

# Case Studies

*Case studies actively involve students as they work on issues found in “real-life” situations and, with careful planning, can be used in all academic disciplines.*

Case studies can be used to help students understand simple and complex issues. They typically are presented to the students as a situation or scenario which is guided by questions such as “What would you do in this situation?” or “How would you solve this problem?” Successful case studies focus on problem situations relevant to course content and which are relevant “both to the interests and experience level of learners” (Illinois Online Network, 2007).

Case studies can be simple problems where students “work out” a solution to more complex scenarios which require role playing and elaborate planning. Case studies typically involve teams although cases can be undertaken individually. Because case studies often are proposed to not have “one right answer” (Kowalski, Weaver, Henson, 1998, p. 4), some students may be challenged to think alternatively than their peers. However, when properly planned, case studies can effectively engage students in problem solving and deriving creative solutions.

The Penn State University’s Teaching and Learning with Technology unit suggests the following elements when planning case studies for use in the classroom.

*Most case assignments require students to answer an open-ended question or develop a solution to an open-ended problem with multiple potential solutions.*

1. **Real-World Scenario.** Cases are generally based on real world situations, although some facts may be changed to simplify the scenario or “protect the innocent.”
2. **Supporting Data and Documents.** Effective case assignments typically provide real world situations for student to analyze. These can be simple data tables, links to URLs, quoted statements or testimony, supporting documents, images, video, audio, or any appropriate material.
3. **Open-Ended Problem.** Most case assignments require students to answer an open-ended question or develop a solution to an open-ended problem with multiple potential solutions. Requirements can range from a one-paragraph answer to a fully developed team action plan, proposal or decision. (Penn State University, 2006, para. 2).

## **Instructor Tasks**

To help you get started using case studies in the classroom, a number of tasks should be considered. Following this list are tasks to help you prepare students as they participate in the case study.

*Place students in teams in which participants have differing views and opinions to better challenge them in discussing possible solutions to the case*

- Identify a topic that is based on real-world situations
- Develop the case that will challenge students’ current knowledge of the topic
- Link the case to one (or more) of the course goals or objectives
- Provide students with case study basic information before asking them to work on the case

- Prepare necessary data, information, that will help students come up with a solution
- Discuss how this case would relate to real life and career situations
- Place students in teams in which participants have differing views and opinions to better challenge them in discussing possible solutions to the case
- Review team dynamics with the students (prepare an outline of team rules and roles)
- Inform students that they are to find a solution to the case based on their personal experiences, the knowledge gained in class, and challenge one another to solve the problem

**Student Tasks**

- Determine team member roles and identify a strategic plan to solve the case
- Brainstorm and prepare questions to further explore the case
- Read and critically analyze any data provided by the instructor, discuss the facts related to the case, identify and discuss the relationship of further problems within the case
- Listen to and be open to viewpoints expressed by each member of the team
- Assess, refine, and condense solutions that are presented
- Prepare findings as required by the instructor

**Sample Case Study Titles by Subject Area**

The subjects in Table 1 below are provided to illustrate the diverse range of topics which could be presented as a case study. Note that the topics fit the “real world” scenario and “open-ended” problem elements of case studies and how easily two sides of the issue could be identified.

Table 1

<b>Sample Case Study Titles by Subject Area</b>	
<b>Art</b> – Performance Art and Ethics	<b>English</b> – The Phonics Project
<b>Biology</b> – Simulating the Spread of Anthrax	<b>Geography</b> – The Spotted Owl in the Pacific Northwest
<b>Business</b> – Women and the Glass Ceiling	<b>History</b> – Slavery, Labor and Gender
<b>Chemistry</b> – The Case for Artificial Sweeteners	<b>Political Science</b> – Electronic Voting
<b>Teacher Education</b> – No Child Left Behind	<b>Technology</b> – Mobile Phone Use and Radiation

**Summary**

Case studies provide students with scenarios in which they can begin to think about their understanding and solutions to problems found in real-world situations. When carefully planned, case studies will challenge students’ critical

thinking and problem solving skills in a safe and open learning environment. Case studies can help students analyze and find solutions to complex problems with foresight and confidence.

**References**

Illinois Online Network (2007). *ION research: Case studies*.  
<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/resources/casestudies/>

Kowalski, T. J., Weaver, R. A., & Henson, K. T. (1998). *Case studies of beginning teachers*. New York, NY: Longman.

Penn State University (2006). Office of Teaching and Learning with Technology.  
*Using cases in teaching*.  
<http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/cases/casewhat.html>

**Suggested Resource**

Study Guides and Strategies (2007). *Case studies*.  
<http://www.studygs.net/casestudy.htm>