SUMMARY
This document provides a series of theoretical and practical ideas about case study writing for policy. It provides a general definition of what a case study is and then highlights five key recommendations for policy-related case studies: adding contextual information, focusing on process over outcome, minding language use, considering co-writing with a policy maker, and ending with questions rather than answers.
What is a case study?

There are many proposed definitions for the term case study. A good place to start understanding case studies as a research methodology is Robert K. Yin’s series on Case Study Research first published in 1984. For many researchers, this book is considered to be the most seminal work by far. For Yin (1994), a case is “an empirical inquiry that seeks to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p.13). Simply stated, a case study is a description of an entity’s actions and why the entity acts as it does. An entity can be an individual, an organization, a group of people or even events. Methodologically, case study research is formally classified as a qualitative method due to its demand for rich and thick descriptive data (as opposed to quantitative research’s demand for breadth). The advantage therefore of a case study research is that it is able to reveal a very complex network of factors that contributes to the entity’s unique qualities and conditions. Unfortunately, this advantage limits the case study’s ability to produce generalizable principles. This means that while a case study gives you an almost three-dimensional view of what makes an entity unique, it cannot offer you with certainty the ‘replicability’ of such uniqueness in other entities.

How are case studies for policy different?

While a case study, in general, discusses the experience of your subject or case, the presentation of such experience will depend largely on how you plan your case to be used. In other words, the utility of case studies will depend on how well you are able to integrate the context of your intended audience.

For instance, writing for an academic audience will require you to spend time discussing your methodology to ensure your readers that your documentation of the experience is valid (i.e. that data was carefully collected). On the other hand, preparing a case study for policy influence purposes requires you to be mindful of the context of policymaking, which might call for a more pragmatic use of language and an ability to generate concrete leads for policymaking purposes.
Having said this, the usual protocol (or “how-to-do-this”) for case study writing as a social science research method might not be as useful for policy influence purposes. As an alternative to the mechanical elements of a protocol, a process-reflection guide for writing case studies for policy purposes is presented in this article.

Note that the ideas presented below are not arranged in order of importance. Like case writing, these ideas are reflective whereby meaning is drawn from the interaction between each reflection point. Therefore the goal in case writing for policy is to find meaning as the basis for organizing your narrative and not the other way around.

(1) Present the context of your case based on facts
Case studies for policy purposes are stories of political communities and their problem-solving journey. Unlike short stories or essays however, case studies are designed to present such stories in a succinct manner (Policy makers do not have time for leisurely reading!). As such, it is helpful to begin your case with empirical information about your political community (example: population, level of economic development, etc.). The reason for this is two-fold: (1) empirical data strengthens the integrity of your case which is important for those who are conducting policy research and analysis studies, and (2) policy makers would want to know immediately how comparable your political community is with their own community. For policy research purposes, validity is always a topmost concern, while policy makers’ main concern is comparability. Hence, the first part of your story should give your audience the opportunity to immediately assess how applicable your case is to their own predicament. This gives them the opportunity to determine if your case is worth reading immediately or perhaps save it for another day.

(2) Write about the process more than about the outcome
The success of policymaking lies on how well it was executed. Therefore your case study should be process-oriented. Public policy textbooks would argue that there is a ‘right’ way for doing policy (as evidenced in the many theories developed over time). However, in practice, policy-making is mostly a trial-and-error kind of engagement. Hence, what is helpful ultimately for those reading your story is to know how your political community was able to solve its
predicament through its own version of policy work. Do take note however that being process-oriented does not necessarily exempt you from presenting evidence to support your story. Qualitative research traditions require rigidity in collecting and presenting data to inform the resulting narratives. All political communities have their own 'best' way of doing policy. Your responsibility is to capture this 'best' way in the most scientific manner possible. Having said this, your case must also attempt to present the larger picture of the policy network within which your institution participates. This implies the inclusion of other stakeholders in the narrative. It might be helpful to get to know these other institutions that have been part of the policy work and discuss with them your case study to get their point of view. In your storytelling, also remember that this 'best' way is not presented for the purpose of being copied by others. Rather, your case study should give your readers the opportunity to reflect on their own strengths as a community and then eventually discover what they think is their own best way of problem-solving.

(3) Watch your language
Policy makers, like most social networks, have their 'own language' or way of categorizing and defining certain things or even experience. I use the word 'language' to convey not the formal meanings of words but rather the informal ways or attempts by a collective to make sense of and label a new and/or shared experience. If you are an experienced policy advocate, you would probably have a few of those words in your head right now. (Moreover, it is very likely that these words come from your native language or dialect and that they are not easily translated into a more universal language.) For newbies, it would help if you ask a more senior colleague to read your work and translate some of your 'academic-sounding' words or phrases into something that policy makers will appreciate more. As language is culturally constructed, do take note that this informal language may be similar for policy makers who are located within the same geographic regions or the same similar condition (ex: fishing communities, peri-urban neighborhoods, etc.).

(4) Consider writing your case with the policy maker
Policy making experts will always be the policy makers themselves. As such, it is important that
your case captures their experience from their own point of view. Usually, cases are written by researchers who put themselves in the shoes of their subjects when writing the stories or perhaps by policy advocates who worked closely with the policy makers themselves. Whenever cases are produced this way (which happens more often than not) the stories can be one-dimensional because the message and the messenger are detached from each other’s realities. However, policy makers do not have the time and the patience to write their own case study! So how do we achieve a more holistic presentation of the case? A good way to deal with this is to co-write the case. This will help you produce a more balanced story. The way to do this is to ask the policy maker to describe his/her experience by answering (in writing if possible) specific questions you prepared. Questions should focus on the process (as emphasized previously) such as why such policy work was prioritized over others, on why he/she chose you (or your organization) as a partner in this work, and on how policy bottlenecks were addressed. On your end, answer the same questions based on your experience as a policy advocate - no peeking on the answers of the other! When you both have completed the task, ask a colleague to write the case study as two parallel stories based on the two accounts. You will be surprised how different your experience was with your policy maker partner even though you worked together on the same policy predicament. Co-writing also helps you deal with the language issue that was mentioned in the previous section of this protocol.

(5) End with more questions rather than answers

Obviously, you are writing this case because there were good outcomes that may be of use to other political communities that are in similar conditions. As succinctly as possible, wind down the case study by presenting the concrete outcomes that are most likely attributed to the work. I say here likely because there will always be other factors that may have influenced these outcomes that are not necessarily connected to your work. After this, add a few critical reflection points on how they can start and/or manage their own policy influence journey. The fact that they have gone this far reading your case study means that they see a policy potential in your story! For these reflection questions, focus on the idea of how change can be initiated because after all, the impetus for any great policy work is the drive towards achieving reform. Make these as concrete as possible by putting emphasis on governance structures, policy
networks and other institutions that already exist (e.g. ‘Apart from your local health department, what are the departments/agencies within your local government that can help you jumpstart the planning process for local health reform?’) rather than posing questions that beg for normative answers (e.g. ‘What traits should an ideal policy reform team in local health have?’).

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher, believed that the power of discourse lies not in the words themselves but on the institution that uttered those words. Similarly, the power of your case study lies not on its written format, but on the power and influence of the political community and the policy makers who ‘uttered’ those words to allow such narrative to unfold this way.

Happy case study writing!

Cited Work