

# Writing and Teaching Harvard Cases

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# **1 Introduction**

This document is intended as a reference guide to prepare engagement with quality Harvard Case Studies for teaching in a classroom setting. The first two sections of this guide define what is expected of a Harvard Case and associated Teaching Note, providing assessment criteria for quality evaluation. This is followed by a section that outlines a typical Case Writing Process. A further section provides a quick reference summary of key aspects of Classroom Teaching using Harvard Cases. Finally, example Case Essay Planning Templates are included as tools to establish rapid understanding of the discussion commonly required to analyse a Harvard Case.

## **2 Qualities of a Harvard Case Study**

### **2.1 How are Teaching Case Studies Used?**

Teaching case studies is a very interactive participant centred approach to learning decision-making, usually within a classroom setting. Students are typically given a case that describes some business context or situation for which the tutor is familiar. Often, three or four decision points for managers are then put to the class for which the learners must use the knowledge they already have to exercise judgement. Students attend the class having read the case and are encouraged to debate, discuss, but more importantly listen to alternative points of view to shape and deepen their thinking. It is the role of tutors to make sure that the learning is deepened by questions that students are asking and by making interventions to drive the case to a rich discussion of the issues that help to hone judgement.

With some significant infrastructure investment, the approach has been demonstrated to translate well to an online experience through use of virtual conferencing, live polling and the use of hand-gestures to request contributions.

### **2.2 Learner Story Line**

Cases are usually studied as part of a course, for which the learner is encouraged to think as a key protagonist within a relevant context. For example, for a marketing course the case should encourage the learner to think as a marketer, not a strategist or manufacturing manager. To analyse a case, the learner needs to develop ways of identifying and understanding important aspects of a situation and what they mean overall. Four types of situations tend to occur repeatedly in cases:

1. Problems: The definition of a problem as a case situation is quite specific. It is a situation in which there is a significant outcome or performance, and there is no explicit explanation of the outcome of performance.
2. Decisions: Decisions cases vary greatly in scope, consequence and available data. An executive may decide to launch a product, move a plant, pursue a merger or provide finance for a planned expansion. A countries President may decide on whether to pursue a controversial trade deal. However, analysing any decision requires: options, often defined by the case; criteria, derived through study of the case; and evidence which is compared against the decision criteria.
3. Evaluations: Evaluations express a judgement about the worth, value, or effectiveness of a performance, act or outcome. Evaluation requires appropriate criteria which are often inferred from the particulars of the situation. An overall evaluation expresses best fit between the evidence and criteria.
4. Rules: For rules analysis we need to know the type of information needed, the appropriate rule to furnish that information, the correct way to apply the rule and the data necessary to execute the rule. Examples of rules analysis are the net-present-value calculation and client-billable rate. The scope of these cases is often very narrow and useful only to a specific set of circumstances. They usually involve quantitative methods, the results of which can frequently involve sharp differences of opinion with divergent inferences arrived at from a similar outcome.

Case analysis involves a process of interrogative, purposeful and iterative reading. To achieve this the learner requires a goal which informs them what they should seek to conclude from the case. Analyses are anchored so that the learner adopts the point-of-view of the case protagonist, so that they empathise with their dilemma. It is often also useful to define a hypothesis to be tested by further evidence.

Cases don't have to be too long. Some good cases are only two or three pages. Students may give more scrutiny to these brief cases than they would a 20-page case. Writers who try to capture a situation from every angle and in every detail end up with sprawling narratives that usually do not make a good case. When writing cases, set good, strong boundaries. Avoid superfluous, flowery, or poetic material that may contain interesting anecdotes or factoids, but that could distract readers from the case's core topics. Include only those important and useful details that can help students make decisions and understand key issues that the case explores.

The best cases work on multiple levels. A case should focus on a specific situation. For example, whether or not to introduce a certain product. But it should also serve as a metaphor for broader background issues: How do we think about introducing new products? Are we introducing enough products? Are new product introductions a source of competitive advantage in our industry? How should we organize and manage new product development? Good case studies encourage learners to think broadly about the various cultural, financial, and strategic impacts that managerial decisions have on a company.

Great cases revolve around points of contention on which intelligent people can hold different points of view: What should you do? Why? How do you get it done? Ideally, learners should have to choose between two very attractive alternatives or two terrible alternatives. The best cases involve questions that get learners emotionally engaged so that they really care about choices and outcomes.

## **2.3 Exhibits**

Cases don't have to be obvious. As a pedagogical objective, it may be intended that the learner look beyond a superficial issue to identify an underlying topic that needs to be addressed, and the questions to pose. Still, it's usually unhelpful if cases contain real curveballs where 'unlocking' the case depends on finding some small piece of information hidden in an exhibit. Learners shouldn't spend too much time separating the wheat from the chaff. If a case has 12 pages of text and 10 pages of exhibits, even the smartest learners will likely lose interest.

## 2.4 Quality Evaluation

The following questions are useful to consider when evaluating the quality of Harvard Case's:

- Does the case focus on managerial issues generally posing a problem or challenge requiring a decision?
- Does the case provide complete and self-contained information allowing the student to thoroughly analyse and develop a rich understanding of the core issues from multiple perspectives?
- Is the case written in clear, straightforward language with a logical structure and without unnecessary information? Does the case opening reveal one or more key issues, and the closing call for action or decision?
- Does the case induce strong student engagement through the inherent interest in, or importance of, the protagonist, organisation, and/or core issue?
- Is the case written to highlight differences in perspective, stakeholder interests, and/or potential outcomes of controversial issues?
- Is the case structured around multifaceted issues with no obvious answer, with trade-offs and dilemmas?
- Does the case require rigorous analysis of information provided, sufficient to support multiple points of view, with the need for reasoned assumptions and the resolution requiring judgements?
- Does the case contain novel ideas, concepts or frameworks providing significant discovery opportunities for the students?

### 3 Qualities of Case Teaching Notes

A case is incomplete without a teaching note which makes the effective classroom use of a case accessible. The creation and use of both are interactive and iterative processes. A teaching note explains: what the case is about; where it fits in a course; why we are teaching it; what we are going to teach; and how we can teach it.

Learning objectives anchor a teaching note. The design and substance of cases contribute to the attainment of specific learning objectives that are relevant and important to the goals of a course conveying a wider body of knowledge. Objectives should relate to knowledge enhancement, skill building, or attitudinal development clearly expressed in the teaching note:

- Knowledge enhancement: includes command of theory, frameworks, concepts, information and institutional knowledge.
- Skill building: includes problem or opportunity identification and analysis, strategy formulation and implementation, function-specific techniques.
- Attitudinal development: includes values, beliefs, self-awareness, intellectual openness, receptivity to change and risk tolerance.

Teaching notes should include substantive analyses as reference for the tutor. This may be developed as one or two complete model essays. These can be supplemented with some notes on possible take-aways or closing insights and links to relevant topical literature.

The substantive analyses can be used to support a classroom discussion plan that can be included in the teaching note. In case method teaching, the teacher is not in complete control. Learners teach each other and learn from each other. On any given day, there will likely be somebody in the room who knows more about the company featured in the case than the tutor does. So, a tutor can't walk into the classroom and expect to impose a lesson plan that goes in a strict linear way from A to B to C to D. The case ought to be written to allow students to jump from A to D and then come back later to B if that's how the discussion plays out. At the same time, the case should be structured so that the instructor can collect learner's comments on a board, organizing them as a coherent set of related ideas, and then deliver a 5-to-10-minute summary that communicates whatever essential concepts the case has covered. This summation can be a very powerful teaching and learning experience. The tutor should debrief using many approaches and avoid suggesting there was only one right answer. It can sometimes be very thought provoking to end on a question. The discussion plan should include a set of questions with follow-up, which may be:

- Information-seeking: relevant to setting up a particular analysis. To maintain engagement, use of this type of questioning should be limited.
- Analytical: requiring diagnostic, causal or interpretive skill building.
- Action: fostering decision-making and implementation skills.



- Challenge: aimed at deepening or expanding the analysis.
- Hypothetical: allowing learners to extend insights beyond the account of the case presented.
- Predictive: to develop foresight.
- Generalisation: encouraging a more abstract level of cognitive reasoning that may require a period of student reflection.

Introductions to cases are often vital. Teaching notes should contain a suggested opening question.

## 4 Case Writing Process

To write a good Harvard Case Study it is important that authors have a mindset. Case study writers need to be: curious; comfortable with ambiguity; have command of their topic or subject matter; an ability to relate to the case protagonist; enthusiasm for the case method; and a capacity for finding the drama in a situation.

Writers begin by being constantly on the lookout for new case handles. They look for interesting people, doing interesting things and facing interesting challenges within a topic/subject matter in which they have command. The process of identifying such a handle likely differs with interest, but enthusiastic engagement with the subject matter helps. Once a handle has been recognised, work on finding the burning business issue through developing relationships with as senior members of the organisation as practicable.

Harvard Business School recommend a certain structure to learner's analyses of business issues in order that they support the expected discussion of a Harvard Case. These analyses are fitted to the underlying business issue described by the case: problems; decisions; or evaluations. It is important that when the Harvard Case Study is written it contains the background, features, criteria and relevant factors to support the relevant analyses. The structure of these analyses is provided in the Analyses Planning Templates section at the end of this document.

Once an underlying business issue and required structure of the learner's analyses has been identified, an account of the business situation can be developed through engagement with relevant business actors and desktop reviews of relevant supporting information. Begin by recording all relevant information to the case, paying particular attention to relate to the protagonist in the business situation and the dilemma they have. Once confident that sufficient detail of a valid situation has been recorded to support the required discussion described in the relevant Analysis Planning Template it may be a good time to attempt writing the Harvard Case itself.

When writing the Harvard Case, evaluate your work against the Qualities of a Harvard Case Study described at the beginning of this document. Produce teaching notes once the case is drafted before circulating to a diverse network of relevant actors, ie. case teachers, situation protagonists and subject matter experts. If possible, test later drafts by offering them for discussion by willing colleagues or students. These later tests will require not only how to write Harvard Cases, but how to teach them as well. Make sure to acknowledge useful feedback and respond carefully to every evaluation.

## **5 Teaching Harvard Case Studies**

### **5.1 Learner Selection**

A standard case class has full-time learners meeting regularly over a semester in classroom. The nature of the discussions and facilitation required can vary greatly depending on class size. Where learners have greater diversity of interest and background knowledge, for example when participating in core rather than elective learning, greater emphasis is needed on engagement and motivation. Part-time students tend to be less invested in class dynamics and classroom interaction. Greater diversity amongst learner culture and demography can greatly enhance classroom discussions but may also require explicit management. If too many learners participate from a company, company hierarchies may influence classroom participation.

### **5.2 Learner Engagement**

#### **5.2.1 Foundations**

It's important to have self-confidence and establish a contract with learners through carefully planning a course structure, making learner expectations explicit and selecting well-tailored cases and reading material. A logical structure usually works best, ie. from foundations to advanced, or from general to specific learning. It is often useful to share a form of the course syllabus with learners. Syllabuses can be structured around inducing theory from a series of cases or by applying theory that has already been taught deductively to cases. Inductive syllabuses are often a preferred style as they allow for more thorough analysis of each case. To ensure that learners have properly understood theory, multiple case examples are needed to illustrate relevance to business situations. Questions discussed in class should not be shared to learners before-hand. Use teaching notes as a reference to follow for the questions to be asked, the timing of questions and board plan for class insights. It is often useful to teach material beyond what is described in case studies, where it is tempting to resort to lecturing when this is needed. Instead of lecturing in class, one useful strategy is to pre-record lectures as videos and assign them to learners for viewing before the classroom discussion.

#### **5.2.2 Flow**

Through systematic use of techniques that help plan for, prepare and create a lively classroom discussion. Tutors can establish certain repeated habits to signify the beginning of classroom discussion. The use of varied types of questioning can also be used to enhance engagement: “cold calls” (asking a question directly for a student to answer immediately); “warm calls” (allowing a student to answer a question after a short pause); and “open calls” (where a question is posed to the entire class for a learner to answer). Choice of the first student to answer a cold or warm call should be pre-planned and done carefully. Series of questions often work well be either “spiralling-in” (starting with a general question and getting more specific), or “spiralling-out” (starting with a

specific question and getting more general). The best tutors trust the class to drive the discussion respond, and don't rush to answer questions themselves. Airtime amongst class participants needs to be managed equitably, so that no learners are found to dominate discussion. Where a learner contributes something valuable, writing it on the board is a good way of giving them praise. Use follow-up questions to probe learner knowledge and push learners hard if they have the skills and emotional makeup for it.

### **5.2.3 Feedback**

Feedback is used to evaluate learning before, during and after course with actionable outcomes. Such tools are designed to: measure what degree the learner has achieved the learning objectives; serve as a mechanism for feedback to the students; and motivate learner efforts. As there is no one correct answer to a case, learners should be assessed on how they have used reasoned judgement to arrive at their conclusions rather than whether they have arrived at a correct answer. Up to 50 percent of learner grades should be given for participation in classroom and discussion groups. Assessment may be through a combination of written exam papers or oral reflection/presentation assignments that may be worked on as individuals or groups. Each assignment should be graded and given a short piece of descriptive feedback of a few sentences. The trick is to make the process personal, but efficient.

## 6 Analyses Planning Templates

### 6.1 Problem Essay

#### 6.1.1 Position Statement

State the problem of the case. Try to state in a single sentence and then expand slightly if necessary. Then summarise the diagnosis, which should be the primary cause of the problem.

|            |
|------------|
| Problem:   |
|            |
| Diagnosis: |
|            |

#### 6.1.2 Diagnosis

List the primary causes of the problem and note the evidence for each. Identify the fewest number of cases that account for much of the problem.

|       | Evidence | Action plan ideas |
|-------|----------|-------------------|
| Cause |          |                   |
| Cause |          |                   |
| Cause |          |                   |
| Cause |          |                   |

#### 6.1.3 Action Plan

The general purpose of a problem action plan is to improve the current situation by acting on the causes of the problem.

Begin by stating the goal(s) of the plan, which are the major outcomes the steps are supposed to bring about.

##### *Action Steps*

Write the steps for the plan without worrying too much about their order. Once finished, indicate the final chronological order of the steps and then possibly group them by phases (eg. consensus, communications and improvement phases).

|        |
|--------|
| Goals: |
|        |
|        |
|        |
|        |

*Short-Term Action Steps*

| Order in essay: | Phase: | Step: |
|-----------------|--------|-------|
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |

*Long-Term Action Steps*

| Order in essay: | Phase: | Step: |
|-----------------|--------|-------|
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |

Identify the major risks that could undermine the plan. Propose responses to mitigate them.

| Risk: | Response: |
|-------|-----------|
|       |           |
|       |           |
|       |           |
|       |           |

## 6.2 Decision Essay, Prove and State Model

### 6.2.1 Position Statement

Briefly state the decision to be taken and summarise the reasons for it.

|           |
|-----------|
| Decision: |
|           |
| Reasons:  |
|           |

### 6.2.2 Proof

List the decision options, usually stated in the case.

|                   |
|-------------------|
| Decision options: |
|                   |
|                   |
|                   |
|                   |

State the decision criteria. They should be relevant, broad rather than narrow, and as few as possible. Specific ways to measure the criteria may be needed and should be noted.

| Decision criteria: | How to measure: |
|--------------------|-----------------|
|                    |                 |
|                    |                 |
|                    |                 |
|                    |                 |

List evidence against criteria that shows why options should be rejected. Limit to only the most compelling evidence against the options.

|                    |                 |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| Rejected option:   |                 |
| Decision criteria: | How to measure: |
|                    |                 |
|                    |                 |
|                    |                 |
|                    |                 |

|                    |                 |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| Rejected option:   |                 |
| Decision criteria: | How to measure: |
|                    |                 |
|                    |                 |
|                    |                 |
|                    |                 |

|                    |                 |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| Rejected option:   |                 |
| Decision criteria: | How to measure: |
|                    |                 |
|                    |                 |
|                    |                 |
|                    |                 |

|                         |                 |
|-------------------------|-----------------|
| Recommended option: for |                 |
| Decision criteria:      | How to measure: |
|                         |                 |
|                         |                 |
|                         |                 |
|                         |                 |

List the one or two major disadvantages of your recommendation, any evidence that is needed to prove them, and how to mitigate them.

|               |                          |
|---------------|--------------------------|
| Disadvantage: | Evidence and mitigation: |
|               |                          |
|               |                          |
|               |                          |
|               |                          |



### 6.2.3 Action Plan

The general purpose of a problem action plan is to improve the current situation by acting on the causes of the problem.

Begin by stating the goal(s) of the plan, which are the major outcomes the steps are supposed to bring about.

#### *Action Steps*

|        |
|--------|
| Goals: |
|        |
|        |
|        |
|        |

Write the steps for the plan without worrying too much about their order. Once finished, indicate the final chronological order of the steps and then possibly group them by phases (eg. consensus, communications and improvement phases).

#### *Short-Term Action Steps*

| Order in essay: | Phase: | Step: |
|-----------------|--------|-------|
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |

#### *Long-Term Action Steps*

| Order in essay: | Phase: | Step: |
|-----------------|--------|-------|
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |

Identify the major risks that could undermine the plan. Propose responses to mitigate them.

| Risk: | Response: |
|-------|-----------|
|       |           |
|       |           |
|       |           |
|       |           |

## 6.3 Evaluation

### 6.3.1 Problem Statement: Bottom-line Judgement

Briefly state the overall evaluation, the most significant positive and negative factors, and any qualifications.

|   |
|---|
| Overall evaluation:                         |
|   |
| Summary of major positive/negative factors: |
|   |
|   |
|   |
| Summary of any qualifications:              |
|   |
|   |
|   |

### 6.3.2 Evaluation Criteria

State the evaluation criteria. Criteria should be relevant, broad rather than narrow, and as few as possible. Specific ways to measure the criteria may be needed and should be noted.

| Criteria | How to measure them |
|----------|---------------------|
|          |                     |
|          |                     |
|          |                     |
|          |                     |

### 6.3.3 Proof of the Evaluation

List the positive and negative factors the criteria reveal and the evidence in them. If any criteria seem to have ambiguous results, not those.

|             |          |                   |
|-------------|----------|-------------------|
| Criterion 1 |          |                   |
|             | Evidence | Action plan ideas |
| Positive    |          |                   |
| Negative    |          |                   |
| Criterion 2 |          |                   |
|             | Evidence | Action plan ideas |
| Positive    |          |                   |
| Negative    |          |                   |
| Criterion 3 |          |                   |
|             | Evidence | Action plan ideas |
| Positive    |          |                   |
| Negative    |          |                   |
| Criterion 4 |          |                   |
|             | Evidence | Action plan ideas |
| Positive    |          |                   |
| Negative    |          |                   |

#### 6.3.4 Qualifications

Qualifications state factors no part of the evaluation that has an effect on it. A summary of these should be included in the position statement.

|                          |
|--------------------------|
| Qualifications (if any): |
|                          |
|                          |
|                          |
|                          |

#### 6.3.5 Action Plan

The general purpose of a problem action plan is to improve the current situation by acting on the causes of the problem.

Begin by stating the goal(s) of the plan, which are the major outcomes the steps are supposed to bring about.

##### *Action Steps*

Write the steps for the plan without worrying too much about their order. Once finished, indicate the final chronological order of the steps and then possibly group them by phases (eg. consensus, communications and improvement phases).

|        |
|--------|
| Goals: |
|        |
|        |
|        |
|        |

*Short-Term Action Steps*

| Order in essay: | Phase: | Step: |
|-----------------|--------|-------|
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |

*Long-Term Action Steps*

| Order in essay: | Phase: | Step: |
|-----------------|--------|-------|
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |
|                 |        |       |

Identify the major risks that could undermine the plan. Propose responses to mitigate them.

| Risk: | Response: |
|-------|-----------|
|       |           |
|       |           |
|       |           |
|       |           |