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## HOW TO PREPARE A CASE

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The purpose of discussion cases is to present you with realistic situations in which practitioners have to make decisions. Most cases are “problem posing.” Typically, you will apply concepts covered in class and in supplementary readings (i.e., readings that supplement the case), as well as your own knowledge and experience. Inevitably, you will also bring your own biases to reading the case, and bear in mind that the casewriter had his/her biases as well.

Formal teaching cases—as opposed to news articles or other items that may serve as cases for discussion—are not prepared to give a comprehensive account of events but rather to highlight issues for decision and action. Don’t expect to find “lessons” neatly summarized within the cases. Your task is to do the analysis, carefully consider why the decisions may not be straightforward (some are more complex than others), and consider alternatives for action.

### Preparing

Learning from a case depends much more on interchange among students and the professor or other discussion leader than on solitary study, yet good study in advance is essential. Case-method learning is a **participatory** method of learning; both students and the instructor bear a responsibility to the entire class to share their insights and points of view. Here are some suggestions about how to prepare a case:

- Use any study questions or reading tips provided by the faculty member to get a clear picture of the session’s learning objectives or core concepts.
- Read the supplementary readings either before or after you read the case itself, according to the study questions and tips you’re given.
- When you get to the case, read it quickly to get the big picture. Focus on introductory and concluding sections as well as the main ideas of subsections, not the details: What is the overall arc of action? How do problems evolve, and why—in general terms—are they important to the players in the case?

- Read the case a second time more carefully, developing your own answers to the study questions, which will typically center on decision issues and/or options for action. Some students find it helpful to map out the characters in the case or the chronology of main events as a way of organizing the actors, issues, and actions.
- Draft your list of issues or options for action. Few cases present problems or opportunities for which there is a single right answer, but much of your learning from cases hinges on *sharpening your critical judgment* about which answers are more promising and why.

### Participating in Class

The purpose of a case discussion is to sharpen the thinking and communication skills of as many students in the class as possible, not to show you know the right answers. That is, a case discussion is not an oral exam, and you won't be called on to speak each time you raise your hand.

Sometimes, the faculty member will take a Socratic approach: asking critical questions, questioning your reasoning, asking you to defend your ideas or compare them to the ideas of others. In other moments, the approach may be more open-ended and collaborative: What's really at issue here? What are the various ways we could understand this situation?

- When you're speaking, make an argument: Explain your view, and support it. Give principled reasons and/or specific evidence.
- Encourage an inclusive discussion. Don't hold back, but if the faculty member asks to hear "from those we haven't heard from in a while ...," then take stock of your own participation and, if appropriate, wait a bit.
- Listen carefully to others—evaluate their ideas, appreciate what you can—rather than simply waiting your turn to talk. Keep an open mind.
- Have fun—try to enjoy the range of approaches different people can take to the same material. Case discussions are often rich reflections of real-world agreements and disagreements, both the intellectual and emotional dimensions.

### Afterwards: Recording, Extending, Self-Assessing

Though the class will often move on quickly in terms of themes, the time right after a case discussion is precious, for example as you write out a few summary notes

(thoughts you most want to capture and/or the faculty member's summary of major "take-away" lessons).

- Compare your original ideas on the case to the points raised in class. Identify an insight or two that you gained. If you are confused on some points, ask for clarification.
- Find out how to learn more: Many cases present issues on which you could spend an entire semester and not exhaust the useful concepts or materials. And perhaps the most important part of "find out more" is raising, with the faculty member or classmates or both, questions about applying the concepts to issues and problems you care about (personalizing the lessons).
- Finally, think about your own participation: What progress did you make as an active participant vis-à-vis earlier discussions? What contributions did you make that helped create a rich discussion? What can you do to improve?

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