

Tell stories that stir learners to action—in 30 minutes or less.

A Case for the Mini Case Study

BY JULIE WINKLE GIULIONI AND KAREN VOLOSHIN

Let's face it: The attention spans of training audiences seem to be shrinking at the same rate as many training budgets. Content must be highly engaging and learning activities have to move at a quick pace to get people back to their jobs as soon as possible. Many training professionals are left with the feeling that their only option is to rush through compressed content delivery and send learners on their way.

Yet years of experience tells us that learning is successfully transferred to the workplace when learners are able to apply new knowledge and skills in the training environment first.

So how can training professionals grant learners the time necessary to absorb and apply knowledge and skills, but keep the training event short enough to match their limited attention spans? This is where the mini case study comes in.

Case studies have long been considered a powerful learning tool. In today's time-starved, expectation-rich training environment, they may be among the most expedient methods for driving learning and performance. You don't need several hours or days when your case studies are constructed so that they address multiple outcomes concurrently, elicit diverse points of view, and allow learners to actively develop real-life solutions to real-life problems. If you have 30 minutes, you have the time to deliver a mini case study.

What follows are some guidelines for writing engaging mini case studies.

Start with a strong story line

Effective mini cases quickly engage learners with a compelling story line. One of the best case study writers we know starts with the question, "What tree is the main character up?" Begin the case study with an appropriately complex and realistic problem that is similar to those learners will face on the job.

Once you've got your main character up a tree, map out your plot. Like any great story, a mini case must have "rising action"—a series of events that increase the story's tension. Build the tension until the character reaches a point where she must take some action.

To maximize efficiency, select a story line that replicates the learners' reality. Background information should be minimized so that participants can jump straight into diagnosing problems and exploring solutions. Asking pointed questions directs participants (and their limited time and attention) toward the intended learning outcomes.

The devil is in the details

An effective mini case has believable, relatable characters—characters who face problems, are imperfect, make mistakes, and try again. Details about the characters enhance learners' interest in them. Create a small cast of

characters around the central one—two or three should be enough to offer interesting points of view on the main character’s dilemma. Use these supporting roles to provide essential bits of content, advance the story line, or sow the seeds of an impending conflict.

However, details in other dimensions of the case study can be a distraction. Leaving locations, divisions, functions, and groups a little fuzzy is a smart strategy. Otherwise, you may be faced with learners’ knee-jerk reaction of “That’s not how things work here.”

Including too many details also leaves more room for mistakes. Years ago we created a case study that included the (fictional) names and photos of retail professionals. When the characters were shown wearing the incorrect name badges in a later part of the case study, participants became so distracted that it nearly derailed their learning.

The added bonus of this approach is that these fuzzier cases can be repurposed for different training audiences. And of course, less detail means that participants will need less time to read and digest the story—and you’ll need less time to write it.

There’s rarely one right answer

In real life, few problems have only one solution. Likewise, realistic case studies aren’t too simplistic or one-dimensional. Mini case studies can be brief without being dumbed down.

Case studies can take multiple approaches, spark varied discussions, and have many right answers. Intricacies and complications can add interest and realism. The key is to provide only the information learners need without unnecessary or unproductive complexity. This takes a keen understanding of the audience and the intended learning outcomes, and the eye of an editor.

MINI CASE STUDIES CAN BE BRIEF WITHOUT BEING DUMBED DOWN.

Make it personal

Once you have established a compelling cast of characters and an edge-of-your-seat storyline, it’s time to do a reality check. Is the case realistic enough for learners to say “That could be me”?

Rather than using the typical third-person narrative, try narrating in first person, from the point of view of your protagonist. This invites learners to step into the protagonist’s shoes.

Also, remember to write like real people talk. Your high school English teacher won’t be grading you, so rather than writing “I shall speak with him,” consider “I’ve gotta talk to him.”

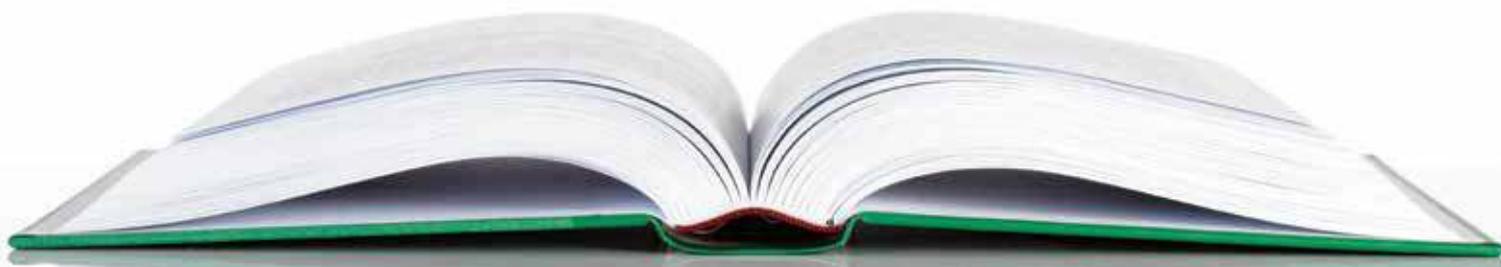
In addition to dialogue, embed realistic-looking and -sounding email

strings and texts, a segment from a customer letter, short snippets from documents or reports, or a headline from a trade publication about a competitor. These elements add richness to the story and can be used to advance the plot or share information without adding a lot of heft.

Mix up the media

Shorter, sweeter, and more engaging case studies don’t rely exclusively on the written word. There are countless alternatives you can use to provide context, establish the problem, offer necessary information, and drive learning. For example:

- Video clips can provide variety, enhance interest, and offer a creative alternative to the typical case study. Videos also can be made available to learners as prework to further reduce seat time in the classroom.
- Audio clips serve the same purpose as video clips, relaying information in a more engaging manner than text. Video and audio clips also build character development and advance the story more effectively than text because they allow information to be revealed through characters’ tones, gestures, and facial expressions, which learners can watch or listen to.
- Bringing in actors or real customers to provide background information, share experiences, or



re-enact exchanges can viscerally set the stage for learning in a way that the printed page rarely can.

While these mixed-media strategies may require more front-end work for training professionals, they offer an offbeat and quick way to capture learners' attention and imaginations.

Start with the debrief in mind

The real learning from a case study occurs through learners' conversations about it. And those conversations are the first thing a good case study developer considers. What knowledge do you want learn-

ers to walk away with? What problems do you want them to be able to solve back on the job? What techniques do you want them to adopt?

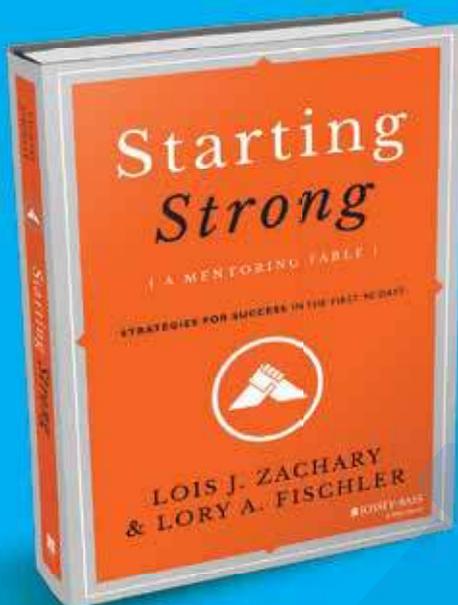
Achieving these outcomes comes down to insightful, carefully crafted questions that force learners to dig beneath the surface, explore issues from multiple perspectives, and participate in a spirited debate. Organizing learners into small groups to discuss the case study also is a good way to promote better discussion because it gives less-confident or more introverted participants the chance to contribute. Then, if time allows, you can bring the

entire group back together for a final discussion and review of the learning outcomes.

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