Arts & Humanities Research Council

Case Studies Guide

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1 Introduction

Case studies are used for many different purposes. Their role is normally to illustrate an argument or to showcase a piece of work. They are often also used as an example of a range of activities or to support a more general point in a report. They can be a valuable source of evidence for evaluation purposes.

The style and format of a case study will vary considerably depending on its purpose and audience. This guide will focus on how to conduct comprehensive and objective case studies on research projects, primarily for the purpose of a scheme or programme evaluation. There is also a section towards the end of the document on how to adapt the case studies to suit additional purposes.

The process for developing a case study can be broken down into six phases:

- Selection
- Initiation
- Ongoing evidence collection
- Project completion
- Final evidence collection
- Case study construction

2 Selection

Projects should be carefully selected to deliver against the aims of the case studies. For example, where case studies are used for evaluation purposes, unsuccessful projects can be important to illustrate lessons learned. Advocacy studies will focus more on projects that can demonstrate success and impact.

The number of case studies chosen depends on their intended purpose. For reviews, they should be representative of the breadth of the programme and its activities. Individual good practice or advocacy case studies will be chosen according to their merits: for example, to illustrate policy or economic impact.

To deliver detailed case studies, early selection is important. Ideally, projects will be tracked through their lifespan and beyond to demonstrate their impact. It is likely that projects with potentially high impact will be selected. This will ensure there is plenty of material for the case study: if the intended impact is not realised, the reasons for this can still be of value in revealing particular challenges or issues.

Where case studies are used for evaluation purposes it can be beneficial to liaise with programme directors/leaders in selecting case studies. They will have a good knowledge of the projects and the project teams, and will be able to suggest potential studies. However, the final selection should be made by the evaluation team if the case studies will inform a review of the programme.

Ideally, projects should be selected at an early stage in their progress. This enables you to develop a rapport with the project team, and allows you to gather the necessary evidence throughout the duration of the project. Sometimes retrospective case studies can be sufficient, but the comprehensive, objective case study requires solid evidence and continuous monitoring.

3 Initiation

The project team for the chosen study should be contacted in the first instance. It is important to clearly explain the context of the case study, what is involved, and to formally request their participation. If a programme director has been involved in selecting the projects, they should contact the project teams first, by way of introduction.

If possible, a meeting with the project team should take place shortly after the project has begun. Where there is a large project team, it may be preferable to meet initially with just the project leader. Follow-on meetings with other members of the team may be needed at a later stage.

The first meeting is an opportunity to establish contact with the team and to set the context for the case study. The participants may have queries about what is involved and what will be required of them.

The meeting is an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the project. Questions to the team should be based on a close reading of any papers relating to the project. This may include project proposals or application forms, and any other information provided by the team.

Following the meeting, any notes should be written up and shared with the project team. These notes will form a basis for the rest of the case study work. It should be checked by the project leader for accuracy. The meeting note should include possible evidence sources for the case study, which will assist in conducting the evidence-collection phase. The self evaluation guide (link provided in Annex 1) may be useful in determining the evidence to be collected.

If it is not possible to meet with the team in person, an initial interview can be conducted by telephone. However, for detailed case studies that are to be developed over the life of a project, an early meeting is very important. It helps to establish a rapport with the project team, leading to their cooperation and assistance at later stages.

4 Ongoing evidence collection

It is important to keep in contact with the project as it progresses. The project team should be encouraged to provide updates during the project, and to highlight key dates and activities.

If the project involves exhibitions, performances or other public events, it is important to collect evidence whilst they are underway. This may include gathering feedback from participants or recording visitor numbers. It is much harder to collect this information retrospectively, so timely data collection is vital. Possible evidence sources should have been highlighted in the initiation phase.

Attending project meetings or events can enhance understanding of the project process. This will offer further context for the case study, and may also provide useful information to inform reviews.

5 Project completion

A final meeting should be held towards the end of the project or shortly after its completion. Ideally, as many of the team members as possible will attend this meeting.

The questions asked of the team should relate to the notes from the initial meeting and any other information gathered across the lifespan of the project. This is an opportunity to probe the research, the process, interactions and impacts in more detail. It is important to differentiate between research and process: the case study should briefly outline the research in layman's terms, but the focus should be on process, interactions and outcomes.

The team may wish to discuss any challenges and less positive experiences, and they should be encouraged to do so. These help provide a rounded, honest picture of the project and that 'lessons learned' can be very valuable for self-evaluation. Any comments of this nature should be kept within the organisation or remain anonymous.

At this stage it is helpful to collect contact details for team members and third parties, such as collaborators or participants at project events. These will be useful for the final evidence collection phase.

It is important to stress that any long-term, as yet un-developed impacts do remain of interest and can be incorporated into future case studies. The team should be encouraged to keep in contact with updates and developments beyond project completion.

A note of this meeting should be shared with the project leader, allowing for any inaccuracies to be corrected. This, together with the notes of previous meetings, will form the beginnings of the case study text.

6 Final evidence collection

Other project team members and any third parties should be contacted by telephone or email with specific questions on their engagement with the project. Further sources of evidence, such as visitor numbers and other metrics, should also be collected at this stage, if not completed during Phase 3.

Developments with the project should be monitored until it is time to write up the case study. The project team should be encouraged to maintain contact and provide further updates on their work. This will enable follow-up studies to be delivered, capturing longer-term outcomes and impacts.

7 Case study construction

The case study should focus on the key outcomes and impacts from the project. This will be supported by the evidence and information gathered in the previous phases. Where possible, the evidence should include a mix of quantitative and qualitative information: this may include, for example, visitor numbers and hits on websites alongside third-party endorsements and feedback from participants.

The intended purpose and audience for the study should influence its style and content. For example, an advocacy study should be direct and concise: the first paragraph must clearly state the key achievements, followed by a series of short, factual paragraphs describing how these achievements came about. Annex 2 provides further guidance on style and content.

If the project was part of a programme or is being used to represent a group of projects, the case study should consider the extent to which the project benefitted from or fulfilled the criteria of the programme. The case study text should be agreed for accuracy with the project leader.

8 Adapting case studies for different purposes

These guidelines describe the process for developing case studies primarily for evaluation purposes. The guidance can be adapted to suit different purposes: for example, shorter case studies for advocacy purposes will not track projects through their lifespan, but are likely to start with phase four or five outlined above.

Case studies can also be passed to the in-house Communications teams, who can adapt them for wider use.

9 Annex 1

9.1 Measuring ‘Outputs’ and ‘Outcomes’

In measuring the impact of research it is essential to draw a clear distinction between ‘activities’ or ‘outputs’ and ‘outcomes’ or ‘impacts’.

‘Outcomes are the eventual benefits to society that proposals are intended to achieve... Outputs are the results of activities that can be clearly stated or measured and which relate in some way to the outcomes desired’. (The Green Book, HM Treasury 2003).

This model demonstrates, in a necessarily simplified way, that impacts will accrue over a long period of time and that any assessment of impact needs to take a long term view. The measurement of inputs, outputs and outcomes becomes more difficult as they move from being tangible and objective to become less tangible and subjective.

‘The impact of a project is the sum of the outputs and outcomes, an overall analysis of its results: unlike the outcomes, the impact of a project may change over time as subsequent events unfold’

(The Belgrade Theatre, A first social audit 1998-9, a study supported by Arts Council England 1999)

In undertaking any impact assessment it is important to use the most appropriate focal unit. Specific research projects are often interrelated, making the research team or group the most appropriate unit of measurement in many cases. In addition, any assessment of research impact should take account of the different types of research and consider the impacts of the research process itself, for example in shaping the researchers of the future.

“In any assessment of research impact it is important to take account of the different types of... research. This is not just a matter of making the familiar distinction between basic and applied research but also entails acknowledging that different forms of research lead to different types of knowledge, for example: ‘knowing what works’; ‘knowing how things work’; and ‘knowing why things happen’. Assessment approaches need to be able to capture the impact of all these forms of research knowledge; they should not be designed with only ‘what works’ research findings in mind.”

(Approaches to assessing the non-academic impact of social science research, Davies, H., Nutley, S. & Walter, I., Report of the ESRC symposium on assessing the non-academic impact of research, 2005)

9.2 Identifying potential evidence and collecting relevant information

For a full outline of this, see the AHRC publication *Understanding Your Project: A Guide to Self-Evaluation*, available here:

http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/What-We-Do/Impact/Documents/A-guide-to-self-evaluation.pdf

9.3 Communicating Complex Information: Guidance Notes[1]

Readers, particularly policymakers and senior management, will make a quick decision about papers that arrive on their desks. They will generally glance at the first 3-4 sentences in the summary to see if it is relevant to them. If the following points are covered at the start, this will increase the chances of the document being read:

- What is it for? (purpose)
- Why should I read it? (relevance and benefits)
- Is the issue serious? Is it urgent?
- What is it about? (clear title, 3-4 key messages)
- So what? (impact/implications)

9.4 Ensuring your document is read

There are four stages to producing a clear, well-structured document: **clear thinking**, then **choice** of the relevant points in good order, **clear expression** of arguments, and finally **checking** for slips and inconsistencies.

- **Clear thought:** What and who is this for? What is my objective in writing this? What is my main message? Who are my readers? What do they want? What do they already know? What do I want them to do as a result of reading this? What COULD I include?
- **Choice:** From all the things I COULD include, what MUST I include? What are the essential points the reader needs to know? What is the best order for these points? What else SHOULD go in to explain, support or discuss these points? How long should the document be? What style and tone are appropriate for the reader? *This stage is essential to change our focus from creating our ideas to presenting them for a particular task or audience.*

[1] Notes made from 'Communicating complex information simply in writing': a training course delivered by Lois Lightfoot and Amanda Bausor for the National School of Government, 2010.

- **Clear expression:** Having made all the hard choices about what to say, I can now concentrate on how to put across the message clearly, concisely, accurately and positively. The more complex the subject, the greater the need for simple presentation.

- **Checking:** Is the format consistent? Is the presentation clear and well-structured? Are there any inconsistencies or errors?

Short summary documents often complement a longer piece of work. Two possible approaches are:

- Taking two highlighter pens, read through the longer document. With the first pen, highlight the 10 most important sentences/arguments. With the second, highlight a further two sentences or points in support of each. This will provide the basis for your two-page summary.

- Imagine what you would say to someone who phoned you to ask for the headlines from the document. This should help you focus on the key points, which will provide the basis for your summary.

9.5 Planning a sensible structure

- **First things first:** Start with what is most important to the reader. Have you stated the purpose of the document? Do the title and summary (opening lines) show exactly what it is about? Have you stated why it is relevant to them? Main messages should be in the first few sentences, and each section or paragraph should have their key messages up front.

- **Past, present, future:** Why did this happen? What is the current position? What will or should happen next? It may help the reader to present this in a different order – **present** (analyse current situation or problem), **past** (cause of problem) and **future** (implications, effects or solutions).

A good way to present arguments is to split the document into 'bite-size' sections. We can only retain small amounts of information in one sitting: the rule is 5 +/- 2 points, depending on external factors (time of day, time available etc). Each section should contain a MAXIMUM of seven points.

You should state the key point(s) in bold at the start of each section. The aim is to enable the reader to get away with only reading the headlines if they do not have time to read the whole document. Ask yourself: can the reader only look at the sentences in bold and still get the key points? Try to make verbal and logical links between each section – there should be a logical flow through the document.

Writing a paper for policy audience turns the 'academic' style on its head. Start with the conclusion, and make sure that there is plenty of 'white space' in the document. Find a clear and concise heading for each section that summarises the key points made, and check that the document still has a coherent message if the reader only looks at the summary and heading.

9.6 Showing your structure: signposts, links and 'flow'

- **Titles, summaries and headings:** Titles and opening sections should quickly tell readers what the document is about, and why they should read it. In longer documents, use 'signposts' such as contents pages, indexes, summaries and headings to guide readers. Choose a simple hierarchy of headings, where the most important ones **look** important. Make them as specific and informative as possible.

- **Numbering:** This can be helpful for referencing. Keep it simple.

- **Layout:** Short paragraphs help readers to concentrate, and to comprehend and recall the points. Divide the text into short, easily digestible chunks, with plenty of white space. Use visual aids to convey key points quickly and clearly. Choose easy-to-read fonts and don't distract readers with too much formatting.

- **Topic sentences:** This is where the first sentence of each paragraph or section states or introduces the key point. Busy readers who skim documents can use topic sentences to absorb the main points quickly, and non-experts can use them to get a grip on complex arguments. The rest of the paragraph or section supports the opening statement and gives details or examples.

- **Logical links:** In planning, build the connections between points. A list of points is not an explanation or argument – show your thinking by using logical links such as *in order to, because of, caused by, if...then, although, compared to, despite, for example.* Spell out the impact or implication of points: *this means that..., the result of this could be...* Links can also show structure: *first, second, third; finally; to sum up*.

9.7 10 tips to improve written style

- ***Change abstract nouns to verbs for a punchier style.*** For example, instead of writing 'This will be of **assistance** to us in reaching a **decision** about **action** on…' try 'This will **help** us to **decide** what **to do** about…', or 'We **agreed**' instead of 'We came to **an agreement**'. Ask yourself: what did we do?

- ***Unless there is a good reason not to, change verbs in the passive voice to active verbs.*** Unnecessary passive verbs can make documents sound long-winded and stilted: 'Unauthorised visitors **will be stopped** by security' can become 'Security **will stop** unauthorised visitors'. The passive voice can sometimes be useful: to be tactful e.g. 'A mistake has been made'; if we do not know or care who is doing the action e.g. 'The post has been delivered'.

- ***Use personal pronouns such as I, we or you to sound more personal, individual or approachable.*** Active verbs create a more human tone e.g. 'I have enclosed your cheque' instead of 'A cheque is enclosed'. Audiences tend to respond better to arguments that use this direct style – 'you' makes a direct appeal to them, and 'we' suggests a stronger personal commitment than 'the organisation'.

- ***Use the command form to be clear.*** For example, 'please read this and let me know if you would like me to clarify any of the conclusions'. It is helpful to be clear on what you want - to be polite, add please. Don't waste time with unnecessary tact: 'It would be very much appreciated if you could perhaps inform me about...' is much better written as 'Please tell me about…'

- ***Divide long or complex sentences into shorter ones.*** It is easier to take in one or two points at a time, especially if the subject matter is complex. Over-long sentences repel or confuse most readers. Try for an average sentence length of 15-20 words. This will increase the reader's understanding and recall.

- ***Cut out wasted words.*** For example, write 'because of' instead of 'as a consequence of'; write 'so' not 'with the result that'; write 'about 10' instead of 'in the order of 10'. Also look out for other unnecessary words, e.g. **completely** unique, that can be cut without losing meaning.

- ***Decide which words 'carry' the meaning in a sentence.*** Highlight these words, then connect them as simply as possible: 'In general, **firms** had obviously taken **action** with great **speed** in relation to the **reduction** of their **overtime costs**' can be shortened to '**Firms** had **acted quickly** to **reduce overtime costs**'.

- Use your judgement to match the choice of words to the experience and knowledge of your audience, keeping the message clear and unambiguous. Avoid or explain jargon and acronyms. Write words that your reader can understand immediately – ones you would use face-to-face: ‘buy’ not ‘secure’, ‘a rise in X’ not ‘an appreciation in X’. If you do need to use a technical or unusual term for a non-expert audience, define it and give a brief example. If necessary, add a glossary.

- ***Be positive where possible*.** Readers respond better to ‘You can do it if..’ not ‘You cannot do it unless…’ It is also much clearer to tell people what you **do** want: ‘Please be here by 10am’ not ‘Don’t be late’.

- ***Simplify language where you can*.** Untangle complex phrases: ‘People, and this applies in increasing numbers, seem more uninterested…’ can be rewritten as ‘Fewer people seem interested…’ **Two-steps tip:** it is sometimes easier to say the idea as clearly as possible first, then try to make it more concise.

10 Language with impact examples

Using examples to clarify new, abstract or ambiguous terms is perhaps the most effective way of conveying complex ideas. Often people recall the example first, which acts as a ‘memory peg’ to remind them of the theory or concept. Examples also ensure that assertions are backed up with evidence: ‘Science Parks offer a wide range of jobs for support staff as well as specialists – a local young person might do anything from working in a crèche to designing a self-rocking cradle’.

10.1 Alliteration

Starting words with the same sound can emphasise pairs of words so that they stand out and are memorable: ‘rules and regulations should be applied with courtesy and common sense’, ‘This is persistent but not permanent’.

10.2 Contrasts

Contrasts such as in theory/in practice emphasise key words or ideas: ‘This policy could be rationalised as accepting low inflation now to prevent instability in the future’, ‘A specialist is someone who knows more and more about less and less’.

10.3 Trios, lists and sequences

The human brain seems to like threes: ‘faith, hope and charity’, ‘I came, I saw, I conquered’. Ministers agree that they can easily remember three key points, but tend to forget the fourth.

- Trios work well for clear, memorable lists: ‘each of these factors is controlled, reviewed and regularly reported as part of the risk management strategy’.
- Lists can build to a climax: ‘I have nothing to offer you but blood, toil, tears and sweat’.
- Sequences can also be memorable: ‘We tested the new system at the busiest hour of the busiest day of the week’.

10.4 Puzzles and questions

An intriguing title e.g. *Dancing on the edge of the volcano* might encourage us to read on about impending political or financial turmoil. Questions also work well e.g. *How will these changes affect your role?*

10.5 Repetition, rhyme and rhythm

These can be used to get attention e.g. ‘fat cats’, ‘too little, too late’. At a simple level, repetition of words or sounds gives emphasis: ‘tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime’.

10.6 Repetition with variation

Phrases of similar length and construction can be used to create a pattern. This makes the sentence ‘flow’ and stresses any words that break this pattern: ‘It’s not funny and it’s not clever’, ‘It is the shortage of liquidity and not the shortage of capital that has created financial difficulties’.

10.7 Very short sentences

Used sparingly, these add variety and can have great impact: ‘I have a dream’, ‘Sound judgement should always be the priority’, ‘Civilisation is a constant quest to find non-violent means to solve conflicts, to replace hostilities with negotiation. It is a quest for peace.’

10.8 Starting a sentence with ‘But’

This can draw attention to a new point, a new problem or a caveat.

10.9 Imagery

These can be most effective in making complex ideas sound clear and memorable. Similes make comparisons explicitly, using words such as ‘like’ or ‘as’: ‘like a drowned rat', 'as much use as a chocolate teapot'. Metaphors talk about one thing in terms of another: 'snail mail', 'getting bogged down in detail'.

10.10 Reflecting familiar speech patterns

Sometimes complex ideas can be made more palatable if they are expressed in a way that reflects the human voice – as long as the language is clear and precise: 'Can our analysis shed any light on the slowdown in real consumption? Perhaps.'

10.11 Jargon busting

Tips for jargon busting:

- Spell out abbreviations on first use: Frequently asked questions (FAQs).
- Add a helpful sentence to explain what this actually means: This is a list of paragraphs for you to adapt when answering questions from clients.
- If we are using a lot of technical terms but need to write for a mixed audience, consider using a glossary.
- Give brief, clear examples.
- Keep a list of useful 'layman's versions' of frequently used terms – this will also ensure a consistent style within the organisation.
- Use http://ww.plainenglish.co.uk as a useful source of alternative words.

10.12 Ask what lies beneath the language:

- Is it just fashionable – the current buzzword of today, the cliché of tomorrow?
- Does it help you feel safe: are you repeating an accepted phrase, even if you don't fully understand it?
- Does it dress up an unoriginal idea to make it seem important?
- Is it just a lazy way to write, rather than making the effort to be clear?
- Does it mark you as part of an exclusive group – and therefore excludes others?
- Is it euphemistic?
- Does it aim to manipulate reactions? (tree huggers)

- Does it aim to disguise unpalatable truths? (ethnic cleansing)

10.13 Specific terms and tightening up the logic

Precise use of language and being specific will give ideas more impact. Tightly structured sections and paragraphs will have lots of logical links such as *therefore, because, for example, including* or *in spite of*. However, some words do not mean as much as we intended. You can look out for and clarify the weak links. For example:

- We need more time. How much?
- This is a very significant increase. Why? To whom? By how much? Since when?
- This had an impact on the results. What? So what? How important was this?

10.14 Checklist for editing documents

You will need to have a clear idea of who the document is for, and what impact you want to have on them. Put yourself in their shoes.

- Is the purpose of the document clear immediately? Does the reader know what the issue is? What you want? How urgent or important it is? How it relates to key objectives, or to their concerns?
- Are the most important points up front?
- Have you considered layout? Plenty of white space? Short paragraphs? Information clear and easy to find?
- Is the order and structure logical and appropriate to the *reader's* concerns? Is there a clear summary at the top? Are headings specific and helpful? Are the sections numbered for easy reference?
- Is each paragraph or section related explicitly to the reader's concerns or the main issue? Are paragraphs not too long? Is each paragraph introduced by a topic sentence and connected by a logical link to the main arguments? Does each paragraph have one major point, supported by no more than seven related points? Are there plenty of internal logical links? Do you flag up crucial points with signals e.g. crucial?
- Have you supported claims with evidence? Have you selected a few 'killer facts'? Have you clearly flagged the difference between fact and opinion? Have you avoided promises you can't fulfil?

- Is the document the right length for its purpose – based on the reader's needs, not your own interests? Can you cut out any unnecessary detail? Can you move technical details to an annex? Can you cut out repetition or long-winded phrases?

- Is the average sentence length 15-20 words? Are sentences clear, straightforward and well punctuated? Have you checked for unnecessary passive verbs?

- Is the choice of words appropriate to *all* readers? Can you change any unusual words, unexplained abbreviations or jargon? Can you replace any vague terms by specific words? Can you remove any clichés?

- Is the tone appropriate? Would anything give offence or the wrong impression? Does it sound human? Have you tried to be as positive as possible?

10.15 Checking and proof-reading tips

- Find a quiet place if possible. Choose a time when you can concentrate.

- Do an immediate quick check. Then have a final read through after a break.

- Get a colleague to check important or sensitive pieces.

- Check twice:

- For content and tone

- For accuracy and consistency.

- Use spell check, but look out for words like from and form.

- Print it off – you will only see around 85% of mistakes on screen.

- Use a ruler or piece of paper to cover up everything except one line to prevent speed-reading.

- Check it backwards – for example, for columns of figures.

- Read it out loud, or ask a colleague to read the draft aloud while you go through a printed copy.

- If it is for publication, use a checklist to remind you of house style.