

Case Study Guide (UK University Guide)

A practical, no-fluff guide to analysing and writing a case study — from identifying the real issues to structuring a justified, evidence-based recommendation.

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Featured Snippet Answer: A case study assignment asks you to analyse a real or realistic scenario using relevant theory, identify the core issues affecting it, evaluate possible responses, and recommend a specific, justified course of action. The strongest case studies break the core problem down into an "issue tree" of causes and evidence, rather than describing the scenario without genuine analysis.

AI Overview Summary: Writing a strong UK university case study means moving beyond describing the scenario to genuinely analysing it — breaking the core problem into an issue tree of causes, applying relevant theoretical frameworks, evaluating realistic options, and recommending specific, justified actions supported by evidence from the case. The most common weakness is treating the case study as a summary exercise, retelling the scenario's facts without applying theory or reaching a reasoned judgement.

Quick Answer

Read the case study closely and identify its core problem, then break that problem into an issue tree of specific causes, each supported by evidence from the case. Apply relevant theoretical frameworks to analyse these issues, evaluate realistic options against clear criteria, and recommend specific, actionable steps clearly justified by your analysis. Avoid simply retelling the scenario — the analysis is where almost all of your marks are earned.

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What a Case Study Assignment Actually Is

A case study assignment presents a real or realistic scenario — an organisation facing a business problem, a patient presenting particular symptoms, a legal dispute, an engineering failure — and asks you to analyse it using the theory, frameworks, and evidence relevant to your discipline. The goal is never simply to summarise what happened; it's to demonstrate that you can apply academic thinking to a messy, real-world situation and reach a defensible, well-justified conclusion.

This distinction matters because the single most common weakness in case study assignments is treating them as a comprehension exercise — retelling the scenario's facts in your own words, in roughly the order they appeared in the case. A strong case study does something structurally different: it identifies the core problem, breaks that problem down into specific, evidenced causes, applies relevant theory to explain and evaluate those causes, and builds towards a recommendation that a marker could not simply have written by re-reading the case brief.

Case studies reward a particular kind of thinking — moving fluidly between the general (theory, frameworks, established models) and the specific (the facts, figures, and stakeholders in front of you). Students who do this well treat theory as a lens for understanding the case, not as a separate section to be covered before "the real analysis" begins.

Expert Tip: A useful test for any paragraph in your case study: could this sentence have been written by someone who had only skimmed the case brief, without applying any theory? If yes, the paragraph is still at the descriptive stage and needs more analytical development.

Why the Case Study Matters

Case studies are popular with UK lecturers precisely because they can't be answered from memorised theory alone — they require you to apply that theory to a specific, often ambiguous situation, which is a considerably harder and more highly-valued skill than reciting a framework in the abstract.

What Markers Look For	Why It Matters
Correct identification of the core problem(s)	Misdiagnosing the issue undermines everything that follows
Genuine application of theory to the specific case	Shows you can use frameworks as analytical tools, not just list them
Evidence drawn directly from the case	Grounds your analysis in the actual scenario, not generic assumptions
Realistic, evaluated options	Demonstrates practical judgement, not just theoretical knowledge
Specific, justified recommendations	Shows you can translate analysis into actionable conclusions

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Treating the case study as a test of how much theory you can list. Markers are typically far more interested in how well you apply two or three frameworks properly than in how many frameworks you can name without depth.

Types of Case Study Assignments

Type	What It Involves	Typical Discipline
Business/ management case study	Analyse an organisation's strategic, operational, or marketing challenge	Business, management, marketing
Clinical/nursing case study	Analyse a patient scenario using clinical reasoning and reflective frameworks	Nursing, healthcare, medicine
Legal problem-style case study	Apply legal principles and case law to a factual scenario	Law
Engineering case study	Analyse a technical failure, design challenge, or process problem	Engineering
		Education

Type	What It Involves	Typical Discipline
Educational case study	Analyse a classroom, pupil, or policy scenario using educational theory	
Single-case study	In-depth analysis of one organisation, patient, or scenario	Most undergraduate assignments
Comparative/ multiple-case study	Analysis across two or more cases to identify patterns or contrasts	Some dissertations and advanced modules
Teaching case vs research case	Teaching cases are built to illustrate specific theory; research cases explore a genuine open question	Varies by module purpose

Lecturer Advice: Most undergraduate case studies are single-case, teaching-style assignments — designed so that a specific set of frameworks maps cleanly onto the scenario. Check your assignment brief for which theories or frameworks your module has been building towards, since these are usually the ones you're expected to apply.

Case study vs essay: key differences

Students moving from essay-based modules to case study assignments sometimes default to essay conventions that don't quite fit the format. The underlying skills overlap considerably, but the emphasis shifts in several important ways.

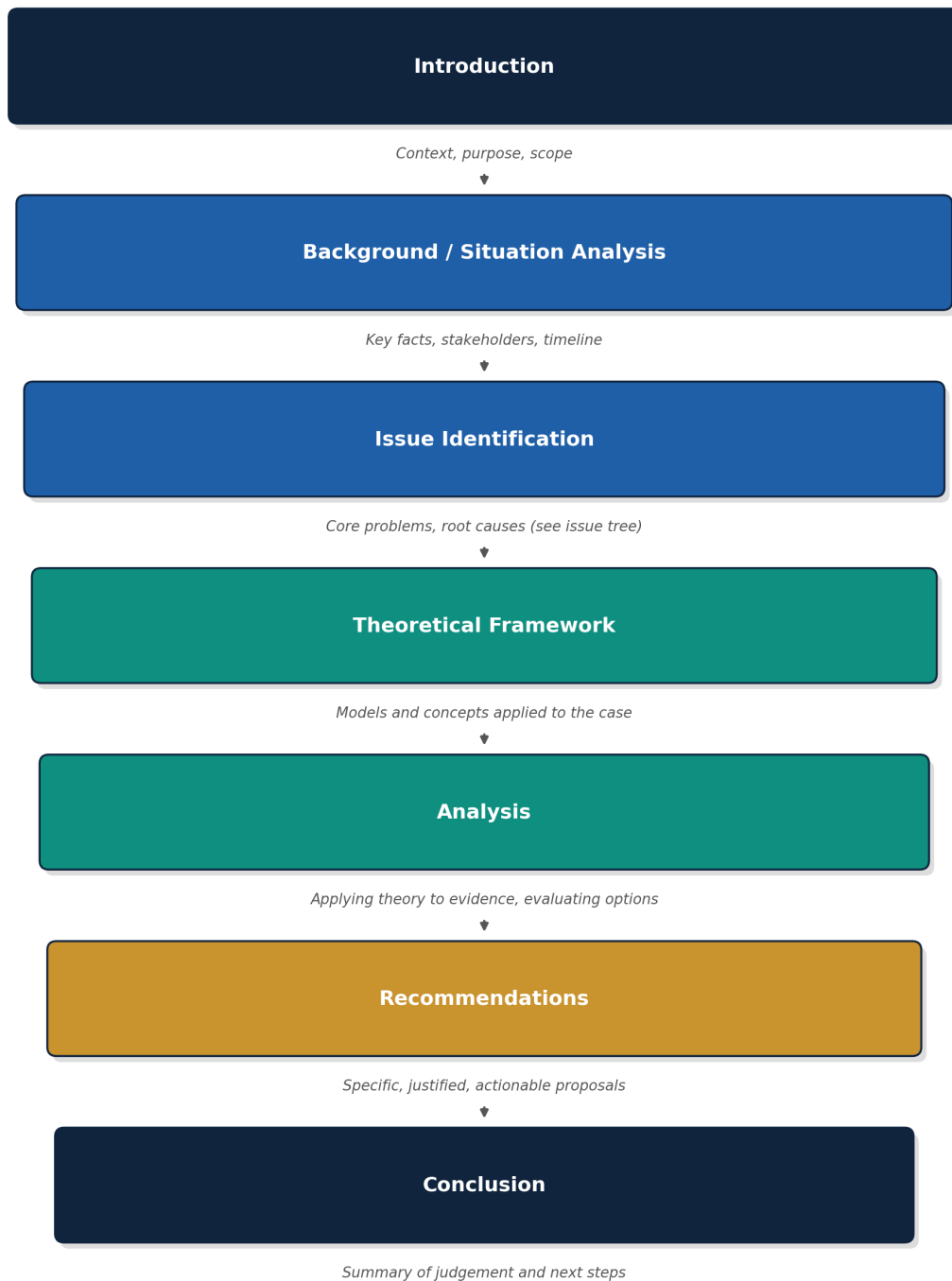
Feature	Essay	Case Study
Central task	Argue a position on a debatable question	Diagnose a problem and recommend a course of action
Evidence source	Academic literature primarily	The case scenario itself, supported by academic frameworks
Structure	Continuous argumentative prose	Often includes headed sections (issues, analysis, recommendations)
Ending	A reasoned judgement on the question	A specific, actionable recommendation
Theory's role	Central subject of discussion	

Feature	Essay	Case Study
		A lens applied to explain and evaluate the scenario

Expert Tip: If you find yourself writing long passages that discuss a theory in the abstract without referring back to the specific case, you have likely drifted into essay-mode. Case study writing should keep returning to the scenario's specific facts throughout.

The Case Study Report Structure

Most case study assignments follow a fairly consistent overall structure, moving from context through analysis to a clear, actionable conclusion.



Stage	Function
Introduction	States the purpose, scope, and structure of your analysis
Background/Situation Analysis	Summarises the key facts, stakeholders, and timeline briefly and neutrally
Issue Identification	

Stage	Function
	States the core problem(s), broken down into specific, evidenced causes
Theoretical Framework	Introduces the models and concepts you'll apply
Analysis	Applies theory to the evidence, evaluating what it reveals
Recommendations	Proposes specific, justified, actionable next steps
Conclusion	Summarises your overall judgement and next steps

Expert Tip: Keep your background/situation section genuinely brief and largely descriptive — save your critical thinking for issue identification and analysis. A situation summary that's too long usually signals that analysis hasn't properly started yet.

Reading and Annotating the Case

Strong case study analysis starts well before you write a single sentence — it starts with how carefully you read and annotate the case material itself.

Reading Technique	How It Helps
First read for overall understanding	Get the full picture before analysing any specific detail
Second read with an evaluative lens	Annotate facts that seem significant, surprising, or potentially causal
Highlight quantitative evidence separately	Numbers (sales figures, patient observations, financial data) often anchor your strongest analytical points
Note stakeholder perspectives	Different stakeholders often want different, sometimes conflicting, outcomes
Flag ambiguous or missing information	Case studies often withhold some information deliberately — noting this shows critical awareness

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Reading the case once and starting to write immediately. Case studies typically reward a second, more analytical read specifically aimed at identifying causes and evidence, not just plot details.

Identifying Key Issues: The Issue Tree

Once you understand the case, the next step is breaking the core problem down into an issue tree — much like a family tree, but for causes rather than relatives. At the top sits the core problem; beneath it, the tree branches into the main contributing issues; beneath those, each issue branches further into specific root causes; and at the bottom, each root cause is anchored to specific evidence drawn from the case.

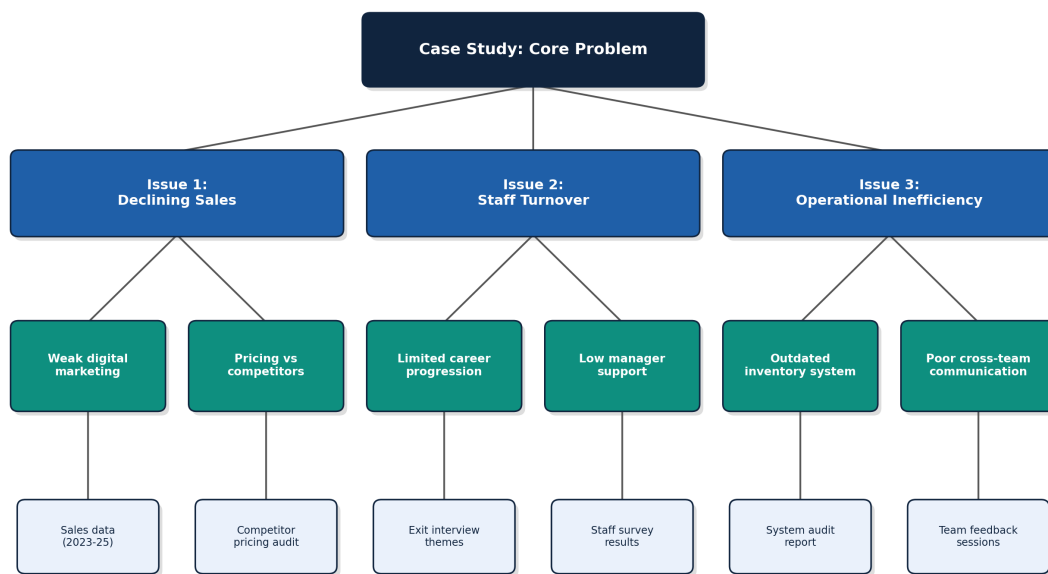


Figure 1: A case study issue tree — the core problem branches into key issues, issues branch into root causes, each supported by specific evidence.

Tree Level	What It Represents	Example
Root (core problem)	The overarching problem the case centres on	Declining performance at a regional retail chain
Branch (key issue)	A major contributing factor	Declining sales / Staff turnover / Operational inefficiency

Tree Level	What It Represents	Example
Sub-branch (root cause)	A specific, more precise cause within that issue	Weak digital marketing / Limited career progression
Leaf (evidence)	The specific case evidence supporting that cause	Sales data, exit interview themes, system audit findings

Expert Tip: Build your issue tree on paper before writing a single paragraph of analysis. It forces you to distinguish between symptoms (what's visibly wrong) and root causes (what's actually driving the problem) — a distinction markers specifically look for.

Why the issue tree prevents shallow analysis

Without a deliberate issue tree, students commonly default to addressing whichever problems are mentioned earliest or most prominently in the case brief, rather than the ones that are actually most significant. The issue tree forces a more disciplined approach: every issue you raise must trace back to the core problem, and every root cause you claim must be anchored to specific evidence rather than plausible-sounding assumption. This is also what allows your recommendations, later, to target root causes directly rather than surface symptoms — a distinction that consistently separates strong case studies from merely competent ones.

Building your own issue tree: a step-by-step approach

Step 1: State the core problem in one sentence. If you can't state it in a single sentence, you likely haven't yet identified it precisely enough.

Step 2: List the visible symptoms. These are the observable signs mentioned in the case — declining sales, high staff turnover, missed deadlines — not yet the underlying causes.

Step 3: Group symptoms into 2–4 key issues. Related symptoms often point towards a shared underlying issue; group them accordingly.

Step 4: Drill down to root causes. For each key issue, ask "why is this happening?" until you reach a cause specific enough to act on, rather than a restatement of the symptom itself.

Step 5: Anchor every root cause to case evidence. A root cause without supporting evidence from the case is speculation, not analysis.

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Confusing a symptom for a root cause — for example, treating "declining sales" itself as the root cause, rather than digging further into why sales are declining (weak digital marketing, uncompetitive pricing, and so on).

Applying Theoretical Frameworks

Once your issue tree is in place, theoretical frameworks give you a structured way to analyse each issue rather than relying on general commentary or personal opinion.

Framework	Best Used For
SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats)	Broad organisational or strategic analysis
PESTLE (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental)	Analysing the external context shaping a case
Porter's Five Forces	Analysing competitive pressure within an industry
Ansoff Matrix	Analysing growth strategy options
Gibbs' Reflective Cycle	Analysing clinical or professional decision-making in nursing and healthcare cases
IRAC (Issue, Rule, Application, Conclusion)	Structuring legal problem-style case analysis
Root Cause Analysis (e.g. 5 Whys, Fishbone Diagram)	Systematically tracing symptoms back to underlying causes

Lecturer Advice: Choose frameworks that genuinely fit the issues in your tree, rather than applying every framework covered in your module regardless of relevance. Two

frameworks applied with real depth typically score far higher than five applied superficially.

Worked Example: "Applying Porter's Five Forces to the retail chain's declining sales issue reveals particularly intense rivalry among existing competitors, driven by three new entrants offering comparable products at lower prices over the past 18 months — directly supporting the pricing pressure identified as a root cause in the issue tree."

Matching frameworks to issue types

Different categories of issue tend to respond better to different families of framework, and recognising this pairing quickly narrows down which two or three frameworks are actually worth applying in depth.

Issue Type	Framework Families That Fit Well
External market or competitive pressure	PESTLE, Porter's Five Forces
Internal organisational capability	SWOT, value chain analysis
Growth or strategic direction	Ansoff Matrix, BCG Matrix
Individual decision-making or reflection	Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, Kolb's Learning Cycle
Legal liability or obligation	IRAC, relevant statute or case law tests
Process or operational failure	Root cause analysis, Fishbone diagrams, FMEA

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Selecting frameworks based on which ones were most recently covered in lectures, rather than which ones actually fit the issues identified in your issue tree. A framework mismatch is usually obvious to markers, since the application tends to feel forced.

Analysing the Case: Linking Evidence to Theory

The heart of a case study is the analysis section, where theory and case evidence are brought together to explain what's happening and why. This is meaningfully different from a section that discusses theory in general terms, or one that simply restates case facts — analysis requires explicit, sustained connection between the two.

Analysis Stage	What It Involves
State the issue being analysed	Draw directly from your issue tree
Apply the relevant framework	Explain the framework briefly, then apply it specifically to this issue
Integrate case evidence	Cite specific facts, figures, or quotations from the case
Draw a reasoned conclusion about this issue	State what this analysis reveals, and how significant this issue is relative to others

Worked Example: "The issue tree identifies weak digital marketing as a key driver of declining sales. Applying the marketing mix framework, the case evidence shows the company's digital advertising spend fell by 40% between 2023 and 2025, even as competitor spend rose by an average of 15% over the same period. This divergence suggests the sales decline is not simply a market-wide trend but is disproportionately linked to the company's own reduced digital visibility relative to competitors."

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Writing a "theory paragraph" followed by a separate "case facts paragraph," without ever explicitly connecting the two. Analysis requires theory and evidence to appear together, in the same sentences, actively explaining each other.

Evaluating Options

Before recommending a course of action, strong case studies evaluate more than one realistic option against clear criteria, rather than presenting a single "obvious" solution without genuine comparison.

Evaluation Criterion	What to Consider
Feasibility	Can this option realistically be implemented given the organisation's resources and constraints?
Cost	What financial investment does this option require, and is it proportionate to the problem?
Timeframe	How quickly could this option realistically produce results?
Risk	What could go wrong, and how significant would the consequences be?
Alignment with root causes	Does this option address a genuine root cause, or only a surface symptom?

Worked Example: "Increasing digital marketing spend directly addresses the root cause identified in the issue tree and could be implemented within one quarter, though it carries moderate cost and depends on marketing team capacity. By contrast, a full rebrand would address weak market visibility more comprehensively but at substantially higher cost and over a much longer timeframe, with less certainty of proportionate return."

Expert Tip: Presenting at least two realistic options, evaluated against the same criteria, demonstrates exactly the kind of practical judgement markers reward — even if you ultimately recommend rejecting the alternative option.

Handling ambiguity and incomplete information

Case studies frequently withhold information deliberately — a deliberate feature of the format, not an oversight. Real organisational and clinical decisions are rarely made with complete information, and part of what a case study tests is your ability to reason carefully under exactly that kind of uncertainty.

Situation	How to Handle It
A relevant fact is missing entirely	State the gap explicitly and note how it limits your conclusion's certainty

Situation	How to Handle It
Information is ambiguous or open to interpretation	State your interpretation explicitly and briefly justify why it's the more reasonable reading
Stakeholders provide conflicting accounts	Acknowledge the conflict rather than silently picking one account as true
Data is presented without full context (e.g. no comparison benchmark)	Note the limitation, and avoid overstating what the data alone can support

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Quietly inventing details not present in the case to make the analysis flow more smoothly. Markers are typically familiar with the case material and will notice fabricated specifics immediately, which undermines credibility across the whole submission.

Writing Recommendations

Recommendations translate your analysis into specific, actionable next steps — the point where your case study moves from understanding the problem to proposing its resolution.

Weak Recommendation	Strong Recommendation
"The company should improve its marketing."	"The company should increase digital advertising spend by 20% over the next two quarters, prioritising the social media channels where competitor engagement data shows strongest customer response."
"Staff turnover needs to be addressed."	"The company should introduce a structured career progression framework within six months, directly targeting the lack of promotion pathways identified as a root cause of staff turnover in the sales team."

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Writing recommendations so generic they could apply to almost any organisation facing a similar-sounding problem. Strong recommendations are

specific, resourced, timed, and clearly traceable back to a root cause identified in your issue tree.

Structuring multiple recommendations

Where a case study generates several recommendations, present them in order of priority, feasibility, or expected impact, rather than in the order the underlying issues happened to appear in your analysis. Briefly noting each recommendation's connection to a specific root cause reinforces that your proposals follow logically from your analysis rather than reading as generic business advice.

Expert Tip: Where possible, briefly note an implementation consideration for each recommendation — who is responsible, what resources are required, and what a reasonable timeframe looks like. This shows practical judgement beyond simply identifying what should happen.

The Case Study Writing Process

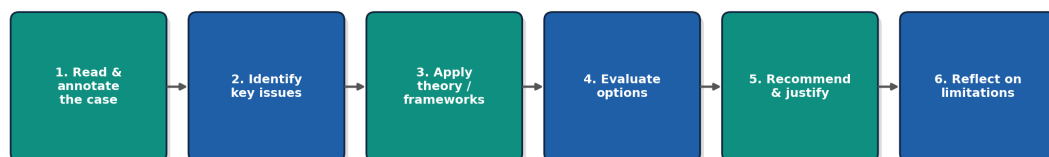


Figure 2: The case study writing process, from first read-through to a justified, evidence-based recommendation.

Step	What Happens Here
1. Read and annotate the case	Understand the full scenario and flag potentially significant details
2. Identify key issues	Build your issue tree, distinguishing symptoms from root causes
	Select frameworks that genuinely fit the issues you've identified

Step	What Happens Here
3. Apply theory/ frameworks	
4. Evaluate options	Compare realistic responses against clear criteria
5. Recommend and justify	Propose specific, actionable steps clearly linked to your analysis
6. Reflect on limitations	Acknowledge what your analysis couldn't fully resolve, given the information available

Expert Tip: Step 6 is frequently skipped under time pressure, but briefly noting the limitations of your analysis — missing data, assumptions made, alternative interpretations — signals exactly the kind of critical self-awareness that distinguishes higher grade bands.

Structuring Your Analysis Paragraphs

At the paragraph level, case study analysis benefits from a structure similar to PEEL, adapted to explicitly integrate theory and case evidence together.

Stage	Function
Issue statement	States which issue from your tree this paragraph addresses
Theory application	Introduces the relevant framework and applies it specifically
Evidence integration	Cites specific case facts, figures, or details
Judgement	States what this analysis reveals and how significant the issue is

Worked Example: "The issue tree identifies outdated inventory systems as a driver of operational inefficiency [Issue statement]. Applying a value chain analysis, inbound logistics functions are shown to depend on manual stock reconciliation processes that modern automated systems have largely replaced across the sector [Theory application]. The case's system audit report notes an average reconciliation time of 6 hours per week

per store, compared to an industry benchmark of under 1 hour with automated systems [Evidence integration]. This gap represents a significant, addressable inefficiency directly within the organisation's control, distinct from the more structural pricing pressures affecting sales [Judgement]."

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Writing analysis paragraphs that describe the case chronologically (as events unfolded) rather than thematically (organised by issue). Chronological retelling rarely produces the focused, issue-driven analysis case studies require.

Common Lecturer Feedback

Common Feedback Comment	What It Usually Means	How to Fix It
"Too descriptive"	Case facts are restated without genuine analysis	Add explicit theory application and evaluation to every section
"Theory not applied to the case"	Frameworks are discussed generally rather than specifically	Integrate case evidence directly into the same sentences as your theoretical discussion
"Recommendations too vague"	Proposals lack specificity, resourcing, or timeframes	Add concrete detail: what, by whom, by when, at what approximate cost
"Doesn't identify the real problem"	Surface symptoms are treated as root causes	Rebuild your issue tree, drilling down further into root causes
"No evaluation of alternatives"	Only one option is presented without genuine comparison	Evaluate at least two realistic options against clear criteria

⚠ **Common Mistake:** The most common comment across UK case study assignments — "too descriptive, not enough analysis." This consistently traces back to retelling the case rather than applying theory to explain and evaluate it.

Weak vs Strong Examples

Weak	Strong
"The company has seen declining sales over the past two years. This is a problem for the business."	"Declining sales stem primarily from reduced digital marketing investment relative to competitors, rather than broader market contraction, since overall sector sales grew by 4% over the same period the company's sales fell by 12%."
"The nurse should have escalated the patient's symptoms sooner."	"Applying Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, the delay in escalation appears linked to an unspoken assumption that raising concerns to a senior colleague would be perceived as a lack of confidence, an assumption directly addressable through structured communication tools such as SBAR."

Expert Tip: Notice the strong versions integrate specific evidence and a clear analytical judgement, rather than simply stating that a problem exists or that someone should have acted differently.

Subject-Specific Examples

Business: "Applying Porter's Five Forces to this retail case reveals intensifying competitive rivalry as the dominant external pressure, with three new market entrants undercutting on price over the past 18 months — directly supporting the pricing-related root cause identified in the issue tree."

Law: "Applying the IRAC framework, the issue is whether a binding contract existed despite the absence of formal consideration. The rule established in *Central London Property Trust v High Trees House* permits enforcement via promissory estoppel where reliance would make it inequitable to withdraw the promise — a rule directly applicable given the tenant's documented reliance on the reduced rent arrangement."

Nursing: "Applying Gibbs' Reflective Cycle to this escalation delay reveals that hesitation stemmed from an unspoken assumption about hierarchy rather than genuine clinical uncertainty, an assumption that structured tools such as SBAR could directly address in future practice."

Psychology: "Applying the biopsychosocial model to this case reveals that the patient's reported anxiety symptoms are best explained not by any single factor but by the interaction between workplace stressors, disrupted sleep patterns, and limited social support identified in the case notes."

Computer Science: "Applying a root cause analysis to this system outage reveals that the immediate trigger — a failed deployment — was itself enabled by the absence of automated rollback procedures, representing the deeper systemic issue this case study should address."

Engineering: "Applying failure mode and effects analysis (FMEA) to this structural case reveals that the weld failure's root cause was inadequate quality inspection protocols, rather than the material defect initially assumed, since three prior inspections had already flagged comparable weld inconsistencies."

Marketing: "Applying the marketing mix framework to this campaign's underperformance reveals a clear promotion-product mismatch: the campaign's messaging emphasised premium positioning while pricing data shows the product was simultaneously discounted by 30%, undermining the intended brand positioning."

Education: "Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to this pupil case reveals that disengagement is better explained by disruption within the pupil's

microsystem (family circumstances) than by classroom-level factors alone, reframing the appropriate scope of intervention."

Finance: "Applying ratio analysis to this company's financial case reveals a current ratio of 0.8, indicating a working capital shortfall that better explains the delayed supplier payments described in the case than the company's own explanation of 'administrative delay.'"

Common Mistakes

#	Mistake	Why It Weakens the Case Study
1	Retelling the case chronologically instead of analysing it thematically	Produces description rather than genuine analysis
2	Treating symptoms as root causes	Leads to recommendations that address surface issues rather than real drivers
3	Applying theory in general terms without integrating case evidence	Fails to show the theory actually explains this specific case
4	Listing many frameworks superficially rather than applying few in depth	Spreads analysis too thinly to be genuinely insightful
5	Writing recommendations that are too vague to action	Fails to demonstrate practical, evidence-based judgement
6	Presenting only one option without evaluating alternatives	Misses the comparative evaluation markers specifically look for
7	Ignoring stakeholder perspectives that complicate a simple narrative	Oversimplifies a case that likely involves competing interests
8	Failing to build an issue tree before writing	Risks addressing issues in whatever order the case presents them, not by importance
9	Overlong background/situation sections	Uses space better spent on analysis and evaluation

#	Mistake	Why It Weakens the Case Study
10	Under-using quantitative evidence from the case	Weakens the specificity and credibility of your analysis
11	Assuming missing information rather than acknowledging the gap	Overstates the certainty your analysis can actually support
12	Failing to connect recommendations back to specific root causes	Leaves recommendations feeling disconnected from your own analysis
13	Writing a "theory section" separate from a "case facts section"	Analysis requires the two to be integrated throughout, not siloed
14	Not evaluating recommendations against feasibility, cost, or risk	Misses the practical judgement a case study specifically tests
15	Overusing hedging language instead of reaching a clear judgement	Undermines the confidence of your final analysis and recommendations
16	Failing to prioritise recommendations when there are several	Leaves the reader unclear which action matters most
17	Not acknowledging the limitations of your own analysis	Can read as overconfident given the inherent limits of case-based evidence
18	Copying frameworks directly from lecture slides without adapting them to the case	Signals mechanical application rather than genuine critical thinking
19	Failing to check the specific command words in your assignment brief	Risks missing an explicitly required element (e.g. "recommend a course of action")
20	Treating every stakeholder's interests as equally weighted without justification	Misses opportunities to show nuanced judgement about competing priorities
21	Writing an issue tree with too many top-level issues	Diffuses focus; 2–4 key issues is usually more effective than 6 or more
22	Failing to distinguish correlation from causation in case evidence	A common and serious analytical error across disciplines
23	Not referencing academic sources to support theoretical frameworks used	Weakens the academic credibility of your analysis
24		

#	Mistake	Why It Weakens the Case Study
	Writing the conclusion as a simple restatement of the introduction	Misses the chance to synthesise the analysis into a clear final judgement
25	Failing to revisit the issue tree once analysis reveals new insights	The tree built at the planning stage may need refining as understanding deepens
26	Assuming a single "correct" answer exists	Most case studies reward well-justified reasoning over a specific predicted answer

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Treating the case study as a puzzle with one hidden correct answer to find, rather than as an open analytical exercise rewarding well-evidenced, well-reasoned judgement — even where reasonable people might disagree on the best course of action.

Case Study Checklist

Printable Case Study Checklist

- ☐ I have built an issue tree distinguishing symptoms from root causes, each anchored to case evidence
- ☐ I have chosen theoretical frameworks that genuinely fit the issues identified, rather than every framework covered in the module
- ☐ My analysis integrates theory and case evidence together in the same paragraphs, not in separate sections
- ☐ I have evaluated at least two realistic options against clear criteria (feasibility, cost, risk, timeframe)
- ☐ My recommendations are specific, resourced, timed, and clearly linked to root causes
- ☐ I have prioritised my recommendations where there are several
- ☐ I have acknowledged the limitations of my analysis given the information available
- ☐ My background/situation section is brief, saving space for genuine analysis

- ☐ I have checked my assignment brief for specific required elements or command words

Case Study Templates

Standard Business Case Study Template

- ☐ Introduction: purpose, scope, structure
- ☐ Background: brief situation summary
- ☐ Issue identification: issue tree of core problems and root causes
- ☐ Theoretical framework: 2–3 relevant models introduced
- ☐ Analysis: theory applied to evidence, issue by issue
- ☐ Options evaluation: at least two alternatives compared
- ☐ Recommendations: specific, prioritised, justified actions
- ☐ Conclusion: overall judgement and next steps

SWOT-Based Case Study Template

- ☐ Introduction and background
- ☐ SWOT analysis: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, each with evidence
- ☐ Synthesis: which factors are most significant, and why
- ☐ Strategic options evaluated against SWOT findings
- ☐ Recommendations directly linked to specific SWOT factors

Clinical/Nursing Case Study Template (Gibbs' Cycle)

- ☐ Description: what happened, briefly and factually
- ☐ Feelings: your own or the involved practitioner's response
- ☐ Evaluation: what went well and what didn't
- ☐ Analysis: applying relevant clinical or communication frameworks
- ☐ Conclusion: what should have happened differently

- ☐ Action plan: specific steps for future practice

Legal Problem-Style Case Study Template (IRAC)

- ☐ Issue: the specific legal question(s) raised by the facts
- ☐ Rule: the relevant legal principle or precedent
- ☐ Application: applying the rule to the specific facts of the case
- ☐ Conclusion: a reasoned legal judgement on the issue

Comparative Multiple-Case Study Template

- ☐ Introduction: rationale for comparing these specific cases
- ☐ Case 1 summary and issue tree
- ☐ Case 2 summary and issue tree
- ☐ Cross-case analysis: patterns, contrasts, and their significance
- ☐ Conclusion: what the comparison reveals that a single case could not

Need feedback on your case study before submission? Our UK academic tutors can review your structure, theory application, evidence use, and referencing to help you strengthen your work.

Practice Exercises

Exercise 1 — The issue tree test

- ☐ State your case's core problem in a single sentence
- ☐ List 2–4 key issues, then drill down to at least one root cause per issue
- ☐ Check each root cause is anchored to specific case evidence, not assumption

Exercise 2 — The "skim test"

- ☐ Read each analysis paragraph and ask whether it could have been written by someone who only skimmed the case
- ☐ Add explicit theory application and evaluation wherever the answer is yes

Exercise 3 — Options comparison

- ☐ List at least two realistic options for addressing your core problem
- ☐ Evaluate each against feasibility, cost, timeframe, and risk
- ☐ Justify your final recommendation by reference to this comparison

Exercise 4 — Recommendation specificity check

- ☐ Read each recommendation and check it states what should happen, by whom, and roughly when
- ☐ Revise any recommendation vague enough to apply to a different organisation or scenario unchanged

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is a case study assignment? An assignment that presents a real or realistic scenario and asks you to analyse it using relevant theory, identify core issues, evaluate options, and recommend a justified course of action.

2. What's the biggest mistake students make in case studies? Retelling the case's facts descriptively rather than genuinely analysing them using theory and evidence — the most common feedback across UK case study assignments.

3. What is an issue tree? A way of breaking a case's core problem down into key issues, then root causes, then supporting evidence, distinguishing surface symptoms from underlying drivers.

4. How many issues should my issue tree have? Typically 2–4 key issues works best — too many diffuses focus, while too few may oversimplify a genuinely multi-factor problem.

5. How do I choose which theoretical framework to apply? Select frameworks that genuinely fit the issues identified in your issue tree, rather than applying every framework covered in your module regardless of relevance.

6. How many frameworks should I use? There's no fixed number, but two or three frameworks applied with real depth typically score higher than five applied superficially.

7. What's the difference between a symptom and a root cause? A symptom is an observable sign something is wrong (declining sales); a root cause is the underlying driver of that symptom (weak digital marketing relative to competitors).

8. Should I summarise the whole case in my introduction? No — keep your background/situation section brief and factual, saving detailed evidence for your analysis section where it can be properly evaluated.

9. How do I know if my analysis is deep enough? Check whether each paragraph integrates theory and specific case evidence together — if a paragraph reads as pure theory or pure case description, it needs further development.

10. Should I always recommend just one course of action? Not necessarily — some case studies expect a single clear recommendation, others expect several prioritised recommendations. Check your assignment brief.

11. How specific should my recommendations be? Specific enough to state what should happen, roughly by whom, and within what timeframe — vague recommendations rarely score well.

12. Do I need to evaluate alternative options, or just present my recommendation? Evaluating at least one credible alternative, even briefly, demonstrates the comparative judgement markers specifically reward.

13. What's IRAC and when should I use it? Issue, Rule, Application, Conclusion — a structure commonly used for legal problem-style case studies to apply legal principles to specific facts.

14. What's Gibbs' Reflective Cycle and when is it relevant? A six-stage reflective framework (description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, action plan) commonly used in nursing and healthcare case studies.

15. Can I use SWOT and PESTLE together in the same case study? Yes, where both add genuine value — PESTLE for external context, SWOT for organisational-specific factors — though avoid using both if one alone sufficiently addresses your issues.

16. How do I handle missing information in a case? Acknowledge the gap explicitly rather than assuming details not provided, and note how this limits the certainty of your conclusions.

17. Should I write in first person in a case study? This depends on your discipline and assignment type — reflective case studies (e.g. nursing) often use first person, while business case studies typically favour a more impersonal register.

18. How long should my background/situation section be? Proportionately short — enough to orient the reader, without duplicating the level of detail that belongs in your analysis section.

19. What's the difference between a teaching case and a research case? A teaching case is designed to illustrate specific theory clearly; a research case explores a genuinely open question without a predetermined "intended" theoretical fit.

20. How do I structure a comparative case study across two cases? Analyse each case individually first, then add a cross-case analysis section identifying patterns, contrasts, and what the comparison reveals that a single case couldn't.

21. Is there one "correct" answer to a case study? Rarely — most case studies reward well-evidenced, well-reasoned judgement, even where different students might reasonably reach different conclusions.

22. How do I avoid writing a purely descriptive case study? Build an issue tree before writing, and check that every analysis paragraph integrates theory and evidence together rather than presenting either alone.

23. What evidence should I prioritise from the case? Quantitative evidence (figures, data, statistics) and specific quotations or details that directly support your issue tree tend to carry the most analytical weight.

24. How do I write a strong case study conclusion? Summarise your overall analytical judgement briefly, avoid introducing new evidence, and reaffirm your key recommendation(s) without repeating your introduction verbatim.

25. Should I reference academic sources in a case study, or just apply frameworks? Both — referencing the academic literature behind your chosen frameworks strengthens the credibility and rigour of your analysis.

26. How do I handle a case with conflicting stakeholder interests? Acknowledge the conflict explicitly, and justify how your recommendation balances or prioritises these interests rather than ignoring the tension.

27. What if my analysis suggests the case's "obvious" problem isn't the real issue? This is often exactly the kind of insight markers reward — provided your issue tree and evidence genuinely support the reinterpretation.

28. How do I make my recommendations feel connected to my analysis rather than generic? Explicitly reference the specific root cause each recommendation addresses, rather than presenting recommendations as a standalone list.

29. Should I include a risk assessment for my recommendations? Briefly noting key risks and how they might be mitigated strengthens your recommendations and demonstrates practical judgement.

30. How detailed should my theoretical framework section be? Detailed enough to show you understand the framework, but the bulk of your marks come from application in the analysis section, not from framework description alone.

31. Can I disagree with the case's own stated problem? Yes, provided your issue tree and evidence support a different diagnosis — this can demonstrate stronger critical thinking than simply accepting the case's framing at face value.

32. How do I prioritise multiple recommendations? Order them by expected impact, feasibility, or urgency, and briefly justify this ordering rather than leaving priority unstated.

33. What's the fastest way to improve a purely descriptive case study draft? Build an issue tree retrospectively from your draft, then rewrite each section to integrate the relevant framework and root cause explicitly.

34. How do case studies differ between essay-based and report-based formats?

Essay-based case studies typically use continuous prose; report-based case studies often use headed sections, sometimes with more concise, structured writing throughout.

35. Should I include limitations of my own analysis? Yes — briefly noting what your analysis couldn't fully resolve, given the information available, demonstrates the kind of critical self-awareness higher grade bands reward.

Key Takeaways

- A case study is analysed, not just summarised — the most common weakness is descriptive retelling rather than genuine theory application.
 - Build an issue tree before writing: core problem, key issues, root causes, and supporting evidence.
 - Choose theoretical frameworks that genuinely fit your issues, and apply fewer frameworks with real depth rather than many superficially.
 - Integrate theory and case evidence together in the same paragraphs, not in separate sections.
 - Evaluate at least one realistic alternative option before recommending a specific course of action.
 - Recommendations should be specific, resourced, timed, and clearly traceable back to root causes.
 - Acknowledge the limitations of your analysis given the information the case actually provides.
 - The fastest fix for a weak case study is almost always the same: stop describing the case, and start analysing it.
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Conclusion

A strong case study demonstrates something markers can't get from a textbook alone: the ability to take real, sometimes messy evidence and apply theory to make sense of it, evaluate realistic options, and reach a specific, justified recommendation. Build your issue tree before you start writing, choose frameworks that genuinely fit the issues you've

identified, and make sure every paragraph of analysis integrates theory and case evidence together rather than treating them separately. The fastest way to strengthen a weak case study is always the same: stop retelling the scenario, and start explaining what it actually means.

Need feedback on your case study before submission? Our UK academic tutors can review your structure, theory application, evidence use, and referencing to help you strengthen your work before you submit.

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