

Advice for Final Papers

The purpose of a case study (and your paper) is to help us understand a general business principle or decision through the lens of a particular example. The idea is that by examining how, say, eHarmony prices, we can learn about how other platform markets should set prices.

Before starting to write the paper, you should think through the following questions.

1. What is the company you are studying?
 - If the company is large, what is the part of the company?
2. Who is the audience?
 - How much expertise should be assumed?
3. What is the aim of the paper?
 - It is very important to keep the paper focused!
4. Why is this case study interesting?
 - Is the firm interesting for its own sake?
 - Are the general lessons to be learnt from the case?
5. What type of data should you include?
 - Where will you get this?
 - Examples: company website, annual reports, website traffic sites (e.g. alexa.com), Lexis Nexis (access to newspapers and lots more), financial data (e.g. Yahoo finance), industry magazines, academic articles (Google scholar, JSTOR). A particularly good source of information for technology firms is Crunchbase.

How do I start writing?

1. Do a six forces analysis – this will tell you what matters to the firm.

For example, suppose I were doing eHarmony. The six forces are as follows: substitutes (offline dating), compliments (video, email), rivals (match, chemistry, plenty of fish, facebook), entrants (?). Since it's a platform, it's hard to think of buyers and suppliers, but there are two sides to the platform: men and women. In my opinion, the most interesting aspects here are the platform issues and the rivals.

2. What is the business plan? Is there a coherent strategy?

eHarmony targets long-term relationships. It does this in several ways: a long form to fill out, matching process, guided communication, marketing, rejecting unsuitable applicants. It then makes money by charging \$X per month to both men and women.

3. What are the interesting strategic issues?

For eHarmony, the big issues include how to differentiate themselves from other sites, how to increase usage, and how to set prices. You can probably think of others.

Now, I would write a paper on eHarmony roughly as follows: (1) introduction, (2) some history of the market and company, (3) the business plan, (4) competition, (5) strategic issues facing the firm in the future. Write out a detailed plan before you start writing!

Other Hints and Tips

1. A paper should be broken into the standard components?

- Opening paragraph (stating the case issue or problem)
- Background for firm and case issue.
- Case study.
- Conclusions (What decisions are to be made? What are options?)

2. Plan the paper carefully. Thinking is the hard part of writing; not the writing itself.

- What issues would you like to raise?
- What decision/question would you like to analyze?

3. Paper length. I hope the median will be 5-6 pages at 1.5 spacing. Yours may be different, but longer is not better! Of course, this page length is just a guide – I care more about the substance.

4. The most common pitfalls:

- No clear decisions or focus.
- Too much detail.
- A lack of structure.
- Too theoretical (don't just repeat lecture notes!)
- Lack of context.
- Assuming the reader to too familiar with the industry/problem.

5. Mundane tips

- Write in consistent tense.
- Use the active voice.
- Be consistent (e.g. when referring to people or firms).
- Use section headings to structure paper. They are the scaffolding.

6. Understand the industry structure.

- Do a six-forces and SWOT analysis. Much of this will not end up in the case, but it will serve as background.

7. The paper should be your own work.

- Cite ALL sources. This includes Wikipedia and the firm's website. As a guide, see any of the case studies we have read.

8. Papers should be easy to read

- Brevity, short sentences, plain language and frequent topic headings.
- There should be no spelling mistakes; the grammar should be correct.
- Data should be presented in a simple way.

9. How do you cite things on the web?

- You should obviously try to find the most reliable source you can, but sometimes you will use information from the web. In this case, just footnote where you found the information and the link, e.g. "Yahoo finance, <http://biz.yahoo.com/ic/114/114115.html>, accessed 23rd Nov 2010."

10. Is Wikipedia a reliable source?

- Usually Wikipedia will send you to the original source, so I would prefer you to use this. If there is no original source, then use your best judgment. Just include a footnote saying where you got the data.

11. Formatting

- You should break the paper into Sections, as in other case studies. This provides structure and makes it easier to read.

How we grade

We grade on the following 5 categories:

1. Firm background
2. Industry background
3. Identifying firm problems
4. Suggesting relevant options for moving forward (this doesn't mean analyzing them)
5. Miscellaneous (e.g. writing style)