

Case Studies: Some Basic Approaches

You may or may not have been exposed to case studies before. Whatever the case (pun intended), here are some useful pointers to think about when you pick up a case for study and discussion:

1. Cases are not hypothetical, but real. What this means is that the case writer's primary goal is to *document* events and facts as they have occurred. As such, it includes not just the richness of detail when it comes to economic and political decisionmaking, but also the possibility of differing opinion and erroneous choices. Importantly, there are no "right" answers in the uncertain world that we inhabit; merely better or worse ones. The beauty of the case method is that it exposes us to qualitative information that may be missing from our quantitative models; the drawback, however, is that optimal decisionmaking becomes less clear-cut.
2. It is your responsibility to analyze the case, and come up with appropriate questions and answers. That being said, we are less interested in questions of *fact*, and more in questions of *choice*. Ask yourself: How were decisions reached at that juncture in the case? What were the constraints involved, and what were the options? Were they good decisions? Do you agree with them, and if not, how could they have been done differently? How can you bring to bear what you have learnt in class to the situation at hand?
3. The first time you go about analyzing a case, use the following step-by-step guideline:
(a) Skim the case and establish what the case is about; (b) Read the case and make notes on the margins; (c) Outline the key issues and questions in the case; (d) Resolve these questions, in light of the evidence presented in the case, always keeping in mind the underlying assumptions.*
4. Form small groups for the purposes of analyzing the case. Learn from your group. Share your views. Don't worry about whether they are right or wrong (recall point 1), or even if they are intelligent or not (making smart comments all the time only

* A detailed discussion of this is available online: <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/projects/casemethod/guidelines.html>.

happens in the movies). Listen to what others' point of view, but be sure to make your own clear. Remember: You get out of the process as much as you are willing put in.

5. Classroom discussion: The in-class discussion of the case is as rewarding as we all allow it to be. We can ensure that this is so by arriving prepared to discuss the case with a clearly articulated point of view (possibly formed when you first discussed the case in your small groups). You may find that other groups arrive at starkly different conclusions; this is normal and encouraged. As the facilitator, I will try to move the discussion along, but you will be the main participants. While I may have a point of view, I do not have "the answer" that I plan to impart to you after we are done. Your well-structured argument is potentially as valid as mine.