utility for a developing nation? Are there any results that could damage the country's development, or is it just a matter of saving, say, a