

How to write a case study

This guide explains how to write a descriptive case study. A descriptive case study describes how an organization handled a specific issue. Case studies can vary in length and the amount of details provided. They can be fictional or based on true events.

Why should you write one? Case studies can help others (e.g., students, other organizations, employees) learn about

- new concepts,
- best practices, and
- situations they might face.

Writing a case study also allows you to critically examine your organizational practices.

Examples

The following pages provide examples of different types of case study formats. As you read them, think about what stands out to you. Which format best matches your needs? You can make similar stylistic choices when you write your own case study.

[ACF Case Studies of Community Economic Development](#)

This page contains links to nine case studies that describe how different organizations performed economic development activities in their communities.

[National Asthma Control Program Wee Wheezers](#)

This case study describes a public health program.

[CDC Epidemiologic Case Studies](#)

This page contains links to five classroom-style case studies on foodborne diseases.

[ATSDR Environmental Health and Medicine](#)

This page contains links to approximately 20 classroom-style case studies focused on exposures to environmental hazards.

Before you get started, ask yourself the following questions.

What are your goals? What should your intended readers understand or learn after reading your case? Pick 1–5 realistic goals. The more goals you include, the more complex your case study might need to be.

Who is your audience? You need to write with them in mind.

What kind of background knowledge do they have? Very little, moderate, or a lot of knowledge. Be sure to explain special terms and jargon so that readers with little to moderate knowledge can understand and enjoy your case study.

What format do you need to use? Will your case study be published in a journal, online, or printed as part of a handout? Think about how word minimums or maximums will shape what you can talk about and how you talk about it. For example, you may be allowed fewer words for a case study written for a print textbook than for a webpage.

What narrative perspective will you use? A first-person perspective uses words such as “I” and “we” to tell a story. A third-person perspective uses pronouns and names such as “they” or “CDC”. Be consistent throughout your case study.

While writing

Depending on your writing style, you might prefer to write everything that comes to your mind first, then organize and edit it later. Some of you might prefer to use headings or be more structured and methodical in your approach. Any writing style is fine, just be sure to write! Later, after you have included all the necessary information, you can go back and find more appropriate words, ensure your writing is clear, and edit your punctuation and grammar.

- Use clear writing principles, sometimes called plain language. More information can be found in the [CDC's Guide to Clear Writing](#) or on the [Federal Plain Language](#) website.
- Use active voice instead of passive voice. If you are unfamiliar with active voice, review resources such as [NCEH/ATSDR's Training on Active Voice](#), [The National Archive's Active Voice Tips](#), and [USCIS' Video on Active Voice](#).
- Word choice is important. If you use jargon or special terminology, define it for readers.
- CDC has developed many resources to help writers choose better words. These include the [NCEH/ATSDR Environmental Health Thesaurus](#), [CDC's National Center for Health Marketing Plain Language Thesaurus for Health Communicators](#), [CDC's Everyday Words for Public Health Communication](#), and the [NCEH/ATSDR's Clear Writing Hub](#).

Proofreading and editing your draft

After writing a draft, the case study writer or team should have 2–3 people, unfamiliar with the draft, read it over. These people should highlight any words or sentences they find confusing. They can also write down one or two questions that they still have after reading the draft. The case study writer or team can use those notes make edits.

1. Review your goals for the case study. Have you met each goal? Make any necessary edits.
2. Check your sentence length. If your sentence has more than 20 words, it might be too long. Limit each sentence to one main idea.
3. Use common words and phrases. Review a list of commonly misused words and phrases.
4. Be sure you have been consistent with your verb tenses throughout.

5. Finally, the writer/team should have someone with a good eye for detail review the case study for grammar and formatting issues. You can review the [CDC Style Guide](#) for clarification on the use of punctuation, spelling, tables, etc.

Case study resources

Green BN, Johnson CD. How to write a case report for publication. *Journal of Chiropractic Medicine*. 2006;5(2):72-82. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0899-3467\(07\)60137-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0899-3467(07)60137-2)

Scholz RW, Tietje O. Types of case studies. In: *Embedded Case Study Methods*. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE Publications, Inc.; 2002. P. 9-14. doi:10.4135/9781412984027

Warner C. How to Write a Case Study [online]. 2009. Available from URL: <https://www.asec.purdue.edu/lct/HBCU/documents/HOWTOWRITEACASESTUDY.pdf>

The template that follows can help you begin to draft your case study. Good luck!

Title:

Organization:

Author(s):

Goals: After reading this case study, readers should

Introduction

Who is your organization? What is your expertise?

Provide your audience with some background information, such as your expertise. This provides context to help them understand your decisions. (*How much should you write?* A few sentences to 1 paragraph)

What problem did you address? Who identified the problem?

Provide some background on who noticed the problem and how it was reported. Were multiple organizations or people involved in identifying and addressing the problem? This will help the reader understand how and why decisions were made. (1 paragraph)

Case Details

Provide more information about the community. What factors affected your decisions?

Describe the community. The context, or setting, is very important to readers. What are some of the unique characteristics that affected your decisions? (1 paragraph)

How did you address the problem? Start at the beginning.

Summarize what happened, in chronological order. If you know which section of the publication your case study is likely to be put in, you can specify how your actions addressed one or more of the main points of the publication/lesson.

What challenge(s) did you encounter? Address them now if you have not already.

What was the outcome? What were your notable achievements?

Explain how your actions or the outcomes satisfy your learning goals for the reader. Be clear about the main point. For example, if you wanted readers to understand how your organization dealt with a major organizational change, include a few sentences that reiterate how you encountered and dealt with the organizational change. (A few sentences to 1 paragraph)

Conclusion

Summarize lessons learned.

Reiterate your main point(s) for the reader by explaining how your actions, or the outcomes, meet your goals for the reader.