10 Tips for Developing Effective Policy Case Studies

The purpose of a case study is to glean lessons that shed light on your central problem and locate strategies or best practices towards recommendations that resolve key problems. Although case studies can be success stories or failures, they always address key areas that you will usually research further through other primary and secondary data. Case studies are never didactic or rhetorical, and are intended to focus the problem and define the stakeholders. The sooner you can specify the likely lesson that the case will service, the more efficiently you can investigate it.

A case study studies a set of lessons about a problem, presenting the problem clearly and then focusing on how the solution either does or does not meet those needs. From there, the case study moves into a critique of how those solutions or failings operate. Do they operate well or poorly? Do they meet the challenges presented? Why or why not? What are the missed opportunities? What could the case study organization or group do better? What lessons can you glean—both positive and negative—that you can apply to the specifics of the problem?

A Checklist: What Makes a Good Case?

1. What, broadly, are the lessons learned from this case and what types of information apply to the motivating problem or questions? What central issue does the case raise? How is the issue relevant to your problem or projected solution? Can those issues be raised equally well or better by another case?
2. Does the case study offer a theory or overarching lesson? Does the case serve strategic as well as substantive goals?
3. Is the case the best example of a common problem? Alternatively, does it offer the best example of a strong solution to a common problem? If the case is an isolated instance of the problem, you’ll want to set it aside in favor of stronger evidence. If a case is unique, it may not be useful in demonstrating an overarching problem. On the other hand, the solution to a general problem is, in fact, the thing you’ll highlight as a unique strategy with application to other instances.
4. Is the case about something fundamentally controversial or one that shows a path through difficult tradeoffs? Does the case offer solutions to tough problems? Alternatively, does it show a failure to address such problems?
5. Where are the decision points in the case? Excavate the points of controversy and highlight the decisions that ensued. Sort out the relevant options for each problem area in the case. What problems in each option must the central players resolve? How do those decision points fit in the context of your motivating question/s?
6. Does the case address principles of management or particular methods of analysis?
7. Have you carefully explained central lessons? Idiosyncratic facts can impede progress. Too many facts keep the focus on the particulars. Briefly glean the central lessons for your reader or decision-maker.
8. Offer a conclusion to each case study that highlights lessons learned, applying those lessons specifically to the themes at stake in your own problem or projected solutions. Make it easy for your decision-maker to understand the key lessons from the case.
9. Develop a set of findings or lessons learned, supported by your analysis, of the case data.
10. Do you have supporting data that points to best practices that you can build into your recommendations? If so, synthesizing those practices for immediate action steps for your decision-maker and in the context of your research goals. Note: Best Practices require careful, replicable analysis. Be cautious in how you identify them.

Examples of policy reports based on case studies: