

## **APPENDIX: CASE STUDY ASSIGNMENT**

For the first major assignment, you'll work in groups of three to analyze a case scenario, strategize possible responses to the situation, and implement part of the strategy in two effectively written professional documents. Each group will also be required to prepare a statement of rationale explaining the strategy your group adopted on behalf of the central character whose role you'll assume and accompanying choices made in the composed documents.

### **Case Assignment Goals**

This assignment begins with a brief hypothetical scenario that draws on the readings and discussions we've been engaging with during the past week. The *goals of a case assignment* are many:

- To improve the situation, however slightly, without dismissing the problems suggested by the scenario
- To encourage critical thinking about complex scenarios involving diverse stakeholders and competing values
- To engage in a conversation that brings multiple perspectives to the table (both within the scenario and in your own group)
- To understand the numerous complexities of a situation before committing to a particular strategy (with knowledge of the implications of this strategy for other case components directly or indirectly affected)
- To strategize key textual features that best compliment targeted audiences (and unintended readers), intended purposes, and context restrictions (e.g., medium, content, tone, organization, etc.)
- To recognize the many ways that communication can be used to address a complex scenario, especially one with many unknowns—and the viability of more than one solution to a problematic situation

### **Case Scenario and Roles**

At this point, you've read several selections addressing issues that are interwoven into the scenario with which you'll be working. To provide a bit more context to Short's (2005) comments, Coca-Cola's Beverage Institute for Health and Wellness (BIHW) conveys the message that consumers can achieve their health goals by adhering to the principles of "energy balance." This concept promotes the idea that achieving a desirable weight (which is assumed to signal overall healthfulness) depends on the effective balance between calories consumed and calories expended. From an energy balance perspective, the types of food and beverages consumed do not matter as long as consumers are expending as many (or more) calories than they are taking in.

On the Coca-Cola website, you'll find a number of messages from executives at the company defending the principles of the now-largely defunct BIHW, the company's support for research to improve consumer health, Coca-Cola's efforts to be transparent in their funding process, and so on. All of this information on Coca-Cola's website will help you to better grasp the communications and practices in which the company has been engaged. Also, while much has been written about "energy balance" and Coca-Cola's role in funding scientific research that largely supports their claims—and thus sale of their products--the articles by Anahad O'Connor (2015, 2016) in *The New York Times* have proven particularly powerful for driving the conversation about both Coca-Cola's role in shaping the narrative about SSBs and obesity as well as the problems associated with industry-funded research.

For the purposes of the assignment, you (your group) will occupy the role of Dr. Sam Harrison and respond to the following (hypothetical) scenario.

Dr. Harrison is an untenured assistant professor of nutrition at the University of Carbonate who joined a research team examining the health effects of drinking sugary carbonated beverages. Harrison has a Ph.D. in biochemistry, and their research focuses on the relationship between diet and prevention of a number of diseases including heart disease, obesity, and diabetes. Also, Harrison has been recognized locally and nationally for their advocacy work, especially an

initiative to develop community nutrition and exercise programs in underserved neighborhoods in their adopted city of Carbonate, Idaho.

After coming to the University of Carbonate in 2015, Harrison was honored to be invited to join an existing research team including colleagues Dr. Terry Jones (public health), Dr. Sarah Williams (physiology), and Dr. Jamie Keller (also a biochemist in the nutrition department), all senior researchers who have established reputations in their fields. The project on which the team was working (and continues to work) had received substantial funding from the BIHW, and Harrison was relieved to have secured this funding while embarking on a research career. While Harrison has also been engaged in another research project in their own, much smaller lab, Harrison's collaborative work with Jones, Williams, and Keller has been a top priority and what Harrison intends to rely on to maintain and grow both their position at the university and reputation in the nutrition field.

During the past four years, Harrison and colleagues have presented their research design at a number of conferences and published some preliminary data in peer-reviewed journals. In each instance, they have fully disclosed the funding they have received from the BIHW under the auspices of the Coca-Cola Company. As the team works on their biggest publication yet, though, Harrison is concerned that their hard work might be compromised.

The data collected by the team *strongly suggests* that even moderate consumption of sugary carbonated beverages increases the risk of severe liver damage among individuals diagnosed with diabetes and also contributes to steady weight gain in diverse populations regardless of controlled calorie intake from other foods and beverages and regular exercise.

While Jones, Williams, and Keller agree that their data should be reported, they insist that there's not enough data to state that *even moderate consumption* of sugary carbonated beverages increases the stated risk of liver damage and contributes to weight gain. Rather, they think that the published conclusions should state that *excessive consumption* of these beverages *might* lead to these outcomes.

Harrison disagrees and is convinced that the team's hesitancy to present a compelling argument is tied to their sense of obligation to the industry funding their current (and potentially, future) work. And Harrison is personally conflicted about being listed as an author on a publication that might downplay their research conclusions given Harrison's commitment to improving the health of the community.

Further complicating the team's thinking on how best to present their findings are recent publications in the scientific and public realms that discredit the ties between the BIHW (and other industry sponsors) and researchers who have capitalized on the funding opportunities offered to them through companies like Coca-Cola. Given this windstorm of accusations, Jones, Williams, Keller, and Harrison are all feeling conflicted about taking a stance that will salvage their reputations amid claims that they are among those in the scientific community who have sold out to industry pressures.

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Specific guidelines for writing your/Dr. Harrison's way through this scenario are included in the section that follows. While your group may choose the type of documents to write from Dr. Harrison's perspective as well as the overall content of these messages, the documents *must address an issue of importance* that arises from the scenario. You may not compose a message that *avoids or downplays* a problem laid out in the scenario; for example, you may not assume that Dr. Harrison looks again at the team's data and suddenly decides that the shift in claims is warranted or that a pile of money suddenly drops on Dr. Harrison's lab removing any professional or financial stake tied to the research with the team.

Also, since a case study scenario contains numerous gaps in information, your group may "fill in" information that's absent—as long as these additions do not violate other requirements for the assignment. For example, you may add stakeholders, roles beyond those indicated for parties presented in the case, or additional institutional factors (e.g., at the University of Carbonate or The Coca-Cola Company) that might influence Dr. Harrison's decision-making process. Any additions will need to be addressed in your statement of rationale, which will also

contain information about your group's overall communication strategy as well as the rhetorical decisions that influenced the two documents you've composed.

### Process

Your first task after reading the case assignment guidelines is to answer the **invention questions about the scenario** (see attachment). Since your understanding of all dimensions of the case is crucial to success, your notes should be thorough (several handwritten or typed pages in length). For this portion of the assignment, you should *work collaboratively* to ensure multiple perspectives on the information provided in the case.

Once you've met with members of your group to discuss responses to the invention questions and received feedback from another group, you'll progress through the following stages:

- identify a **particular aspect of the case** to focus on (e.g., the interests of one stakeholder or within a specified time period)
- develop an **overall communication strategy** (several steps, usually 5-7, that would be involved in addressing this problem, paying attention to specific stakeholders, related problems, and other research and communication actions that might occur during a specified period of time in response to the aspect of the case your group has chosen to focus on)
- select **two compatible documents** from this strategy to compose (documents may include memos, letters, press releases, or other documents (1-2 pages in length) that coincide with the steps your group has articulated). One of these documents must address an expert stakeholder (scientific or corporate—just keep in mind the type and extent of expertise the particular party possesses), while the other must address a public stakeholder as the *primary audience*. As we'll discuss in class, most communications of this magnitude are sent to multiple audiences—either simultaneously or in an appropriate sequence (a matter to be addressed in your rationale).

By “compatible,” I mean that the documents need to support a single strategy and not contradict one another. For example, if the first document expresses Dr. Harrison’s efforts to work with Drs. Jones, Williams, and Keller to develop a framework for the research to be published with which all members of the team will be satisfied, the second document cannot be a newspaper op-ed in which Dr. Harrison slams these colleagues for accepting industry funding (a problematic argument anyway, since Dr. Harrison has also benefitted from and publicly disclosed the funding). As we work on this assignment, we’ll continue to discuss the seamlessness of ethos and the importance of presenting a consistent, unified perspective supported by principled actions in all communication contexts stemming from the workplace to the community.

- **Draft** the documents (and subsequent drafts following reader response workshops and group discussion)
- Polish a **statement of rationale** presenting your group’s strategy and specifics about the choices made for the composed documents

### **Attachment: Collaborative Case Invention Questions**

After reading the information you’ve been given carefully (preferably several times), answer the following questions *collaboratively*. Your responses should be thorough, considering all relevant perspectives on the question—both those explicitly stated and those that are implied (e.g., far-reaching stakeholders that might be affected by issues pertaining to the case). Your goal should be to get as much material down as possible—correctness and stylistic flair aren’t important at this point.

Remember, too, that your group may add to the information provided in the case scenario, as long as these additions are reasonable and do not conflict with knowledge you’ve been given.

### **Issues**

- List all of the problems, questions, issues, or concerns (i.e., *exigencies*) that are stated or implied in the case. The list should offer more than “topics” —explain *why* the topic is a potential consideration.
- Once you’ve developed a list, group items as *scientific* and/or *social*. Then, identify the different *stakes* raised by particular problems—some problems involve financial concerns, questions about professional ethics, institutional politics at the University of Carbonate, etc. (each of these areas of concern constitutes a different type of problem that may or may not be addressed simultaneously).

### Stakeholders

- Who is involved in or affected by the problems you’ve listed?
- What specific *stakes* does each party have in the problems? What does each stakeholder have to gain or lose?
- What *assumptions* might your group make about each of these stakeholders (e.g., values, education, political views, health status, etc.)?

### Potential Purposes

- For each of the problems and stakeholders you’ve identified, for what purposes might you communicate (e.g., to inform, to persuade, to evaluate, etc.)?
- Which *audience roles* might stakeholders adopt according to each purpose? For example, a single stakeholder might consume a text from many perspectives: as a professional, a health advocate, a parent, a member of a particular population, etc.
- What *stance* might audiences take when considering your purposes? Might a particular audience approach a proposal with an open mind or with anger and resistance? Will this same audience be likely to consume a message carefully or be tempted to skim what Dr. Harrison has produced? In what instances might the audience need to “use” the message conveyed for a particular purpose?

## Communication Tools

- What *communication factors* need to be considered for conveying specific purposes to particular audiences? For instance, how might you appeal to the audiences you've described in the previous section through ethos, pathos, and logos to make a case for an alternative perspective?
- What *genres* might be most appropriate for conveying the messages? You may consider communication options that are oral as well as written or that involve taking action (e.g., choosing to complete additional research), since they could be relevant to your communication strategy.

## Context Considerations

- Identify the specific contexts (local and far-reaching) in which the events and issues portrayed in the scenario are taking place.
- For each of these contexts, consider prevailing features (setting, timeliness of work completed, hierarchy of decision-making), values (professional codes of conduct, mission statements defining the culture of an organization), freedoms and constraints that might exist.