Business

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The Case Analysis

A Brief Overview of the Case Analysis

The case analysis is a common assignment across a number of business courses, particularly those at the 300, 400, and graduate levels. A case analysis shows your professor that you (and your group, if assigned as a collaborative project) can think through a real-life business problem or decision-making process in a logical, professional, ethical, and informed manner. Your primary purpose, then, is to apply your critical-thinking skills and business expertise to a problem faced by a real company and propose a logical, realistic solution.

The purpose of a case analysis is to show your professor that you can think through a real-life business problem or decision-making process in a logical, professional, ethical, and informed manner.

Your primary audience is your professor; however, a successful case analysis keeps the needs of a real-life businessperson in mind. Your professor likely has the knowledge and background to understand the problem and know which solution would be most effective. However, your professor is interested in seeing how well you can explain and justify your decisions, much as you would need to do in a real-world business setting. Therefore, you should include enough detail throughout the report that a non-expert, non-professor businessperson can follow your thinking process and enact the solution you propose.

All business writing should be done with an eye toward professionalism. After all, outside of the university (and sometimes for academic courses), the audience for your writing will be a colleague or client. Your writing should not be overly formal, but rather should communicate with the reader in a respectful and efficient manner. Typically, the emphasis of business writing is on ideas, things, and the reader; references to the writer, first-person (“I,” “me,” and “my”) or otherwise (“the writer believes...”) should be used sparingly.

Structure and Format

Your professor’s assignment sheet will likely detail exactly what should be included in your case analysis, so you should read it carefully and refer to it frequently during your writing process. Generally, however, your document will be split into sections, each with its own heading. Those sections are typically:

Table of Contents

The table of contents lists each section of the report and the page number on which each can be found. Each sub-section of the report should be listed, as well as each visual aid you might include in the appendix.

Your professor may not require an abstract or table of contents. Refer to the assignment sheet to ensure you include all the sections required by your professor.

Abstract

The abstract briefly describes the company or organization you studied, the problem it faced, the thinking process you followed, and the outcome or solution you propose. In business writing, an abstract saves readers quite a bit of time; they can read the abstract before reading the rest of your document to get a sense of what you propose. After reading the full report, the abstract is a way for readers to remember the document. It's a short-hand way of helping readers decide if the document needs to be re-read or acted upon. For these reasons, the abstract should give a thorough overview of the entire report–but in a very brief and clear manner. Its tone should be objective throughout, and aside from the final sentence or two that summarize your specific recommendations, references to the first person ("I","me", or "my") should be avoided. Visit the Fred Meijer Center for Writing's website for a handout about how to write abstracts, if you need help getting started on this section. http://www.gvsu.edu/wc.

Be sure to refer to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association or reputable information on the internet regarding how to cite each type of source (newspaper article, academic journal article, book, website, etc). A good online source for help with APA style is http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc.

Case Analysis

The case analysis includes:

- (Optional) **Pertinent background information** about the company involved, such as its size, location, processes, products, and organizational culture. This section of the report may be very brief or nonexistent if everyone in your class is writing about the same organization or if your professor indicates he or she is very familiar with the company.
- **A thorough and clear description of the problem or decision** the organization faces. Detail the internal and external forces that have a bearing on the problem. If applicable, include the company's competitive position in your analysis. If the problem is particularly complex, you might need to break this section into several sub-sections to ensure you thoroughly describe the problem from each angle; in addition, by using sub-sections, you emphasize and highlight the various facets to the problem, demonstrating its scope and complexity. Most importantly, however, sub-sections will keep your writing organized and therefore guide readers through the text effectively.
- (If applicable, given the assignment sheet) **Analysis from the perspectives of multiple disciplines**, and evidence from both quantitative and qualitative research to support your analysis. These facets demonstrate to your professor that you can think critically in a broad manner, and take into account the different perspectives offered by diverse research methodologies.
- **A discussion of the specific solutions or decisions** that would solve the problem. Each proposed solution or decision should include enough information to make it actionable–that is, to make it possible for someone within the company to implement your ideas.
- **Your specific recommendation**. Given all the factors related to the problem, and the various solutions available to address it, what is your recommendation? In this section of the document, you will most likely find yourself using the first person ("I recommend" or "My recommendation is...") and that is acceptable in most cases.

Did you know? *There is a guide called Displaying Your Findings: A Practical Guide for Presenting Figures, Posters, and Presentations which describes how to format visuals to suit APA format. The writing center and GVSU libraries have this resource on our shelves for your reference.*

References

Your references should be listed in alphabetical format and in accordance with APA style. Throughout the entire report, any cited research should be referred to in correct APA format. Be sure to avoid plagiarism by ensuring that any summaries or paraphrases of research you write are thorough and that you put quotation marks around any direct quotations. Double check that all sources you summarize, paraphrase, or quote from are listed on the references page.

Be sure to refer to the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* or reputable information on the internet regarding how to cite each type of source (newspaper article, academic journal article, book, website, etc). A good online source for help with APA style is http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc.

Visuals

Charts, graphs, and tables, help to illustrate and describe the problem faced by the company and/or the possible solutions. When designing visuals, be sure that:

- Each visual aid has both a number/letter (Table A or Graph 1) for easy reference and a title that clearly describes what the reader should take away from the visual.
- Each visual is referred to and described within the text of the report.
- The colors used to show different parts of the chart/graph contrast, even if printed in black and white. (Note: some colors will apear quite different from one another on your screen but will actually print the same color of gray. For this reason, you should look at the print-out itself to determine whether the visual is clear and useful to readers).
- All charts and graphs have legends that indicate what each color, shape, or line represents.
- If applicable (i.e., a line or bar graph), x and y axes are labeled, and increments between points on the axes are incrementally consistent.
- If you took the visual from an online or print source, you must cite the source on the visual itself and on the references page.
- If you built your own visual based on someone else's data, you must cite the source of the data on the visual itself and on the references page.

Ensuring You're On the Right Track

Seidman College of Business faculty have contributed their suggestions to this handout. Some specific problems they most commonly note in students' case analysis reports include:

The repetition of too many case facts in the background section. Particularly if the professor has assigned the specific case you are writing about, it's unnecessary to give much detail in the background section. Instead, you should write with the assumption that the professor knows the case, and your summary of the facts should highlight the important factors that become relevant in future sections of the report.

Analysis that is based too much on the writer's opinion. Most often, an over-opinionated case analysis manifests itself as:

- Not clearly connected to the models and theories discussed in class.
- Not evidence based.

It's a good idea, then, to make sure the body of your report explicitly identifies the model(s) and theory you are applying to the situation and each claim you make about the case is supported with evidence.

Analysis that indicates the writer has not yet zoned in on the important aspects of the case that need to be addressed in the writing. Pick and choose the important aspects of the case to be developed throughout your analysis. A very long paper that addresses every bit of the case may seem, on the surface, to be thorough. But very long papers might indicate to your professor that you were unable to pick out the most important elements of

Tip: *You might find it easier to write a more focused background/summary of the case after you have drafted the rest of your report. That way, you can build a summary around the information that is most pertinent to your analysis and (if applicable) proposed solution.*

the case. It's a good idea, then, to ask classmates or writing consultants from the Fred Meijer Center for Writing to read your paper and give you a three-sentence summary about what your analysis seems to be saying. If readers cannot "say back" a summary that indicates a focus–but rather indicates you've written an "overview" of the case–you should begin to pare down your writing to the essential elements of the case. (Good readers can help you to identify those areas of the writing worth keeping and further developing).

Writing that is too descriptive and not analytical enough. Description tends to answer the questions: What happened? Where? When? Who did it? Answering these questions is easier than answering the kinds of questions that lead to analysis–questions that focus on why and how, or that weigh issues against each other: Why did this happen? To what end(s)? What are the most important considerations, and why? How should the problem be addressed, and why? How much should be spent? Taking into account the complexities of the situation, what are the most important considerations to be addressed first–and why, and how?

Prompts for Writing Consultations

- Begin by learning about the case on which the writer's analysis is based. What are the salient points that need to be addressed in the case analysis, and why?
- Does the report contain all the sections required by the professor?
- Is the abstract (if required) brief, but also complete and clear?
- Is the problem or decision faced by the company clearly described, and does the description of the case remain brief? (Writers should assume that readers know the facts of the case).
- Can you locate where in the text the writer has indicated the models/theories used to analyze the case?
- Throughout the analysis, are "highlights" from the case analyzed with enough depth? Did the writer avoid recounting every element in the case (describing) rather than analyzing?
- Whenever the writer makes assertions in the text, are there research-based or fact-based details offered as support?
- Are the potential solutions to the problem each outlined with enough supporting detail, indicating that the writer clearly understands why that solution might be viable or what the limitations might be?
- Are headings used throughout the report in an effective manner?
- Are references to the first person ("I," "me," or "my") reserved for the final recommendation?
- Are sources correctly documented in APA format?
- Are visuals clear, well-conceived, and accurate?
- Is the writing well-edited? The most common errors to look for include problems with commas and semi-colons, awkward word choice and phrasing, the use of second person ("you"), and subject-pronoun agreement.