

Letter from the Editor

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Cures for lonely case writer syndrome

Writing is often described as a lonely vocation. Samuel Clemens (aka Mark Twain) spent his summers in Elmira, New York writing many of his famous works such as Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn in an octagonal study (more like a gazebo) perched on a knoll overlooking a river valley. Far from the house, Clemens was alone to smoke his cigars and craft his masterworks. Ernest Hemingway wrote that “writing, at its best, is a lonely life.” Essayist Susan Sontag opined that “One can never be alone enough to write.” Even Snoopy, the famous beagle from the Peanuts comic strip sat in isolation atop his dog house painstakingly typing the opening to his great novel – “It was a dark and stormy night.”

Case writing often is a solitary enterprise for many authors. Many case writers find themselves as the sole practitioner of the craft at their institution. I have worked at two universities, a large AACSB accredited business school and at a significantly smaller liberal arts university and have been the sole case writer on the faculty of both institutions. My experience is unfortunately not all that unique. Many higher education institutions emphasize empirical research in promotion and tenure criteria, and scholars channel their scholarly writings to outlets that are most likely to advance their academic careers. Case writing at many institutions is a lonely path with few peers or mentors down the hall to provide support, solace or inspiration. The isolated case writer has no one to provide constructive feedback, to suggest a better theoretical model for the Teaching Notes (TN) or to help polish the opening hook. No one seems to understand the agony of defeat (the negative reviews on the first version of the case) or the thrill of victory (the final acceptance).

It does not have to be lonely – the benefits of writing partners

Glen Leibowitz, Inc.com columnist and host of the podcast “Write with Impact” dispels the romantic notion of the lonely writer. He says, “writing can be hard, but it doesn’t have to be lonely.” Case writing with colleagues can provide many advantages such as complementary skills, accountability and collaborative creativity.

Co-authorships provide opportunities to capitalize on unique skills. I once co-authored a case with a colleague who was an expert in writing TN. I wrote the case, and she wrote the TN – it was so beautifully written and structured that it would make you weep to read it! She also had a stronger background in the theoretical frameworks that were needed for a powerful TN. My contribution was expertise in strategic management and utilizing secondary resources to bolster the case narrative. Together we made a good team, and the case was published and well received.

A case writing partner also provides a sense of accountability – someone else is depending upon you to make progress on a writing project. I just spent most of my winter break feverishly writing a book chapter for a book edited by my dean – I made a promise to a colleague and felt obligated to complete the project and within the agreed upon timeline! It is much easier to abandon a writing project if you are the only one working on it.

Writing partners also spark creativity as ideas are frequently built off those of others. In case writing, the right partner can envision a way around writing problems while preserving the integrity of the learning objectives. Another pair of eyes may also see the weaknesses in the opening hook and know precisely how to fix them. Because we all process information differently, a good writing partner may have an idea for presenting case information in a visual way that clarifies essential information in the case. Together, writing partners may be inspired to craft a case that is more creative and interesting than either might develop on their own.

The benefits of writing with others present a compelling rationale for collaboration, but how can lone wolf case writers find suitable writing partners?



Curing lonely case writer syndrome

I know of three strategies for effectively overcoming lonely case writer syndrome:

- creating a case writing community of practice (CoP);
- writing with students; and
- attending a case writing workshop.

Wenger (2010) defines a CoP as a rich space that supports knowledge creation, social engagement and practice improvement. Rebecca Wilson-Mah and Gina Vega (2016) presented a session on creating a CoP for case writers at the 2016 NACRA conference. Wilson-Mah described an interdisciplinary case writing CoP she had created at her university saying “creating communities of practice around case writing within our institutions will result not only in closer faculty relationships but also in improved case quality and more rapid turnaround of case submissions (Wilson-Mah and Vega, 2016).” Wilson-May and Walinga (2017) listed the following fundamental principles for developing and supporting a CoP:

- Convening – the group needs someone to hold the meeting, arrange a location and provide support. The members of the CoP should decide at the onset who will be responsible for convening the sessions and how frequently they will occur.
- Curating – the group needs someone to capture the data, ideas and solutions on behalf of the group. These artifacts can be shared through a knowledge or learning management system so that members can easily access developing ideas or case drafts. CoP members might also share helpful resources on case writing or theoretical frameworks in a shared location for the benefit of all.
- Emerging – Wilson-May and Walinga (2017) recommend that the group and its activities remain emergent rather than rule-bound or fixed. If participants are to be actively involved, a tolerance for ambiguity and a willingness to permit ideas and issues to emerge from the group are essential to the group’s continued effectiveness.

Case writing CoPs could be developed among colleagues at a single institution or across multiple institutions through the use of digital communication technologies. E-mail and virtual meetings could allow colleagues to collaborate and support case writing endeavors despite geographical separation. Communications and timelines may be critical to keeping a case writing CoP on task and making progress.

A second way to cure the lonely case writer syndrome is to write cases with your students. I have done this successfully with both undergraduate and graduate students. Instead of assigning a typical term project, I substitute a case writing assignment in my strategic management classes (full-length cases with graduate students, Compact Cases with undergraduates). Students are instructed to write a case and then analyze their cases (I use a template for the analysis to ensure that students do not overlook important frameworks or other key elements). The work is very similar to the strategic analysis assignment that many strategy instructors use but has the added benefit of creating a publishable product. I have used both groups (three to four students) and individual students to write cases. Instructors should be aware that whether the writing is done in groups or by individual students, the case writing assignment requires significant mentoring as it differs radically from the typical term paper assignment the students have previously followed.

Publication of student-authored cases often requires significant support from the instructor in terms of the TN. Since students have little to no teaching experience, it is difficult for them to write meaningful learning objectives. Students also find the Theoretical Linkages section of the TN to be challenging to write. Typically, I left the case as the students had written it and added the learning objectives and theoretical section to the TN. I also wrote the discussion questions to utilize the analysis the students had done. In return, I added my name as the last on the author list. My contribution was not only in structuring the TN but in managing the journal submission process and the revisions for the students. While students are generally pleased to achieve publication, they often are less reliable contributors to the project once they have graduated!

Although writing with students can be gratifying, there are a few caveats:

- Students will need more instruction on writing the case than for a typical term project. Consider using the journal's guidelines for authors to provide some of the rules of case writing for the students (link here). I have also found it useful to take a case the students have read for class and discuss the writing elements of the case with students. By pointing out the opening hook, the industry background section and so forth, students can then use the published case as a model for their work.
- Be careful in making this assignment if you have large classes. Students seemed to enjoy the interactive, mentoring aspect of my involvement in the case and responded well to the feedback I provided, but this does require a substantial time commitment. If you have too many students, this can be overwhelming. At one point, I was supervising over 125 individual student cases each year. It became too much, and I was forced to change my approach.
- Unfortunately, you must also be careful about plagiarism. Be wary of student proclivities to cut and paste from online sources. If you are going to attach your name to the case as an author, be sure that the work is original.

Finally, attending a case writing workshop can help the lonely case writer. There are many case writing workshops held in the USA (and abroad) on an annual basis. Table I lists some of the most prominent ones. Most of these events feature a case writing roundtable format that can be invaluable to the solitary case writer hungering for validation and formative feedback.

In a case writing roundtable, participants receive the cases and TN of the five to six cases to be presented at the roundtable. Each participant is assigned to read the cases and TN of the other authors at their table. Participants are asked to prepare written feedback (sometimes just marking up the case and the TN) to share with the authors during the roundtable session. Typically, participants discuss each case in a 30–50 min session led by the facilitator (usually an experienced case writer). The author(s) is invited to briefly introduce the case in 5 min or less, focusing on what motivated the author to write that particular case and the target audience for the case (usually in terms of the courses and/or levels where it will be used). The authors are also encouraged to indicate particular areas where the group's help would be appreciated. Participants are then invited to share their feedback and suggestions with the group. A scribe is often selected to take notes for the authors so that they may focus on and respond to what is being said without worrying about capturing all of the details. The facilitator will assist in moving the discussion along and keeping it constructive. If time remains, participants sometimes share suggestions for effectively teaching the case. At the end of the discussion, the authors receive actionable feedback for revising and improving both the case and the TN before submitting it to an appropriate journal for publication.

Table I Conferences with case writing roundtable formats

| <i>Association</i> | <i>Typical meeting dates and locations</i> | <i>Website</i> |
|--|--|--|
| The CASE Association (CASE) | Annually in May in New England, USA | www.caseweb.org |
| North American Case Research Association (NACRA) | Annually in October around the USA and Canada | www.nacra.net |
| Society for Case Research (SCR) | Annually in July in the Midwestern USA | www.sfcr.org |
| Asociación Latinoamericana de Casos (ALAC) | Annually in May in Spain, Latin and South America | www.cic.tec.mx/alac/ |
| Canada Administrative Sciences Association of Canada (ASAC) | Annually in May throughout Canada | www.asac.ca |
| Caribbean Case Researchers Association (CCRA) | New organization hosted first roundtable in May 2018 | www.utechja-ccra.com |
| World Association for Case Method Research & Application (WACRA) | Annually in June/July in many global destinations. Fall workshops in November. Recent conferences in Peru, Austria, the Netherlands, Finland | www.wacra.org |
| Southeast Case Research Association (SECRA) | Annually in February in the Southeastern USA | www.secra.org |
| Southwest Case Research Association (SWACRA) | Annually in March usually in Texas | www.swcra.net |
| Western Casewriters Association (WCA) | Annually in March in California, Hawaii and other western destinations | www.westerncasewriters.org |

Notes: All of the associations welcome submissions from participants outside the designated region. Submission deadlines are typically three to six months prior to the conference date. Calls for conference submissions can be found on the association's website

Authors (especially first timers) receive the following benefits in bringing a case to a case writing workshop:

- Peer-to-peer learning of case writing conventions and effective case pedagogy. I acquired much of what I know about case writing through participation in case writing workshops. Experienced case writers often join the roundtable to share their expertise and interact with newcomers.
- Actionable feedback designed to improve the case before submission to a journal such as *TCJ*. A first-time author's chance of receiving a favorable review in the first round is far better after the case is revised following a workshop than it would be if submitted directly to the journal.
- Energy and new ideas for effectively writing and teaching with cases. I always come away from a case workshop eager to teach the cases we discussed and to try out new approaches shared at the roundtable. The discussion of the cases of others often triggers new ideas for structuring or developing my cases. I leave the conference tired but recharged to do more (Table II).

Table II Cases in this issue

| <i>Case title and target audience</i> | <i>Authors</i> | <i>Synopsis</i> |
|---|--|--|
| Managing wildfire disasters in the Rocky Mountains Compact case Audience: undergraduate and graduate students in business and STEM classes | Christopher Craig | With drought conditions expected to worsen in at-risk areas thus amplifying wildfire likelihood, this case explores the organizational and natural dynamics involved with wildfire management. The case engages students to explore the interactions between wildfire, wildland firefighters and agency organizations drawing from the natural resource dependence theory within a sustainability context. When completing the discussion questions, students are challenged to explore how organizations can use discursive closures to eliminate conflict and control meaning surrounding potentially controversial and politicized topics such as wildfire management |
| The trials and tribulations of JTH Inc. Audience: Undergraduate students in Strategic Management and/or Entrepreneurship classes | Mayank Jaiswal and Robert Maxwell | This case discusses strategy in the context of a crisis situation in a small business. JTH Inc. was a computer subcontract manufacturing (SCM) firm serving the New England region of the USA. The influx of international competition (mainly from China) due to recession led to significant challenges for JTH and the SCM industry. JTH was struggling and the situation was further complicated by the founder's (Robert Maxwell) personal and emotional situation. Robert had to decide whether to keep the business running, close it down, merge with/be acquired by a competitor, innovate the business model, or do something else |
| Startup on a budget: winning new customers without breaking the bank Audience: undergraduate or graduate entrepreneurship courses | Heidi Bertels | Lammily is a startup company in its second year of existence which produces toys that embody realism: a fashion doll with proportions based on the average 19-year old American woman, a sticker set of common body markings such as boobooos and cellulite to make dolls look realistic and doll outfits. After the company's initial success in 2014, fueled by positive publicity from online media eager to share information about the average doll project, sales were flat. Nickolay Lamm, the Founder of Lammily, started to feel the heat to acquire new customers in ways that did not rely solely on digital word-of-mouth. Lammily commissioned a direct response TV commercial in the summer of 2015, but it failed to lead to significant new customer growth This case describes how Nickolay struggles to move beyond the launch phase of his entrepreneurial venture and turn his startup into a business with a sustainable customer base. Facing stagnating growth and established competitors with deep pockets, Nickolay needs to figure out why the TV commercial did not work for Lammily and what his new plan to quickly acquire new customers will be |
| To do or not to do: Stratasy considers HP's partnership offer Audience: undergraduate and graduate strategic management and small business management courses. Also relevant to MBA, Executive MBA or MSA students | Lumina Albert, Robert Gallagher and Rosemond Desir | Scott Crump, Founder of Stratasy, a company that developed and sold 3D printers, had always envisioned a future when it would be commonplace for a 3D printer to be on the desk of every engineer. Hewlett-Packard (HP) approached him with a proposal that had the potential to make that dream come true. Crump knew that Stratasy did not need to partner with HP for a financial reason, but he loved the idea of the technology becoming a standard method for creating parts universally. The case highlights a true-life account of a firm's founder considering an important strategic alliance and analyzing the ramifications of taking on or refusing this partnership |

- Affirmation, affiliation and overwhelming support from case writers. The case writing community is a small but welcoming group of colleagues many of whom have known each other for 20 or more years. The group embraces all newcomers and does their best to help them along their journey to publication. I have co-authored with individuals I have met at case writing conferences, I have served as an officer in two case writing associations (NACRA and The CASE Association) as a result of networking opportunities and I have developed life-long friends with many case writers around the world. After my first case workshop, I knew that the case writing community provided a fun, warm and friendly community of scholars that I wanted to join. I hope you will feel that way too.

References

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