



## Notes on Case Disguises

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*The first set of these notes derives from a CRJ editor's point of view 20 years ago, when I reformatted the journal and partnered with McGraw Hill to produce it and to begin the first electronic distribution system for cases. Times change, and so do editors and their policies. Your own editor, helped by her/his reviewers, will warn you if any of these ideas are now outmoded or outlawed by current policies. Following my notes are those of Marie Rock, who is currently on the editorial review board of the CRJ.*

–JAS

Let's say you have finished writing a new case, and you've just asked the boss of Ace Associates to sign off his permission to publish. He has read the case and talked to his middle managers about it. "I'm sorry," he says, "but we can't publish this as it stands. It could hurt us competitively."

When you first spoke with the boss, getting his OK to write the case in the first place, he was much more positive. Business was looking up, and Ace was ready to introduce a new product line that, the boss said, would eclipse the industry. You quoted him exactly, in the opening paragraph. His optimistic outlook pervaded the case up until the last few pages, where the case recorded the revenue growth of Ace's competitors and the shrinkage of Ace's market share. The new product line was a failure, and Ace's substantial investment in it appeared now to be a total loss.

"I'm sorry," says the boss. What can *you* say? Before you say anything, ask some questions. What, specifically, is management concerned about? By omitting some detail that's not essential for your teaching objectives, you may calm their fears. But let's assume the boss objects to the whole case. What now?

One thought: you could change the name of the firm, and the names of the people you interviewed, and the location, and then submit it to a journal for publication, without the boss's permission. WHOA! Some alert reviewer (or teacher, or student) is going to know something about Ace's industry, and can identify the major actors. Or the editor is going to ask how you learned about the company's internal data; if that data came from Ace employees, you *must* have a permission letter, regardless of any disguise. If the data came from published sources, you must say so and cite the sources in your Instructor's Manual.

Second thought: disguise the industry, too. But that's really hard to do. [Long before serving as *CRJ* editor, I had to disguise the industry of my dissertation site, in order to gain access to management meetings. That was a creative writing challenge that slowed the progress of the thesis substantially and made it impossible to publish a case later.] Changing the industry can also lead analytic students astray, because common ratio measures available in the library or on the web can't be applied to the subject case.

Third thought: split the Ace case into two separate cases, withholding the bad news until the "B" case. Then students could discuss the positive-feeling case, possibly missing its signs of impending problems. In the final minutes of the class, students might be given the short B case to read. This idea might well improve the teaching effectiveness of the case and gain a release for the first case, but it would be unlikely to get Ace's approval for the second one. And, since both cases used inside information, both would require releases.

Fourth thought: assuming the competitive information that concerns Ace comes from revenue numbers or accounting statements, you could offer to remove or disguise the numbers. This idea could hurt the learning experience for students—especially if you multiply all the company numbers by more than 5 percent, because a numeric disguise must not distort the firm's performance or relative position in the industry. Many readers will not believe *any* of the numbers, if they see a footnote at page 1 that claims they are disguised.

Fifth thought: end the case at the close of that "A" case, and drop the data that indicates how poorly Ace performed with its new product line. This should gain the approval of the firm, and need not harm the learning of the students. All you need to do is assign the class the job of determining how successful the new product line was. This may present a research challenge to the students, but it's one that can be resolved with a simple telephone call to any commercial office of an industry member or distributor. The data don't have to be published, to be available. Most students (and, we suspect, many faculty members) won't think of doing their own field research to learn what happened.

So much for Ace Associates. Now, imagine the case you wrote describes the incredibly stupid decision of your own previous employer—the one who fired you. You have already disguised the boss's name and the company's, of course, hoping to avoid a libel lawsuit, but it's clear that anybody in that firm would recognize your story and nobody is about to sign off on permission to publish it. It's equally clear to journal reviewers and editors that the case is fatally flawed; it is biased, and so is its Instructor's Manual. The author is blind to any alternative view of why he was fired, other than the "incredible stupidity of management." He overlooks theoretical rationales for the company's actions. His rightness overwhelms his reason.

This is called a "personal experience case," and it presents a problem common to many Organization Behavior researchers, and quite a few from other disciplines as well: How do you objectively analyze a case where your own emotions influence your opinions?

Your first thought might well be, "get rid of the emotionality." But be careful here; emotion is one factor that makes your case interesting to the students. You want them to feel the same anger and disappointment you felt at the time, and draining all the blood from the case's veins will not give it life. One of your learning objectives should be to help students recognize the bias that gripped you at the time; help them see the alternatives you could not see. It is the Instructor's Manual that must be stripped of

emotion; it must be cool-headed analysis, considering the viewpoints of everybody involved—including the boss who fired you. To write it, you must separate yourself from the story. Hang up your “Injured Party” hat and put on your “Professor” hat.

That’s really hard work. If you can, enlist the help of a colleague or another case writer, with fresh, unprejudiced eyesight. Begin by editing the case itself, examining every adjective for bias. Let the students conclude whether management’s stupidity is “incredible,” if indeed they find it stupid at all. Describe what management *did*, and what people *said* about those actions, but leave the interpretation to the students. That’s their job.

When the case is cleaned of prejudicial language, you turn to the IM. Here, it is useful to begin with the basic theoretical frameworks of your own discipline. How would the dominant theories of your field apply to the story you have told? Intellectually, this is a practical way to shake off the blinders of your own opinions; those theoreticians, after all, do not know you. Still, seeing your own bias is not easy. [I recall, from 1992 in my first year as editor of *CRJ*, a case author who revised and re-submitted his first case four times before clearing the bias from his Instructors’ Manual. (*He later became a transformative president of NACRA, without any sign of bias.*)]

One of our finest case writers of that era—Art Sharplin, now retired—often avoided bias and the need for a firm’s release by relying exclusively on public sources for his information. For example, he documented large-scale scandals in Johns-Manville with asbestos-caused disease, and in Union Carbide Corporation with its disastrous Bhopal, India, methyl-isocyanate gas cloud. Neither case could have gained clearance from management, had Sharplin used insider information; instead, he relied on published documents and court records, and produced some of the most provocative, engaging cases of his decades.

Good luck with your own cases, writers.

## THE PITFALL OF OVERUSE OF DISGUISE:

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*The following note is from my perspective as a case writer, colleague to case writers and current CRJ editorial review board member. As suggested by John, above, you should check with your editor for definitive answers to specific issues you may be experiencing with the use of disguise.*

—MLR

The use of disguise is a tricky thing. As a reviewer, I have read cases that are clearly disguised, as noted in the instructor’s manual and in the footnote at the bottom of the first page. Many of these have retained the integrity of the case situation because the author has employed a “just enough” disguise strategy. But in some cases where the author has noted that there is some disguise, the reader is not really quite sure about the parameters, or real extent, of the disguise and is left wondering and confused about the case, especially if disguise is overused.

To illustrate, a colleague of mine emailed me a case that he was in the process of writing and wanted some feedback, well before any submission for review or publication. He knew of my research in the forest products industry and that I would be interested in his case. The caveat at the bottom of the first page indicated that the organization was disguised, as were the names of the people involved. As I was reading the case, which was situated in a particular town in which public comment and debate were

solicited about an issue related to a forest products firm, my curiosity was sparked. I made note of the dates of the public hearings in the town because the quotes used by my colleague seemed “canned” in my estimation. I wondered if the people in the case had actually been quoted. While I did not have the actual name of the organization, the town mentioned in the case was a real one.

Subsequently, I went online and looked up the public hearings during the time frame used in the case. I discovered no such public hearings that were central to the case. In reviewing the topic in the town’s online newspaper, I did find mention of the issue, but those hearings were in an adjacent town. Back at the keyboard, I looked up the public hearings in the adjacent town, and while there were no online transcripts, there were references to an issue impacting the town and several forest products firms in the area. This prompted a call to my colleague, in which I asked: “Just exactly how much disguise did you use?”

I was not surprised to find that my colleague had used disguise beyond its usefulness. Not only was the town mentioned in the case not the one affected by the firm, which by itself is a light use of disguise, but the author wrote the case about a public issue that actually encompassed several forest products firms, not just one. His contacts at two of the firms were the sources of what was said by several people at the hearings in the adjacent town. The firm that the author described in the case was not real; it was actually a composite firm, with characteristics of several, not just one, of the firms. The quoted dialogue was not from any hearing transcripts or actual field observation, but derived from vague recollections of three people who attended some of the hearings. Additionally, my colleague admitted that he had constructed a “quoted” discussion for the purpose of illustrating what had happened at one of the hearings and therefore the artificial-sounding, canned quotes that had prompted my digging. The hearing described in the case was, in fact, a fiction.

I decided that we needed to meet to make my colleague’s case one that was freed from the web of disguises. First, I explained that public hearings are public hearings and their content is available for use by anybody, without need for anyone’s permission. Anyone attending the meeting, if transcripts were available, could be quoted from those transcripts. While not published in the local papers, it was quite possible that the impacted town had transcribed the meetings and that the transcripts could be available. Second, I urged him to contact just one of the firms involved and, after explaining the purpose of the research and so forth, to formally set up interviews, if possible, in order to ask some representatives of the firm about what went on in the hearings and their perspectives on the issue in general. These contacts would be new and I felt that at least he would have a shot at getting a real firm with real people and real quotes for use in the case and if people did not want to be named, they might be willing to be quoted. Third, I urged that he use the name of the actual town and contact town representatives to obtain real quotes from them. Even if none of the firms responded to his initial overtures, at least he might be able to build a case from the town’s perspective. By using the actual town, he could also employ the news articles from the local papers and not worry about having to change things around. Another advantage would be that, armed with data and interview material showing the perspectives of the town representatives, such as those sitting on a board, then he could use that as leverage to elicit a response from one of the firms. This often works in situations where a firm wants its side of a story represented, once presented with opposing views on a public issue.

During our conversation, I asked him why he made his disguises so heavy in the first place; much of the heavy use of disguise had been apparent in some of the contradictory information in the case and I was reminded of that old adage about “tangled webs” and “when we practice to deceive.” Evidently, his initial contacts in the forest products industry, who were his friends, did not want to be identified in any way. He then went through the time-consuming chore of constructing disguised situations, people, and so forth. This led to the question of whether or not he could write a field-based case and do it justice, and do his friends justice, at the same time. While you might think that this is an unusual situation, in my experience as a case writer it is often the people we have contact with, including close friends or acquaintances, who provide that initial thread of a story that piques our interest enough to pursue it as a case-to-be-researched. And sometimes our friends and acquaintances wish to help us, but not to the extent of revealing their identities.

Although most of us would prefer not to use disguise, most of us have used it due to circumstances with our sources. Generally, it is quite acceptable to disguise names at the request of our informants and to use a different name for the organization, if requested, and location we are studying. Disguising the industry is generally not recommended, as that removes too much context. The problem for the case writer is to determine the “how much” part of using disguise.

How much we disguise is often a function of what sort of initial release we can obtain from our informants, especially those with final sign-off on the relevant material that has been quoted or represented in the case. As case researchers, we want to protect both our sources and the institution we represent, so getting a release prior to any formal interview process is critical. The type of release that a case writer can obtain is usually tied with our informants’ desire to be protected from criticism and liability about what they might reveal, and with their overall comfort level in revealing information. It’s important to realize that what a case writer might view as information, the informant might view as very personal knowledge and feel considerably vulnerable in revealing it. While there are some informants who have no qualms about being quoted and identified, and therefore provide an unconditional release, others put disguise conditions on the case writer and the sought-after information. When this happens, the case writer must assess whether or not the amount or type of disguise requested by the informant is worth the potential information to be garnered, and if there is another source that would provide similar information without the attendant conditions. The practice of gathering potential backup sources, whether in-the-field primary sources or off-the-shelf secondary sources, can mitigate the problem of too much disguise and aid in maintaining the essence of your case story.

To sum up, when conditions are imposed on you to heavily disguise case information, writing an overly disguised case can bog you down with unnecessary work; it can drain the life out of your case and lead to integrity issues with the case methodology and the case writing. Moreover, an overly disguised case can lead to more questions than the author ultimately intended. I think it is important to ask yourself if it is possible to write the case without so much disguise or with no disguise at all. Having alternative sources that do not demand or require extensive disguise can mitigate the problem and provide your case with new life.

*I added the following note in case the reader is wondering about the viewpoint of the current editor on case disguises.*

–DRE

As John and Marie have explained and illustrated so nicely, there are many reasons to resist case disguises so that the case remains authentic to the real decision faced by the real decision maker. In John's companion piece published in this issue, "So They're Writing a Case About You," he offers some arguments that can be used in negotiating with your organizational host. By our editorial policy, the *CRJ* does not publish fictional or composite cases, and the extent of any disguises must be revealed in the Research Methods section of the Instructor's Manual. In practice, the "light" disguises mentioned are quite common, especially disguised names of some or all of the individuals in the case. At the request of the organization, financial statements may also be disguised, but the trick is to preserve the relationships so that students will not be led astray in their analysis. An example is the "Frog's Leap Winery" case published in this issue. Disguised organization names or locations are less common, but sometimes warranted. For example, in the recent case "Striking the Queen" (*CRJ* Spring 2011, Volume 31, Issue 2, pp. 1–19), the authors disguised the names of all universities and locations to allow the protagonists to speak more freely when litigation was in progress. "Heavy" disguises, such as changing the industry, are much less common, but sometimes necessary due to special conditions. In the business ethics area for example, disguises may be necessary to protect whistleblowers. In extreme cases, even the authors' names may be disguised to protect the host organization or individual informants, or even the authors themselves.

Three examples of these include:

Disparate Treatment at Southwestern State: A Workshop on Research Ethics, *CRJ* Spring 2006; Volume 26, Issue 2, pp. 17–32

Karen Connors: Sexual Harassment or Cultural Differences, *CRJ* Summer/Fall 1997; Volume 17, Issue 3, pp. 25–41

Carpax Company and Phyllis Copeland, *CRJ* Winter 1995, Volume 15, Issue 1, pp. 52–58.

In such an extreme situation, previous editors have written letters on the authors' behalf to their departments or deans to document the publication of the authors' work.

I hope these notes are useful to authors in contemplating case disguises, and invite you to contact me directly with questions about a specific situation. I appreciate the assistance of my most recent predecessors, Tupper Cawsey, Lew Brown, David Rosenthal, and Linda Swayne, in providing examples and their experience with case disguises.