Study Design Dichotomous Key[1]

1. Did the investigator get to decide who was exposed and at what level of exposure?

YES – this is a clinical or community trial.
NO – go to question 2.

2. Was the unit of observation the population (that means they had no information about specific individuals, just rates in a population)?

YES – this is an ecological study.
NO – go to question 3.

3. Was there a comparison group?

NO – this is a case report (if only 1 case) or a case series (if more than 1 case).
YES – go to question 4.

4. Did they assess both outcome and exposure as of the time that they asked?

YES – this is a cross-sectional study.
NO – go to question 5.

5. Were the study subjects originally identified and grouped by whether they were "exposed" or "unexposed"?

YES – this is a cohort study.
NO – go to question 6.

6. Were the study subjects originally identified and grouped by whether they had the outcome or not?

YES – this is a case control study.

So how do nested case control studies fit in here? Instead of using the entire population of a city/state/country/planet as the population from which cases and controls are drawn, a nested case control study draws cases and controls only from a cohort which has previously been defined by researchers conducting a cohort study.

[1] **dichotomous key** (*noun*)**:** a key for the identification of organisms based on a series of choices between alternative characters. http://www.merriam-webster.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=dichotomous+key