

How to Write a Case Study for the *American Archivist*

As journal of record for the Society of American Archivists, the *American Archivist* provides a forum for discussion of trends and issues in archival theory and practice both in the United States and abroad. *American Archivist* defines case studies as “analytical reports of projects or activities that take place in a specific setting and offer the basis for emulation or comparison in other settings.” Case studies provide opportunities to report on the application of theory to practice or to discuss developments or experiments in practice of interest to many archival institutions. Thus, a case study report is much more than a set of anecdotes describing “this is how we did it.” It identifies how the project or activity adds to the corpus of archival literature regarding a particular issue or scenario. Although the case study itself may be specific or narrow, the context of the issue involved and the implications it holds for practice apply to a broad audience. Readers want to understand the context and see how to generalize the specific case in a wide variety of circumstances.

A case study provides a means of understanding particular social phenomenon such as an event, activity, or project in its natural setting or context. (Yin, 1994). Rich descriptions of specific cases allow us to understand complex social phenomenon and interaction within a particular context. A case study can also be used as a teaching tool to provide insight into specific situations and provide a framework for discussion.

Although we do not specify a template for a case study report in the *American Archivist*, we suggest that a case study contain the following sections:

1. Identify or establish the problem or issue being addressed — i.e., this is a case study on outreach in literary archives, or a case study of digital project collaboration across state institutions, or a case study on implementing More Product, Less Process (MPLP) in a historical society.
2. Provide context for the specific problem by discussing relevant literature, which may come from fields such as archives, library and information science, related disciplines, or subject matter specialties. Pay particular attention to identifying the knowledge gap that might be partly filled through lessons learned in the case study.
3. Present the case(s). This can vary between case studies — some case studies use a standard research method of data gathering and analysis, others employ a narrative approach describing how the author dealt with the situation in question. Either may be suitable as long as the other required elements create a case study that provides for contextualization and generalization.

4. Discuss and analyze the case(s). In your discussion, be candid in considering both the pros and cons of the approach(s) taken and in noting what could have been improved in the course of the activity. Discuss lessons learned, unresolved issues, unsuccessful strategies, next steps, and future plans. Learning from both successes and failures is one of the most beneficial aspects of the case study as a genre of research.
5. Conclude by describing the implications of the case for generalized practice, emphasizing the specific points or most significant lessons learned during the episode being described, and *where appropriate*, a discussion of additional research needed regarding this issue.

See the [Editorial Policy](#) for required elements in formatting the manuscript in “Submitting Manuscripts.” Note especially that the *American Archivist* uses the latest version of [Chicago Manual of Style](#) as the standard for style and footnote format. All articles must be accompanied by a 100-word abstract.

For examples of the case study as a method in archival literature see:

Blouin, Francis X. “[The Relevance of the Case Study Method to Archival Education and Training](#),” *American Archivist* 41 (1978): 37–44.

Kesner, Richard M. “[Employing the Case Study Method in the Teaching of Automated Records and Techniques to Archivists](#),” *American Archivist* 56 (1993): 522–31.

References

Yin, Robert K. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1994.