



# STUDENT NOTES FOR SUCCESS

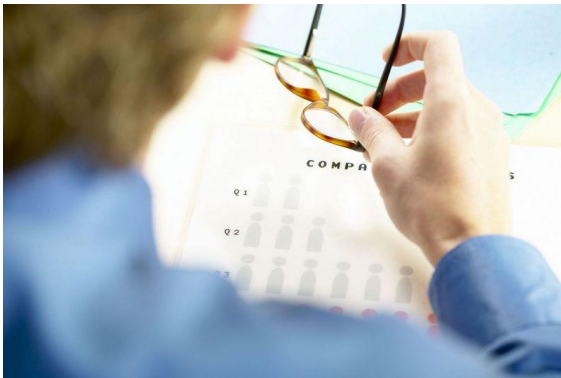
## No 11

### Analysing case studies: Combining theory with practice

Case studies tell a story. They set out a situation or actual event. Case study analysis involves reading the story, determining what is happening, finding the problem, and analysing and finding possible solutions to the problem.

#### What is a case study?

A case study is an account of an event or series of events that describe real or hypothetical situations which you will be asked to critically analyse.



Usually, case studies used in university courses are written to give you the opportunity to show that you can apply theories and concepts you have studied to a practical situation. For this reason, case studies are usually accompanied by a set of questions designed to challenge your analysis, problem solving, and writing skills. Most often, those questions will provide you with guiding clues as to how to interpret the case study and structure your answers. Analysing and understanding the questions is just as important as analysing and understanding the case study itself.

Case studies are step-by-step ways of thinking through a situation, evaluating issues, and taking logical and educated steps towards effective decision-making.

#### Analysis: the key to reading case studies

As the problems in a case study are not always clear at first reading, you may need to read it several times to critically analyse the case in order to determine what is really going on. Often multiple parts or points of view must be examined to understand the given situation.

Case studies always require careful analysis. Begin by reading any questions that have come with the case study. From these questions determine what you are being asked to do: decide, describe, analyse or make recommendations and so on. Use this information to focus your reading by highlighting key words, characters or events.

Start by working out what is going on. What events or actions are taking place? Then, determine the key players and their roles in shaping the events described. Identify the circumstances and context of the situation. This means understanding the circumstances that influence how decisions are made and what consequences may result from those. Some of the information uncovered may not be relevant to the problems (or case study questions) and must be carefully filtered and eliminated.

**Ask:** What is happening here? Who are the key players? How could this be done better? What is wrong and why? Is this the problem or is there another problem impacting the situation? What must be done to get a better result?

Often the answers to these questions lead to more questions and new pathways to solutions. It is important to make notes as you read and to continually evaluate what is happening at critical times during the case. Having built a picture of the people, events, and circumstances described in the case study, you can then turn your attention to answering the questions you have been asked.

### For each question:

1. Identify what you are being asked to do – list, describe, compare and contrast, evaluate, make recommendations.
2. Map out a structure for your answer, using facts or other information from the case study or supporting material you have found (referenced).
3. Write your answer using the required format – short answer, essay, report, presentation and so on.

### How to read a case study: five easy steps

**Step 1** - Read the case study from beginning to end and get an overall idea of what is happening.

**Step 2** - Actively read again, making connections with the text by highlighting anything you feel is important and related to the problem.

**Step 3** - Review your theoretical papers, journal articles or other texts and find material that you can apply to the text. Theoretical papers provide a framework for analysing the situation and assisting you in using known theories and academic language when writing your answers.

**Step 4** - Re-read the case

- Highlight areas important to the case.
- Ask: Is this correct or is there a problem?
- Ask questions: What? How? Who? How can this be?
- Be a detective: investigate and eliminate what is irrelevant to the situation or appears to not fit the case context.
- Make notes. Analyse and organise the information.

- Support your argument using theories and facts found in your course and reference literature.

**Step 5** - Write your answer, detailing the issues, your analysis, findings and recommendations for solutions based on the theories read. Use the theory as evidence for your decisions.

You could structure your case study report as follows:

- Introduction
- Analysis of the case
- Identification of major issues
- Possible solutions (with reference to existing theories/ literature)
- Conclusion.



### Hot tips

- Your lecturer may prefer a different format; be sure to check first!
- The best case study answers integrate the theory with the practical.

### Case studies in exams

The reason for a case study question in an exam is to give you the opportunity to show that you can apply the theory and concepts you have learned during the study of a unit to a practical situation such as might happen in your organization. Your own opinions are very valuable, and your own experience should certainly be used to help you give good responses to case study questions. However, take care never to stray far from the main objective. Show that you are able to make use of what you have learned to help analyse and solve the specific organizational issues outlined in the given situation.

**Find out** more at the CBS Academic Communication Development website:

<https://businesslaw.curtin.edu.au/study/student-experience/academic-communication-development/>

You might also be interested in *Handy Handout 13. Critical Analysis*.

**Contact us at:**

[AcademicCommunicationDevelopment@curtin.edu.au](mailto:AcademicCommunicationDevelopment@curtin.edu.au)