Writing Individual Briefs

Write in a professional tone, without memo heading, as if you are a consultant to the firm, giving your best (and highly paid!) advice. Use strong, active verbs and avoiding hedging. The styles of *Business Week* and *The Wall Street Journal* are good models in most instances. You will end up with some well-crafted sentences that your English teacher would call “run on,” but they may be efficient in business prose: Smithco should immediately reduce costs by canceling TV advertising, laying off surplus warehouse staff, reducing R&D spending to 2005 levels and avoiding construction of the proposed San Diego factory.”

In most business situations, there are two or three possible courses of action. Don’t be afraid to choose one firmly (e.g., low price—heavy advertising) although that will rule out other options (in this case, a “luxury-good” positioning). However, this is not to say that there are no wrong answers. For example, recommending heavy promotional expenditures by a firm about to become bankrupt doesn’t make sense. Think of the four elements of the marketing mix and make them sing together in harmony.

**Format**

Your individual briefs are to be up to one page of text, accompanied by a maximum of three pages of relevant exhibits, stapled top left, with no cover page. (These limits are doubled for the group brief.) The format must be strictly followed: 1 inch margins on all sides; use a serif font (such as Garamond or Book Antiqua) 12-point or greater size (do not use a condensed font—edit your work); single-spaced within paragraphs, double-spaced between paragraphs—that is, just like this handout. Identify your brief with you name (as it shows on the registrar’s rolls) and the case title in the top right margin. Running over the page limit for text—or cramming text by changing font size and spacing—will lead to a substantial penalty in the grade. You must follow the paragraph-by-paragraph organization that follows. Within the page limits, you don’t have enough space for side headings (such as *Format*, above); in general they aren’t needed, but you may use paragraph headings (as “Decision and Background” shown below) if it helps your writing.

**Exhibits**

Few briefs can attain top grades without the appropriate exhibits. The exhibits may be spreadsheets showing pro forma financials, a time line, positioning map or sample ads. Often you can explore possible outcomes by presenting the “worst, expected and best” cases—but don’t print out endless iterations of the same idea (e.g., net profit at 0.1, 0.2, 0.3 … 8.9 percent sales increase). Never photocopy parts of the case or simply reformat case numbers without further analysis. Exhibits should *not* contain narrative that should appear in the text itself.
Organization (Your brief must have these four sections in this order)

Decision and Background: Very briefly, identify the situation and who must take what decision, for example, “Cashing Lee, Marketing Manager for Pontiac, must decide whether to increase promotional spending by $1 million and if so, where to spend the additional budget.” Do not repeat case facts, such as: “Pontiac makes cars and is a division of General Motors, one of the largest US corporations.” However, you should identify the key problem that leads to the Decision: “Despite the introduction of several new products, the division has failed to recapture its market share in the small car category.” Then, briefly summarize your understanding of the situation. Think about the relevant category (is it “transportation,” “small cars,” or “domestic cars”?) You can comment on important trends in customer needs and buying patterns, changes in the competition, regulation and so on—again, focus on key facts and don’t repeat broad generalizations about the firm. It may help to briefly summarize what the firm has tried already: “Pontiac needs to win back customers in the 25-35 age bracket after losing market share to cheaper Japanese imports. Customers are demanding cars with higher gas mileage but have seen US cars as poor value compared with imports. In 1991 Pontiac introduced three value-priced models but they failed to gain their target market share. Research shows consumers have low recall for the firm’s ads.”

Recommendation & Basis: Avoid placing your recommendation at the end of the brief as a conventional conclusion—in business, the reader may not get that far. You should make explicit strategic recommendations and backup each one. Do not hedge with wasted words such as “In my opinion” or, “I feel that.” Say what the executive or firm should do: “Lee should reposition the Starfire as an affordable family car. GM should eliminate unprofitable dealers, especially in the Mid-West.” Do not express vague wishes such as: “Pontiac should increase revenue” or, “Pontiac should needs to get more customers.” Avoid vague words such as: “leverage” and “focus.” For each recommendation, offer a few reasons why your plan makes sense, such as, “Marketing research showed the car appeals to families because of the flip-down seats.” In many cases your reasons for the rejection of alternate strategies are important too: “The Starfire is viewed as underpowered when positioned as a sports sedan.” You must refer to your exhibits at the appropriate point in your narrative text, as shown in this example: “A sales increase of only 0.4 percent would completely cover the planned extra advertising costs (Ex. 2).” However, you can assert case facts without referencing them (the Reader has read the same things as you)—no need to write “See Case Ex. 2.”

Assumptions and Uncertainties: Outline key assumptions that you have made and discuss possible uncertainties associated with your recommendation. Example, “This assumes that the increase in awareness in the small Peoria test-market can be replicated nationally.” And, “This plan assumes competitors maintain their current level of promotional spending and do not adopt retaliatory sale pricing.” A good checklist for this section is the structure: “Costs, Capability, Customers, Channel, Competitors”—what do we expect from each of these?

Action Steps What should be done today? Tomorrow? And in the next three months? Don’t be vague, as in, “Pontiac should rebuild its brand image.” Rather, “Lee should purchase $1M of spot local advertising in sitcom reruns. At the end of the first month, Lee should conduct awareness studies to measure the effectiveness of the new TV ad campaign and—if successful—should develop plans for increased ad spending in the remainder of the 1987 model year.”