



Composing a Case Study

A case study is a document used in many disciplines that examines unique or intriguing cases in order to gain some insight or understanding about the topic. Clinical case studies often look at individual cases or study different types of clinical practice. A case study may involve qualitative or quantitative research methods.

When writing a case study, select a case that offers interesting, unusual, or revealing circumstances. Usually, extreme, deviant, or atypical cases will offer more insight than a more typical or representative case. Before you begin writing, think about your purpose for writing a case study: will you be evaluating or exploring? Then, think about how you want to approach your case study: are you building a theory? Testing a theory? Illustrating an existing theory?

This handout looks at common sections of a case study and explain the contents and purpose of each section. Note that not all case studies will contain each of these sections. Different case study topics lend themselves to different sections, and different journals will have their own preference for sections to cover.

Abstracts and Summaries

A case study often contains an abstract or summary. Both are designed to tell the reader everything they need to know without having to read the whole paper. Therefore, an abstract/summary should be patient centered, and should contain a brief overview of the patient's background, diagnosis, goals, and treatments. Sometimes, you might see a summary that is more focused on the treatment than the patient, but even in those cases, the treatments are still discussed within the context of treating the patient.

Introduction and Background

Typically, a case study begins with a background section that provides a brief understanding of the disease/disorder or potentially the treatment, if the case study really explores the use of a particular treatment option. The background section usually ends with a short explanation of how the disease or treatment affected the patient.

The introduction/background section does not need to be a complete history on the disease/treatment your study focuses on. Rather, think of it as getting readers up to speed about why you're discussing the disease/disorder and what they need to know to understand your discussion. The end of your background/introduction should connect back to the patient you're focusing on.

Case Presentation

Generally, a case study has a case presentation section that is patient centered and contains background on the patient, their presentation, and the symptoms they present with. It's important in this section that the reader has an idea of the history of the patient's condition and an understanding of how the disorder affects the patient's life. It does not need to be an exhaustive history: aim for 3-4 paragraphs where you discuss the patient's background, presentation, and symptoms.



Discussion

In a case study, the discussion section should include discussion on the patient's experience, clinical observations, the patient's diagnoses (and why those diagnoses are accurate), therapy and treatments (along with an explanation of the pathophysiology of medications and treatments), and a reflection on the patient. The reflection may include what could have been done differently, theories as to why particular treatments did or did not work, and/or explanation about what makes this case particularly notable or interesting. The discussion section might also highlight places for continued research or call for a change in protocol.

Other sections

Sometimes in a case study, you'll see sections for a differential diagnosis and/or treatment. A differential diagnosis section simply lists the items on the differential. The treatment section includes drugs and dosing information and any sort of therapy treatments.

It's also not uncommon to include an outcome or follow-up section that would include a discussion about changes in medications and treatments, reports of wellbeing or difficulty, side effects, or trouble following treatment plans.

Including tables

Tables are a useful way to present information, but usually in a case study, the information is synthesized briefly in the text of the study, and the table appears as an appendix. This may vary depending on your audience and their expectations, but regardless, the text should relate all relevant information from the table—in other words, the table should supplement but not replace the text.