INQUIRY CASE STUDY

An Inquiry Case is a story about people in a real world situation without the actual real world ending (with some exceptions) and the author’s interpretation of the information. Instead, the author provides sufficient information about the problem and asks the participants to decide what information is important for understanding the problem and which solution is best supported by the evidence. These omissions may seem to negate the value of a story, but an Inquiry Case has specific learning goals that require omission of the ending and any interpretation of the case information. The educational purpose of Inquiry Cases is to provide participants with opportunities to gain knowledge about a subject through applying analytical, argumentation, and decision making skills that they will have to perform in the real world. Instructors can teach participants about the essential skills, but only through practice and instructive feedback will they develop proficiency in using those skills.

The exception to the "no ending" rule for Inquiry Cases is a situation in which the author wants readers to evaluate or diagnose the real world ending. In the case “The Valley of Ashes: New York City’s Next Great Neighborhood?," the author sets up two different approaches to the case. The instructor could ask readers to evaluate the series of decisions the case describes or diagnose the causes of an unsuccessful development effort.

Inquiry cases have these essential characteristics. They

- Focus on a real world situation and provide facts about it, including relevant background information.
- Crucially, do not disclose the actual resolution (with the exceptions noted).
- Provide a fact base that is aligned with the learning goals of the case. The fact base can be limited, forcing readers to make multiple inferences about relevant facts, or it can be dense, forcing readers to sift through the information and decide what is most relevant to the main issue. Some information may be incomplete or ambiguous – as it often is in real world situations – thus requiring readers to make inferences about its relevance to the situation.
- May include facts that are "distractors": they are not essential and simulate the "noise" real world participants would encounter when trying to understand the situation.
- Ask readers to take on the role of characters in the case and decide what knowledge – such as concepts, frameworks, policies, and tools – is relevant to the situation, propose a resolution, and justify it with evidence from the case.

Writing an Inquiry Case

Here are four steps to writing an Inquiry Case:

1. Choosing the main issue and main characters
2. Developing the fact base
3. Avoiding interpretative statements
4. Designing the story arc

Choosing the Main Issue and Main Characters

First, the writer needs to identify the main issue of the case and the main characters. The main issue depends on the real world situation the story will narrate. Fortunately, the main issues of most Inquiry Cases fall into one of two distinct categories – decision and diagnosis.

Decision: Many cases begin and end with people or groups considering a decision that needs to be made. Not surprisingly, this is the most common type of case, at least in business disciplines. Example:

“Community Toilets and the Challenge of Urban Sanitation”: With the growth of community toilets in Nairobi’s sprawling informal settlements, should municipal officials ignore community toilets and seek the development of centralized sewerage networks, embrace them as part of the city’s sanitation strategies, or oppose them as inimical to centralized networks and as aiding the consolidation of the settlements?

Diagnosis: Sometimes the main issue is a problem that case characters don’t fully understand. In other words, they recognize a problem but do not know what is causing it. In order to take actions that address the problem, they must diagnose what is causing the problematic outcomes. Example:

“The Valley of Ashes: New York City’s Next Great Neighborhood?”: A large, industrial neighborhood with waterfront location in New York City has been the target of multiple city-led redevelopment efforts that failed. The stakeholders want to know what major causes drove the failures in order to design a successful redevelopment solution.

The main issue can also focus on a decision that has been made with consequential outcomes. The primary objective of the case is for readers to diagnose the underlying forces behind the decision. Example:

“Politics of Flood Disaster Evacuation in Houston City: A Dilemma of Decision Making Under Climate-Uncertainty”: Despite the probability of heavy rain and life-threatening flooding in Houston and the surrounding area when hurricane Harvey makes landfall, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner chose to not issue an evacuation order and instead urged people to stay at home. The city suffered a large number of deaths primarily attributable to flooding.

A case can be written as a story without people. For instance, a case can describe the actions of organizations rather than individuals. However, stories are more engaging with people in them. Moreover, most real world situations revolve around at least a few key people. Finally, the main characters should have agency – the power to act. If they don't, the case may have limited
educational value unless the underlying point of the case is why characters in the case were denied or refused agency.

Developing the Fact Base

Writers have to decide what information to include in a case and what to leave out. Too much information can overwhelm readers and make the task of identifying essential information onerous. It can also obscure the case's main issue. Short cases have advantages for both instructors and students. Students often are more willing to read and think about them, which leads to a better discussion of it. Short cases require authors to maintain a tight focus on the main issue. In long cases, the fact base is extensive, and readers have to analyze a large amount of information, identify facts, and decide which are most relevant to the main issue. Long cases can be a good match for individuals with extensive experience in a field such as graduate students and professionals.

Some information in a case may be incomplete, ambiguous, or misleading – as is often true in the real world. Learning to recognize salient information and to make reasonable inferences from it are valuable skills. Finally, an Inquiry Case may include information that is a distraction: it is not essential and simulates the noise encountered in the real world. This too is a useful skill because the real world generates high levels of noise.

Avoiding Interpretative Statements

Writers of Inquiry Cases have to avoid making statements that interpret case information for readers or make judgments for them. Academics and professionals used to writing articles and papers often find these statements hard to resist. However, the writer can represent different interpretations and judgments regarding the content through characters in the case. For example, the two main characters of a case can express conflicting opinions about the main issue. They might be focused on an immediate but inconsequential problem and overlook indicators of a consequential but distal one.

Designing the Story Arc

The writer has to structure the arc or plot of the story, deciding where it will start, in what order information will be delivered, and how to end it. Defining the main issue of the case is a necessary step to designing the story arc. For instance, a story about a decision is going to be different from one about a diagnosis. A case about a decision should introduce the decision and decision makers early in the story. A case about a diagnosis should start by describing the problem that needs to be diagnosed, without necessarily labeling it as a problem, and the main character or characters and their awareness of the problem.

Please see the Inquiry Case Templates below for more guidance about organizing the case story.
General Information about the Case
This section is not part of the case itself. The information will help the Lincoln Institute describe the case to potential users and support users to find relevant cases in the digital case library.

- Topic and subtopics
- Timeframe
- Learning goals
- Primary audience
- Prerequisite knowledge
- Brief summary

Topic and Subtopics
Specify the topic and subtopics to help instructors and facilitators understand how the case fits into a discipline.

Timeframe
Specify the inclusive dates of the main events of the case.

Learning Goals
States the specific knowledge relevant to the topic, skills and expected outcomes of the case using active verbs (understand, apply, analyze, evaluate or create).

Primary Audience
Indicate the most appropriate audience for the case. Example: graduate urban planning students.

Prerequisite Knowledge
Specify what the primary audience needs to know to make best use of the case.

Brief Summary
In a few sentences describe the primary topic of the case and the major events it covers.
INQUIRY CASE TEMPLATES

Title of the Case
The title should state the main subject of the case. Interesting titles and subtitles can pique reader interest. Example: The Hudson Yards Infrastructure Project: Banking on the Future in Manhattan.

Introduction of the Main Issue and Characters

The first section (By "section" we mean one or more paragraphs set off by headings in the text.) should introduce the main character and the subject of the case. Information about the main character typically includes the name, the character's job or position, background, and relationship to the subject of the case. If there are several characters of equal importance to the case story, they should be introduced in the first section – as succinctly as possible. Lastly, this first section of the case should be relatively short.

How to express the subject of the case depends on the type of case:

- Decision: the decision should be explicitly stated. Authors often include the major decision options in the first section, but they can be described in later sections or even at the end of the case. For example, the first section of “Community Toilets and the Challenge of Urban Sanitation,” the opening section introduces:
  - The main characters: government officials of the Nairobi City County Executive Committee
  - The main issue: growth of community toilets in Nairobi’s sprawling informal settlements

  Subsequent sections of the case develop the fact base and the case concludes with three decision options: ignore, support, or restrict the use of community toilets.

- Diagnosis: the first section should give readers an overview of the outcome or results that are not understood. An analogy is the major symptoms that a patient presents to a doctor. Subsequent sections provide detailed information about each of the major symptoms. To be clear, when we say introduce the subject or main issue, we do not mean writers should state that a case is about a diagnosis. Students need to be able to recognize situations that call for a diagnosis. For example, “The Valley of Ashes: New York City’s Next Great Neighborhood?” includes the following major sections:
  - A short historical account of failed redevelopment efforts that introduces the main issue and key stakeholders.
  - A detailed account of Mayor Bloomberg’s aggressive plan that eventually stalled because of local opposition.
  - A concluding section that asks readers to design a redevelopment solution that accomplishes the city’s goals and satisfies the various stakeholders.
Background

Many cases provide background information after the opening section. The information can be important in understanding the roots of a decision or an outcome that needs to be diagnosed. In “The Valley of Ashes” case, the background recounts the history of the city’s failed efforts to redevelop the land.

The information in a Background section can be important to understand the main issue, of mixed importance (information essential to the main issue is mingled with nonessential information), or largely irrelevant. The inclusion of nonessential or irrelevant information should be calibrated carefully. It is one of the most difficult aspects of writing a case: how to simulate real world situations in which actors are deluged with information of different value but not overwhelm readers, especially readers new to the field, with information.

Body of the Case

The sections that follow Background (if it is included) vary widely from case to case. They can be organized chronologically, telling the story as a history with clear divisions; by subtopics of the main issue; or by the parts of a theoretical or analytical framework.

There are no hard and fast rules for selecting topics and their sequence. However, the two types of case issues can help authors think through what content to include and in what order:

- Decision: appropriate decision criteria are a crucial part of the underlying logic of decision-making. The body of a decision case can be broken down into topics that mirror the most important criteria – for example, social purpose, finances, and quality of planning, design, and construction. In an Inquiry Case, the writer usually does not explicitly say that the topics correlate with the criteria – that is a task for readers. However, the writer might want to be more specific to help structure students’ thinking about a decision. Another way to organize the body of a decision case is to offer the perspectives of different parties to the decision, different policies that apply to the decision, the views of all stakeholders – those who are decision makers and those who are not – or a combination of these.

- Diagnosis: the body of the case should provide information about the outcome that needs to be diagnosed. A writer can organize information into sections that address the major symptoms, that implicitly reflect the major causes of the outcome, or implicitly reflect the frameworks most helpful in diagnosing the subject of the case. Any of these organizations can be combined with the opinions of case characters.

Whatever the main issue is, the writer can vary the value of the information and even its truthfulness. Case writers need to be confident that readers will have the knowledge necessary to properly sort out valuable from less valuable information. They also have to provide cues to help readers recognize inaccurate or false information.
Conclusion

At the end of an Inquiry Case, readers are usually returned to the beginning of the story. The main character reflects on the main issue, what is at stake, and sometimes the actions that will need to be taken after the main issue is resolved.

A decision case might end with the major decision options that the decision maker should consider. The main character could also be thinking about the consequences of the decision – the benefits flowing from a good decision and the damage flowing from a bad one. The point is to put readers in the position of the main character and ask themselves what they would do. For example, in “Community Toilets and the Challenge of Urban Sanitation,” the case concludes with the decision options confronting the main characters:

Government officials were in a difficult position. Should they accept the “facts on the ground” and Umande’s decentralized model (community toilets)? Could the decentralized model work with the existing sanitation planning processes?... Or, should officials discourage or limit the decentralized model because it undermines the eventual building of a reliable centralized system and encourages the continued growth of informal settlements—which then further compounds the problem of building out a centralized infrastructure?

A common way to end a diagnosis case is to have the main character think about what she or he is going to say about causes of the problem and, sometimes, how to fix it.