

DESCRIPTIVE CASE STUDY

A descriptive case study is a story about a real world situation facing people or groups and how they addressed it. It includes a concise but thorough account of the facts of the situation and expert commentary to help the audience understand the causes of the problem, the forces behind the solution, the outcomes of implementation, lessons learned, and connections to theories, concepts, policies, and tools relevant to the situation. Descriptive cases are teaching materials, not research publications. They require research, but the research furnishes concepts and content for the case narrative.

Writing this type of case is very different from writing a research article. First-time case authors typically go through a period of adjustment to adapt their writing from a form they are familiar with (articles and similar publications) to one they aren't (a case).

Descriptive cases have these essential characteristics. First, they tell a story. They:

- Define a real world problem and provide essential facts about it.
- Describe the important people and groups involved in the problem and their actions, thoughts, and opinions. Typically a case will focus on a small number of people, groups, or both that are central to the narrative. This is a notable difference between cases and a research article: the former are stories and stories need characters, while the latter are generally not stories and people are less important than concepts, theoretical frameworks, and research outcomes.
- Structure the story's plot around the main characters and interesting and important events that are engaging and instructive.
- Describe the main characters' perceptions of the problem, the solutions they considered, the solution they chose, the process of implementing it, the results, and the current status of the problem and the solution.
- Apply key frameworks, concepts, and analytical tools that are relevant to the story.

Second, after the story has been told, the case:

- Offers analysis and evaluation of the chosen solution, its implementation, and the outcomes. Did the solution and implementation achieve the desired goals? If not, why not? Subsequently, was another solution adopted and how did it perform?
- Offers lessons learned that are applicable to the problem described in the case and, if appropriate, to similar problems elsewhere.

General Information about the Case

This section is not part of the case itself. The information will help the Lincoln Institute describe the case to potential users and support users to find relevant cases in the digital case library.

- Topic and subtopics
- Timeframe
- Learning goals
- Primary audience
- Prerequisite knowledge
- Brief summary

Topic and Subtopics

Specify the topic and subtopics to help instructors and facilitators find relevant cases and make instructional decisions such as how the case fits into a discipline.

Timeframe

Specify the inclusive dates of the main events of the case.

Learning Goals

States the specific knowledge relevant to the topic, skills, and expected outcomes of the case using active verbs (understand, apply, analyze, evaluate or create).

Primary Audience

Indicate the most appropriate audience for the case (e.g., graduate students, public officials).

Prerequisite Knowledge

Specify what the primary audience needs to know to make best use of the case.

Brief Summary

In a few sentences describe the primary topic of the case and the major events it covers.

Guidelines for Research and Writing

The hardest decision authors have to make is what information to include and exclude. Case authors need to provide the level of detail necessary for readers to have a clear understanding of the situation. They should also define practices and concepts that may be unfamiliar to the audience. At the same time, a descriptive case should not provide so much information that the audience loses sight of the key characters, facts, and events.

One approach to writing a case is for authors to include in the first draft all the content they think is important--without worrying about the length. As the shape of the narrative emerges, authors can focus on main characters, critical events, and the narrative plot of the story.

TEMPLATE

The Institute's descriptive case template has a problem-solution-expert commentary organization that provides flexibility for authors and consistency for readers and instructors who use the cases.

Title of the Case

The title should tell readers what the main subject of the case is. Interesting titles and subtitles can pique reader interest. Example: The Hudson Yards Infrastructure Project: Banking on the Future in Manhattan.

Definition of the Problem

This first section of a descriptive case describes the characteristics and essential facts of the problem confronting the main characters that they should be most concerned about. Problems are outcomes or results of people's actions, institutional processes, or human and natural forces. A "problem" is not necessarily a negative construct. A better way to think about it is a combination of opportunities and challenges. Here is an example from the Lincoln Institute case "Tourism, Conservation, and Contestation in Florianópolis, Brazil." The case describes and analyzes a struggle over decades between groups trying to conserve shrinking natural habitat (a challenge) against the encroachments of private developers building facilities for a booming tourist business (an opportunity) and low-wage workers building informal housing on fragile land (a challenge) so that they can participate in the local economy (an opportunity).

A problem can also be about results of decisions that have been made. "Floating TDR" and Land Value Capture in Taiwan: Designing a More Effective Land-Finance Tool" features an innovative policy for compensating owners of land zoned for public facilities that had the unintended consequence of disproportionately rewarding commercial developers. Urban planners campaigned to change the terms of the policy and spread the benefits and reduce the stress new development has on existing infrastructure.

In "Coordinating Conservation Programs in the Albuquerque–Bernalillo Region," a growing population that consumed land at a rapid rate needed working policies and programs for open space conservation. Public and nonprofit organizations in the region had been increasingly taking steps to preserve undeveloped land and open space. These steps were fragmented, with different communities and organizations taking actions in different directions. The benefit of an inter-sectoral approach to land and open space conservation was that both public and nonprofit organizations shared part of the implementation burden of land conservation efforts. The weakness of a decentralized approach to open space conservation was the need for more coordination of those different actions taken by the public and nonprofit organizations in the metropolitan region.

The definition of the problem should reflect the awareness and opinions of the characters in the case. Sometimes the characters recognize the problem, and sometimes they do not. Other

times, they may try to solve the wrong problem. When case characters have different understandings of a problem, describing the differences will encourage readers to think about what contributed to the different points of view and to what degree the differences influenced the chosen solution and its results.

Possible Strategies and Solutions

The next section of a descriptive case introduces the possible strategies available to the main characters in the case for solving the problem. A complicated situation can have multiple solutions. Case writers understandably tend to focus on the solution that the people in the case pursued. But, if other solutions were considered, they should be included. Nonetheless, be judicious in the selection of possible solution options. The more options provided, the longer the case can get because the writer will have to provide background information on each option.

Here is an example of possible solutions stated in a case:

The City Council, the Mayor's Office, and the Urban Planning Institute explored various strategies that would allow developers to continue building tourist amenities while also protecting the island's natural and cultural heritage. Possible strategies included:

- 1) Allocating additional resources and building institutional capacity to monitor and enforce the protection of land preserved under federal and state laws;
- 2) Passing municipal laws and regulations to increase the area of land under preservation and creating institutional capacity to ensure municipal land would not be degraded;
- 3) Engaging non-state actors in participatory planning and budgeting, as well as the monitoring and enforcement of parkland; and,
- 4) Promoting the development of dense urban nodes throughout the island, connected by water-based transportation, to distribute growth and lessen encroachment on preserved land in the city center.

Here is a second example:

Adopt coastal resiliency measures, including land use regulation, residential relocation, and levee construction. Regulating coastal land use would prohibit informal settlements from redeveloping in geographically vulnerable areas. Relocation would provide residences away from the coast to families that had informally settled along the coast pre-Yolanda, in exchange for not rebuilding in the original location. Constructing a sturdy coastal levee would then protect the city's people and assets from inundation induced by increasing storm surges and sea level rise.

Create a new urban core in underdeveloped areas safe from coastal hazards. Tacloban

city's downtown population was expanding outward, having exceeded its accommodation capacity. Creating a new urban core in the underdeveloped northern area of the city could accommodate the growing downtown population and provide housing for relocating coastal residents. The idea of developing a new urban core existed pre-Yolanda, but requires massive construction of residential units, infrastructure, and other public facilities including schools and hospitals especially with a large number of relocating population – no small task.

Solution and Implementation

This section of the case has two parts. First, it describes the solution that was chosen and the reasons why the main characters chose it. The description should be factual, without evaluative comments. The second part should describe the implementation of the solution. The real world being what it is--messy--this part may not be as neat as defined in the template. Solutions can be modified or substantially changed as implementation proceeds. These changes should be documented.

Results

This section details the results of the selected solution and implementation, including quantitative and qualitative outcomes. The description should be factual and avoid judgment. A common feature of descriptive cases in land policy is the long timeline of results. Authors should be clear about what results had been achieved in the timeframe of the case and what results were not yet known.

Analysis and Evaluation

As mentioned earlier, the case narrative ends with the Results section. In the Analysis and Evaluation section the author should take a step back from the narrative and provide an overall evaluation of the problem definition and the chosen solution--how well the problem was defined, the solution's effectiveness, and any modifications or fundamental changes to the solution as it was implemented. The writer should explain in detail the positive and negative outcomes of the solution and causes of the outcomes. For example, the location of a housing development, the involvement of the local community, and the use of appropriate finance tools to pay for new development could be major factors behind a project's success.

The case writer should account for any external or unanticipated factors that affected the outcomes. Example: a creative solution to more equitably distribute increases in the value of property among the original land owners, developers, and the government failed because of resistance from politicians beholden to developers and land owners.

Lessons Learned

In this final section, the writer has an opportunity to do two things:

- Explain case lessons that apply to the specific situation described in the case
- Explain case lessons that could apply to situations in other localities

The difference between this section and the previous one is that this one is forward looking. What has been learned that could improve the situation in the case? What has been learned that could help individuals and groups involved in similar problems elsewhere in the world?

Descriptive case writers are under no obligation to provide lessons that may apply elsewhere. Case writers with less experience in the field should not feel that they have to generalize the analysis and evaluation in the Lessons Learned section. On the other hand, experienced professionals and academics may be able to explain how the findings can assist others grappling with similar situations in other parts of the world.

Teaching Support

Case writers can help instructors and facilitators use their cases more effectively by sharing their knowledge about its learning objectives, content, organization, and educational use.

Please provide the following:

Summary of the Case

The summary should highlight the key characters and chronological events of the case.

Teaching Plans and Questions

The most straightforward teaching plan follows the order of the case. Case writers should provide a few questions for each section. Instructor-facilitators benefit from questions that are divided according to the content of the responses: facts, analysis, and judgment.

Case writers may suggest alternative plans for discussing the case in an order that is different from its organization. For example:

The background information may reveal that an opportunity was missed or a mistake was made in the past that had a profound effect on the subject of the case. The instructor might want to start with this and discuss how past events shaped future ones.

A discussion might start with the factual results of a project and move to a discussion of the causes. The instructor might then ask whether students or participants agree with the case writer's evaluation of the causes of the results.

Another fruitful category of questions is asking students to connect their background knowledge to new concepts or tools in the case, to compare and contrast the situation in the case with others they are familiar with (through textbooks or other expository sources, cases, and professional experience), and to consider how the case could help them in thinking about situations they might encounter in the future.