

NEWCOMER'S GUIDE TO NACRA

As of Sep 16, 2013¹

Who we are

The North American Case Research Association (see www.nacra.net), an organization of about 500 researchers and professors, promote excellence in case research, writing, and teaching in business and related disciplines (such as business law, educational administration, and health care management). NACRA members are drawn together by our shared commitment to case research and to student-centered discussion-based learning (what some of us call “case method” teaching). Affiliated organizations include CASE Association (Eastern Case Writers), Western Casewriters Association, Southwest Case Research Association, Southeast Case Research Association, and various others.

We publish the highly selective *Case Research Journal* (Cabell's lists our acceptance rate as 11 percent). *CRJ* is published on a quarterly basis, generally with six cases and one or more papers per issue. Cases and their instructor's manuals are blind reviewed (instructor's manuals are not published). Most *CRJ* cases are presented first at the annual NACRA conference, where authors get valuable feedback that helps them strengthen both the case and instructor's manual (“teaching note”) before submission to the *Journal*.

Both a case and its Instructor's Manual -- a serious paper in its own right -- are submitted and peer-reviewed for the conference, which is a working meeting. Attendees do not merely present their research; they critique each other's work. Authors of accepted cases are assigned to groups based on topical similarity (aligned generally with the tracks listed on the *Call for Cases*). A table will consist of the authors of four to seven cases. Each participant is expected to read and critique all the cases and instructors manuals submitted by the authors assigned to their table. This reading represents significant advance preparation for the NACRA conference. During the conference, attendees spend eight or more hours in critiquing sessions. NACRA attendees get to know their roundtable colleagues quite well, laying a foundation for future research collaboration.

The NACRA conference also includes some paper presentations, panels, workshops, speakers, and other activities. Newcomers are encouraged to prepare a two page synopsis of a case (a “case-let”) in its formative stage for submission to the RIP Workshop. Experienced case writers are also welcome to submit RIP case-lets when they are in the early stages of work on projects that are outside their comfort zone (such as interdisciplinary cases or multi-media cases).

Reasons to attend a NACRA Conference

1. Improve your case! Round table discussions generate helpful feedback that can otherwise be difficult to obtain.
2. Hone and refine your case research, writing, and teaching skills. By participating in constructive case critiques, discussants gain valuable insights that inform their research and their case writing.
3. Receive guidance on how to publish your case. Experience indicates that it's highly unlikely that the case as presented at the NACRA conference will be publishable without further revision. Conference attendees include current and former *Case Research Journal* editors, associate editors, and reviewers who can provide invaluable guidance.
4. Meet a lot of terrific people -- dedicated case researchers, writers, and teachers to whom you can turn for friendship and assistance for years to come.

¹ Many people contributed to writing this Guide! As best we can recall, Dick Eisenbeis and David Rosenthal wrote an early version in 1997. It was subsequently edited by Linda E. Swayne in 2003, Debbie Ettington in 2005 and Janis Gogan in 2012 and 2013. Version: July 11, 2013.

Writing a Case and Instructor's Manual (a.k.a. Teaching Note)

A case is a short history of a real situation facing an organization and one or more managers/employees. The process begins when a researcher decides to learn more about a situation that has come to his/her attention (through a news story, conversation in an executive education session, or a program of research activities). Perhaps the situation is a challenging opportunity, brought about because of technical innovation or a new regulation. Or, perhaps a manager has told the researcher about a crucial decision s/he had to make. His or her curiosity piqued, the researcher begins gathering secondary materials (e.g., news accounts, web site pages) and conducting interviews with members of the focal organization or its stakeholders. After gathering and analyzing the needed information from a variety of sources, the writer then crafts a narrative that focuses on some aspect that he or she judges can be a useful focus for student discussion. A case can be as short as one page or much longer, but a rule of thumb is to limit the text to 10-12 pages (single spaced), and allow another five or more pages for exhibits.

History or Mystery? A case is a short *history*, since it should be factually correct and include relevant information. In another sense, the case is a *mystery*. The writer plants selective clues about the situation that s/he hopes good students will uncover as they analyze the case. For example, one manager may state that a product is “successful,” while an exhibit or another person in the case points to some problematic aspect that might foretell a dramatic drop in sales. Students often need to take multiple perspectives into account when they place themselves in the shoes of the case protagonist.

What makes a good case? There are many answers, but they group into common themes:

1. It is field researched. The detail needed to really understand a situation almost always requires that the author interview some key participants or stakeholders. Occasionally a great case can be prepared based solely on secondary data, but this is the exception, not the rule.
2. It's an interesting story, with a beginning (case “opener”), background, middle and end.
3. It's accurate. The writer needs to report the reality of what happened, in an unbiased and non-judgmental manner (sometimes it is necessary to disguise identities and other facts, but NACRA cases are about real situations; fictitious cases are not allowed).
4. Cases which have a decision focus are highly prized because they place students in the position of having to consider alternatives and reach an informed decision.
5. Some terrific cases do not have a decision focus. Instead, they may bring to light complex issues or help students identify and/or apply theoretical constructs that are highly valued.
6. A case is self-contained; sufficient information is provided within the case itself and a small amount of supplementary material, so that students have the information needed to identify reasonable alternatives and make informed decisions.
7. Cases have real characters – so real that they invite students to place themselves (metaphorically) in their shoes. Case characters are often insightful and likable, and sometimes despicable. It is difficult to separate real decisions from the people who make them.
8. Many terrific cases generate conflict. It should be possible for students to identify more than one viable option before the decision maker. The weighing and debating of pros and cons of identifiable alternatives can generate significant learning in the class discussion. Conflict should not be invented if it did not exist, but if it existed in the real situation, report it.

The instructor's manual is the intellectual foundation for the case, in that it relates the case situation to the theoretical constructs or tools of a particular management discipline. The instructor's manual outlines the learning goals and objectives of the case, the courses in which the case has relevance, provides suggestions for using the case in the classroom, and identifies alternative scenarios that may lead to reasonable solutions to the problems revealed or hinted at in the case. By explaining the link between theory and practice, portions of the instructor's manual can sometimes provide the kernel for a research paper targeted for publication in a discipline-based journal.