Welcome to this online resource on writing a case study. While it was developed for risk management students, it may also be useful for other students writing a case study in engineering at UNSW. There are activities included and I encourage you to spend some time reflecting on the tasks before looking at comments. Time to read and complete activities is estimated at 1-2 hours.

What is a case study?

A case study is an account of an activity, event or problem that contains a real or hypothetical situation and includes the complexities you would encounter in the workplace. Case studies are used to help you see how the complexities of real life influence decisions.

Analysing a case study requires you to practice applying your knowledge and your thinking skills to a real situation. To learn from a case study analysis you will be "analysing, applying knowledge, reasoning and drawing conclusions" (Kardos & Smith 1979).

According to Kardos and Smith (1979) a good case has the following features:

1. It is taken from real life (true identities may be concealed).
2. It consists of many parts and each part usually ends with problems and points for discussion. There may not be a clear cut off point to the situation.
3. It includes sufficient information for the reader to treat problems and issues.
4. It is believable for the reader (the case contains the setting, personalities, sequence of events, problems and conflicts)

Types of case study

Your course may include all the information you require for the case study and in this case all students would be analysing the same case study. This may take the form of an historical case study where you analyse the causes and consequences of a situation and discuss the lessons learned. You are essentially outside the situation.

Other types of case studies require you to imagine or role play that you are in the situation and to make plausible recommendations to senior management or ministers. Some case studies require you to solve a problem by developing a new design. These types of case studies are problem orientated.

Alternatively you may be able to choose a real situation, such as an event in your workplace, to analyse as a case study, either as a problem orientated situation or an historical case /situation. In this instance, you would need to locate the information necessary to write a clear description of the case before you can analyse the situation and make recommendations.

Some examples of case study assignments are:

Historical case study

Take a recent company collapse (eg HIH, FROGGY, ENRON) and analyse what went wrong.

Problem orientated case study
Using cost benefit risk analysis, determine the current and future market opportunity of company X in country Y.

See next: Writing the case study