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# CHAPTER 4

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## Case Writing Process: Collecting the Material

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### Learning Objectives

*After completion of this unit, the students will be aware of the following topics:*

- Before the Interview
- During the Interview
- After the Interview
- Checks and Controls in Collection of Material

The process of researching situations or problem areas for creating cases involves developing case ideas and then obtaining the relevant information. This can come from many sources such as:

- Organisations,
- Interviews,
- Your own activities and researches in the field,
- Archive material (e.g., reports, journals, newspapers, books and other print material; off-air recordings from radio or television; film and video; promotional materials; etc.),
- Informal discussions with friends, colleagues and consultants.

Your sources are only limited by your ingenuity. The only source that it is probably advisable to avoid is you. Do not write a case from your own experiences - at least, not until you have had a considerable amount of experience in case writing - and do not put yourself in a case.

The personal interview is one commonly used technique to obtain the information that you need for your case, but in using it, there are some difficulties that can occur. Perhaps the main one is that the information derived from the interview may have some bias and this can arise from two sources.

The first source of bias is the person whom you are interviewing. The distortion of facts may be unconscious - people often tend to provide either a better or a worse picture of a situation than that which actually exists, particularly if they are not in a position to have a grasp of the entire picture. This may also be a deliberate effect, for their personal reasons. You must be alert to the possibilities and equipping yourself with as much background knowledge as possible before the interview can help in this. Using that can provide questions that allow you to probe further should you suspect that the responses you are getting do not agree with your prior information.

Alternatively, you may have formed opinions about the person, topic and/or organisation from your sources. You may take a dislike to the person you are interviewing or suspect that you are deliberately being given faulty information. Either or both of these can colour your approach, questioning, interpretation and recording; and unless you do your writing up immediately after the interview, your memory may be selective - as time tends to distort information, the case writer always has to assess the reliability of the reporting. Data may be affected internally and externally by impressions, assumptions and biases of the case writer or the person being interviewed.



## BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

There are certain steps preparatory to an interview. Described here are the steps that you may bear in mind. The last two steps are applicable to the specific interview that you may be conducting while the other steps are applicable to any interviews that you may contemplate.

*Expand your own background knowledge:* You stand a better chance of securing the helpful cooperation of businessmen if you have a working knowledge of business generally and a familiarity with the current business problems most likely to be perplexing to business executives.

*Find "Leads":* There is no one best or usual way of finding leads to follow in order to make appointments for getting case material. Your teacher or colleagues will frequently have in mind several leads which have come to their attention through their contacts with personal friends, business associates, trade associations and other business organisations; at other times they may be searching for a special kind of problem (e.g., salesmen's compensation, reciprocity, pricing, or refinancing) and a lead can be developed among some companies which may be presumed to have a problem in that area.

People using the case system, however, seem to develop a knack of spotting case leads; the things they read in magazines, books, newspapers, advertisements, company reports; the people they meet, visitors to the school, speakers, friends; the things they see, factory buildings, new products, changing business practice - all are instinctively examined as possible case leads.

In the constant search for good case material, it is well to remember that the foundation of the case system does not rest on the unusual situations faced infrequently by businessmen but on the specific and typical situations that confront people in administrative positions. Surely, if you want that your case should make some landmark contribution to the understanding of business, you need to focus on areas where new practices are developing or where new problems are emerging that are yet not recognised by most businessmen. Yet, if only to keep proportionate emphasis realistic, most cases report typical problems.

*Make appointments:* For someone like you to drop in on businessmen unannounced would not proved satisfactory. It is better to make an appointment in advance so that the person to be interviewed knows (i) when you are coming and (ii) in a general way, what is the purpose of your visit.

*Start with top executives:* The first contact with a company should always be through a responsible top executive. The higher, the better. Sometimes officers of lower rank can help; but the farther you go from the top, the greater is the



possibility of failure and also the greater is the possibility of setting off internal frictions within the company which may eventually harm your cause.

*Establish a routine for making appointments:* In consultation with the guide if you have one, for whom you are working, select the person or persons you wish to see. If you are on your own, you may need some references before people grant you the interviews.

After these steps have been completed, by letter or by telephone, as the circumstances may require, ask and arrange for an appointment.

*Learn all you can about the person, company and industry you are visiting:* Frequently the interview does not contribute the major part of the material included in a case; usually, however, it sets the stage, clarifies the issue, or finally crystallizes the business situation into a real problem. It is therefore helpful to know as much as possible before the interview takes place. Know the person, know the company, know the industry - even have a good idea of the company's problems. Then what you hear in the personal interview will have more meaning for you.

*Know what you want, but.....:* You should think about prospective case trips; before you actually undertake them, make sure you have a real understanding of what you want, where you expect to find it and how are you going to use it. Experience shows that such thinking results in written 'specifications' and the cases produced are more satisfactory.

It is also helpful to jot down, more briefly than in case specifications, some key questions you would like to ask; then, if conversation lags or memory fails you, you can pick up the interview on important questions rather than trivia.

Nevertheless, in the process of knowing what you want, do not overlook other things, including the possibility that what you thought you wanted either does not really exist or is in fact quite different from what you supposed. Research is looking for facts, not looking for evidence to support a preconceived notion while evidence to the contrary is ignored. Keep alert for evidence that may force you to re-examine your current thoughts and beliefs; keep alert for situations other than those, which you set out to explore. If you see leads for material, which might be useful in other cases, pass them along to the people concerned with those cases.

## DURING THE INTERVIEW

The exact conduct of an interview will be determined by many things, which cannot be forecast. The businessmen whom you will be interviewing is probably the most important unpredictable factor; his personality, position and authority,



as well as whether he happens to be very busy or relatively free, are important. The extent of his knowledge of the work of your institution and of the purpose of your visit will determine how much introductory information you will have to give. The following suggestions are intended to be complete and parts can be eliminated when they are obviously unnecessary.

**Explain the case collection policies:** As briefly as possible, tell of the case method of instruction and the collection of teaching material. You may not offer anything specific, such as consultation services or commentaries on company action, in return for the privilege of writing up a company's experience as a case for teaching material. Avoid promising or even implying that the company might expect any service in return for helping the cause of education – it is a pure donation to education. Make it clear that we expect to receive confidential information and that we always have treated it as such and always will. Indicate the use to which cases are put and the fact that many are eventually published. If necessary, explain that company's identity can be disguised. If it is not necessary, however, do not offer to disguise.

**Get the material you need:** In general it is a good procedure to ask for what you want, especially if it is a factual record such as a profit and loss statement. It is better to let the executive know what you want and to have him give it to you than to get it by other means and have him wonder later how you go it. You will soon learn, however, that there are various subtle ways of getting information legitimately and that frequently intelligent guesses about undisclosed information will produce the real and authentic information. In brief, experience indicates that you should be direct, but tactful and resourceful.

Successful experience in getting the information needed for good case material indicates that the following are useful rules to bear in mind:

1. Arrive at the interview on time and be prepared. Prior information on the operations of the organisation is important since it provides a basis for asking intelligent and carefully worded questions.
2. Inform the interviewee of the purpose of the interview. Since the interviewee may not be in a position to supply all the information you require, this will give the chance to refer you to others within the organisation who may be of greater assistance.
3. Do not ask businessmen, "Have you got any problems?" Rather ask for the benefit of their experience.
4. Give the assurance that the interviewee's comments will not be used or published without written permission.



5. There is no general rule as to whether you should take notes during an interview. Ask your interviewee whether you can take notes or use a recorder. If you want to take notes do that openly.
6. Be prepared to guide the conversation with intelligent questions, but do not pre-plan the interview to such an extent that you prevent the executive from giving you ideas or pertinent information which you may not have anticipated.
7. While taking notes, do not be so engrossed that you fail to give your full attention to the interviewee. The recording of key points surrounding the issue is advisable.
8. Give your full attention to the interviewee. Make it evident that you are doing so. You are there to listen, not to say what you need.
9. Always remember not to express your feelings or to offer suggestions. Report what is actually being said rather than what you think has been said or what you want to hear.
10. Do not argue with the interviewee - this may end the interview and spoil your chance of obtaining another interview in the future.
11. Except when exact figures are involved, many researchers have found it best to refrain from taking notes during an interview; rather they centre their attention solely on the topics being discussed and then make notes immediately after the interviewee is concluded. Jotting down key words during an interview is sometimes a useful technique.
12. Whether or not notes are taken during an interview, it is good practice, especially when on an extended trip, to make notes covering the day's work before the day has passed. Some case writers find it advisable, even on local calls, to make rather extensive notes before returning to the office.
13. Listen - do not talk - unless on a point of clarification.
14. Get some material you may not need. In addition to the necessary material for a specific case, usually you will find information that apparently has no bearing on your problem. Do not accept such material indiscriminately, but learn to accept some miscellaneous items of information. It is amazing how and when you will find them useful.
15. Observe. Make mental notes, consciously and subconsciously, of the things you see. Is the office neat, or gaudy? Does the man act as if he were interested?



Is he constantly interrupted? Is his secretary efficient? Where is the plant or office located with respect to the rest of the town?

16. Accept, where time permits, invitations to look around. If the opportunity arises, lunch with people connected with the company and let them guide the conversation. Do not worry about what such random information adds to the particular case; it may add nothing, but, unless such observation is overdone to the extent that you take time from your immediate job, you add to your appreciation of the business.
17. Summarise what the interviewee has said and present it back for clarification. This is useful since it not only provides you with a clear picture, but may give the interviewee an opportunity to include any further important details that may have been overlooked the first time around. It also provides you with a chance to ask key questions pertinent to the underlying issues which may not have been touched on the interviewee.

## AFTER THE INTERVIEW

After the interview, your primary concern is the writing of the case. Before starting to write the case, however, check that all the necessary data has been collected. Not all data may come through the interview. Data collection may involve the use of all sorts of print material. This provides a vast resource, which may often be the main source for many case writers, particularly in countries like ours, where case writing has no established basis or is an unusual teaching/training technique. Some examples are:

- Daily newspapers, local and national;
- Weekly newspapers, local and national;
- General interest magazines and journals;
- Specialist magazines and journals;
- The cuttings libraries of all the above;
- Cuttings services;
- Encyclopedias;
- Books;
- Government reports;



- Annual reports of organisations;
- Prospectuses;
- Special reports;
- Theses;
- Advertisements; etc.

Again, this is not intended to be a comprehensive list and you should add your own ideas to it.

Many of these types of sources will need to be cross-checked if at all possible, as they may have been edited or presented so as to give a particular angle and thus will contain bias or distortion. Further, it may often be advisable to find out whether the material you gather from these sources can be used by you - check either with the newspaper whose report you are using and/or with the organisation that the report is about.

Observations can be made and information gathered, directly by you being present and recording in one or more of a variety of ways whatever takes place. This is a flexible but difficult technique to use. The flexibility arises from your ability to note subtleties and nuances in behaviour or events and to concentrate on particular aspects. Against this, though, there may be either too little happening or too much, so that you miss information and you are left with an imperfect record that you try to complete at some subsequent time.

As with the interview, though, there is often no objection to making some sort of audio and/or visual record of the event. This may be, for example, a photographic, audiotape, film or a video recording technique, each of which can provide a less biased but two dimensional record of the part of the event that they focus on, but which do not give a complete indication of everything which occurred. In fact, bias may be introduced because of imbalance between what they record and what they miss; they are dependent on what their operators regard or are told is important, unless a multi-unit or multimedia unit is arranged which will give as complete a record as possible.

Providing some form of record other than that dependent on an observer's written notes and memory does have considerable advantages not only for allowing you to analyse the events at leisure, but also for allowing your participants the same opportunity. Recordings can form a part of your case for them to work on, with the advantage of increasing the involvement. Such use is not yet common, but is certainly increasing - either on audiotape or, more commonly, on videotape.



## CHECKS AND CONTROLS IN COLLECTION OF MATERIAL

There are certain administrative practices that help in an adequate control of the material collection process for case writing:

1. It is important not to give to one businessman the names of others from whom information has been received.
2. Under no circumstances should cases be discussed with individuals not associated with your research in such a way as to reveal the identity of the firms from which the information was secured.
3. In all events, company confidences must not be violated.
4. The name of the case should be a fictitious company name unless permission is given to use the actual name. In disguised cases, do not use the name of any executive in the company giving the information. Avoid facetious names or those difficult or tiresome to use in the classroom and in the casebooks.
5. Before assigning a fictitious name to a case, check the name in order to be sure that it is not the name of an actual company or one that already has been used for a case.
6. Ordinarily no attempt should be made to disguise the industry; a case in which the industry is disguised may not prove be useful for teaching purposes.
7. Figures may be changed by multiplying by a constant or by applying some other mechanical device that does not destroy essential relationships.
8. Even though a case is based wholly on published information, it is frequently advisable to obtain a release or verification from an executive of the company. Such a release from the company or companies concerned should be obtained under the following circumstances:
  - Where part of the material or all of it is taken from sources not authorised by the company, such as articles in the business newspapers or the business magazines.
  - Where the author of the case has not used published material verbatim but has paraphrased or condensed to a substantial degree.
9. For a case based on published material, the circumstances under which it does not appear essential to obtain a formal release from an executive of the



company or companies concerned are the following:

- Where the entire case is based on material quoted verbatim from a source fully authorised by the company, such as the company's annual reports, letters to stockholders or financial and operating statements published in newspapers or similar manuals, such cases should carry a footnote stating the source. When such cases involve highly controversial issues, careful consideration should be given to the desirability of sending a copy of the case to someone in the company, requesting correction of any errors it may contain.
- When the case consists of court and commission decisions, with or without the briefs presented.
- Where the material quoted or paraphrased is of a wholly general character not pertaining to any particular company, such as cases on government price control, the fiscal policy and so on.

For obvious reasons, cases, which are written and sent for release within a short time after the original interview, have a better chance of being released promptly.

After the case collection process has been completed with a particular company, ethics suggests that you drop a note to the company executive, thanking him for his cooperation.

- Organize your Material
- Material to include
- Preparing your Material
- Finding Company