



CASE STUDY 9 · BUSINESS C1

The Priya Paragraph & the Marcus Monday

Integrated case study · reading, analysis, negotiation and writing

BRIEFING

Two Sunday-night papers, two Monday rooms

8 min

Company A — Halden Studio. A London-based design consultancy, 240 people. Head of people: Ana-Lena Voss (39), two years in the seat, ex-partner at a European talent-advisory firm. On Friday afternoon the promotion round closes: three of the eleven candidates on the design side will be promoted to team lead. She has 48 hours to sign off the paragraphs the calibration committee will read on Monday morning — every one of which will, in the counterfactual case, be read back aloud by a rejected peer in a mediation later this year.

The Halden situation. The strongest paragraph on her desk is Priya Kaur's. Priya has led three of the past year's most-cited projects and has been, on both the calibration nine-box and the pulse-survey data, at the top of her cohort. But the draft paragraph her line manager, Tomas, has submitted contains four orphan pronouns, one substitution ('the team also thinks so') that could refer to either of two propositions, and no dated source for any of the three project claims. Ana-Lena has read the paragraph three times. She knows exactly which sentence Priya's peer, Marcus, will circle when his own promotion is refused on Monday afternoon.

Company B — Verrocchio Group. A Milan-headquartered industrial mid-cap, 3,100 people, restructuring after a three-year strategic review. Head of operations: David Iannucci (46), 18 years in the group, first time leading a redundancy round. He has 48 hours to prepare the opening of Marcus Weill's Monday-morning conversation — the conversation in which Marcus, a seven-year designer with no performance concerns on file, will be told his role is being consolidated with two others into a single new position that has already been offered to someone else.

The Verrocchio situation. David's first draft of the opening runs to 52 words in a single sentence, six subordinate clauses, and the word 'unfortunately' as the fourth word. His HR director, Ines Ramírez, has read the draft once and returned it with a single note: 'Marcus will hear nothing after word four. Cut everything. Bring me the five-word version.' The bond on the whole restructuring is not commercial. It is whether Marcus, in a fortnight when the meeting is a memory, can reconstruct what was said, and whether he was told with respect for the fact that he was, in the moment, running on a fraction of his normal bandwidth.

The parallel. Both papers open with a single paragraph read, at a distance, by a person whose relationship to the room the register of the paragraph will either preserve or destroy. Halden's paragraph will be judged by whether its reference chain carries the fiduciary weight of the calibration decision; Verrocchio's opening will be judged by whether its elliptical register carries the emotional weight of the moment without the messenger hiding behind the grammar. Both problems are grammatical, and both, on Monday afternoon, will be lived.

COMPLICATION

What can't be said as it stands

9 min

Halden — the reference problem. Tomas's draft opens: "Priya has been with the team for four years. She has led three projects. She would be a strong candidate for team lead. Her manager thinks she is ready. The team also thinks so." Five sentences. Four pronouns that resolve to Priya. One substitution ('so') that could refer either to the previous clause ('her manager thinks she is ready') or to the wider proposition ('she would be a strong candidate'). Three projects unnamed. One unnamed 'the team'. In a mediation the paragraph collapses on the first two questions —

which three, and which proposition?

Ana-Lena's private diagnostic: Every un-anchored pronoun and every un-unpicked substitution in that paragraph is a decision the calibration committee did not, in fact, take — and each is the sentence the rejected peer will build a case around.

Verrocchio — the ellipsis problem. David's draft opens: "Marcus, I need to tell you that unfortunately, following the restructuring that was announced last week and which affects the department that you are in, your role, which is one of three roles being consolidated into a single position, is being made redundant." One sentence. Fifty-two words. Six subordinate clauses. The word 'unfortunately' as the fourth word, guaranteeing Marcus stops listening. The word 'redundant' as the last, guaranteeing he never processes it. The sentence is grammatically flawless and, in the room, unheardable.

David's private diagnostic (after reading it aloud once): I wrote that sentence to protect myself. Marcus doesn't need a paragraph. He needs three words, twice — the sentence, and then the compassion clause — and then the answer to the question he is going to ask.

The register each reader is expecting. Halden's calibration committee, and (in the bad case) a mediator six months later, are calibrated to a specific reference register: Priya has led the Rotterdam launch, the Warsaw migration and the Milan pilot; each of the three delivered ahead of plan. Her line manager, Anselm Hart, in the calibration session of 14 March, endorsed her readiness. The pulse survey conducted the same month endorsed the same view. Verrocchio's Marcus, in the middle of the emotional load of a redundancy conversation, is calibrated to a specific elliptical register: Marcus. Your role is being made redundant. The three roles into one. I'm sorry. This isn't what you wanted to hear. Both readers will judge the paragraph in the first fifteen seconds and both will, silently, price the register.

DATA ROOM

Facts, uncontested and contested

6 min

Halden — uncontested:

- 240 people; 11 candidates on the design track; 3 promotions to team lead.
- Priya Kaur: 4 years' tenure; led Rotterdam launch (Jan), Warsaw migration (Apr), Milan pilot (Sep); calibration session 14 March; pulse survey among 7 direct reports, same month.
- Marcus Rowe (Halden's rejected peer, unrelated to Verrocchio's Marcus): 6 years' tenure; led Warsaw migration jointly with Priya; peer-nominated by 4 of 11 in the pulse survey.
- Prior two years of Halden promotion paragraphs: 68% contain at least one orphan 'they' or 'the team'; 22% contain at least one substitution without a named antecedent.
- Head of people's private note to Tomas (Friday evening): 'the paragraph has to read the same way to a mediator in November as it does to us on Monday'.

Verrocchio — uncontested:

- 3,100 people; 47 roles across three sites being consolidated into 22 new positions.
- Marcus Weill: 7 years' tenure; no performance concerns on file; last review 'strong'; PIP never issued.
- Marcus's conversation: Monday 08:30 CET, David's office. Marcus has no prior indication.
- HR director's guideline: opening ≤ 8 words; entire conversation ≤ 6 minutes; compassion clause a fragment.

- Prior redundancy conversations at Verrocchio: 71% opened with a subordinated sentence over 30 words; 4% of counterparties, in the two-week reconstruction test, could recall what was said.

Contested (Ana-Lena and David vs their coaches):

- Ana-Lena. Tomas wants to keep the paragraph 'as drafted' — 'it reads well'. Ana-Lena wants every pronoun anchored and every substitution unpicked into a dated source — and knows Tomas will resist the effort as 'clerical'.
- David. His own instinct is to open with 'Marcus, I really don't want to have this conversation, but'. Ines has written a single word in red on the draft: 'no.' David has to design an opening in which the compassion is a fragment, not a preamble.

TEXT EXTRACTS

Two source paragraphs, side by side

5 min

Extract 1 — Tomas's first-draft promotion paragraph (Halden):

"Priya has been with the team for four years. She has led three projects. She would be a strong candidate for team lead. Her manager thinks she is ready. The team also thinks so."

Extract 2 — David's first-draft redundancy opening (Verrocchio):

"Marcus, I need to tell you that unfortunately, following the restructuring that was announced last week and which affects the department that you are in, your role, which is one of three roles being consolidated into a single position, is being made redundant."

Both paragraphs are grammatically defensible under a narrow reading. Both, as drafted, will fail — Halden's by leaving pronouns and substitutions the rejected peer will litigate, and Verrocchio's by piling clauses no receiver in emotional load can hear. Your task begins here.

YOUR TASK

Two paragraphs, one register discipline each

35 min

You are, in turn, Ana-Lena and then David. Draft both:

Document 1 — Ana-Lena's audited promotion paragraph on Priya Kaur (180–220 words).

- Every personal pronoun anchored to a single named individual.
- At least three narrowing references to dated sources (calibration session of [date], pulse survey conducted on [date], project delivered on [date]).
- Every substitution ('so', 'one', 'the same', 'do so') unpicked into a full reference.
- Includes one quantifier reference ('each of the three', 'both of them') that resolves back to a previously-named set.
- Includes the sentence on the rejected peer — Marcus Rowe — that names his contribution and locates him on the succession short-list without opening ground the calibration did not, in fact, close.
- Ends with the sentence Ana-Lena would be most content to see a mediator read aloud in November.

Document 2 — David's opening prep-sheet for Marcus Weill's Monday conversation (140–180 words).

- Opening sentence: five words or fewer.
- Reason clause: six words or fewer, using the substitution 'one' for 'position'.
- Compassion fragment: three words or fewer.
- Anticipated follow-up ('was it me?'): elliptical answer using the pro-form 'no' or 'not', without introducing the noun 'performance', 'competence' or 'trust'.
- Closing offer of support: two elliptical fragments, not a paragraph.
- Ends with the sentence Marcus can, in a fortnight when the room is a memory, reconstruct verbatim.

Teacher notes

Success criteria (teacher-facing): Document 1 passes if a mediator, reading it cold in November, can locate every antecedent on the page without asking — and if the sentence about Marcus Rowe would neither humiliate him nor open him a path of appeal. Document 2 passes the two-week reconstruction test: a peer who reads the prep sheet Monday and is asked on Friday what Marcus was told can recall the words, in order, and can say why the compassion fragment is not a template.

SOLO WORK

Two rewrites, in your own hand

25 min

Before you draft the two documents, spend 15 minutes on the following:

- Take Tomas's draft (Extract 1) and, sentence by sentence, circle every pronoun. For each, name the antecedent in the margin. Which pronoun has more than one possible anchor? Which substitution has more than one possible proposition? Rewrite the paragraph so that neither a peer nor a mediator can find either.
- Take David's draft (Extract 2) and, clause by clause, cross out every clause that is recoverable from context. What remains? Rewrite the opening in the fewest words that still deliver the message. Then design the compassion fragment, out loud.
- Write, in one sentence, the difference between the register a calibration committee (and a later mediator) has been calibrated to and the register a person in the middle of a redundancy conversation can, under load, actually hear. What does each reader take as the sign of a senior operator?

This is a private diagnostic. The point is not to publish the sentences — it is to notice which of the register moves you can, in fact, execute under time pressure.

Did you read carefully?

5 min

- The central people-function event at Halden Studio is:
 - (a) a hiring plan
 - (b) a head of people auditing a promotion paragraph a rejected peer will, in a mediation, read back to her — every pronoun anchored, every substitution unpicked
 - (c) a merger
 - (d) a rebrand

Answer key: (b) a head of people auditing a promotion paragraph a rejected peer will, in a mediation, read back to her — every pronoun anchored, every substitution unpicked

- The parallel event at Verrocchio Group is:
 - (a) a listing
 - (b) a line manager compressing the opening of a redundancy conversation the counterparty can, under emotional load, actually hear — every recoverable clause cut, every substitution deliberate
 - (c) an acquisition
 - (d) a dividend

Answer key: (b) a line manager compressing the opening of a redundancy conversation the counterparty can, under emotional load, actually hear — every recoverable clause cut, every substitution deliberate
- The Halden paragraph must be reference-audited because it:
 - (a) is required by law
 - (b) will, in the counterfactual case, be read aloud by a rejected peer or a mediator six months later — and every un-anchored pronoun becomes a decision the paragraph cannot defend
 - (c) is house style
 - (d) shortens the pack

Answer key: (b) will, in the counterfactual case, be read aloud by a rejected peer or a mediator six months later — and every un-anchored pronoun becomes a decision the paragraph cannot defend
- The Verrocchio opening must be elliptical because:
 - (a) it is more polite
 - (b) the counterparty is running on a fraction of their normal bandwidth — every subordinate clause is bandwidth taken from the sentence they can, in the moment, hear
 - (c) it is faster
 - (d) the HR director says so

Answer key: (b) the counterparty is running on a fraction of their normal bandwidth — every subordinate clause is bandwidth taken from the sentence they can, in the moment, hear

WRAP-UP

From two Mondays back to your desk

6 min

Answer, in a note to yourself:

- Which upcoming decision of yours has the shape of Ana-Lena's Monday — a paragraph a mediator or a rejected peer will, in a bad case, read back to you six months later?
- Which has the shape of David's Monday — a conversation whose opening is either compressible into five words, or, in the room, will be spelled out in fifty and land nowhere?
- Which of the two register disciplines — the reference-audited paragraph or the elliptical opening — do you naturally reach for, and which do you have to force? What would it cost you, this quarter, to add the one you do not already have?

Take-away: