Case Study, Scenario, Story: Same Difference?

It happened one day...

Initial Client Brief: *"Could you develop a Case Study to support this content"?*

First Round Client Review: *"Hmmm. It's a start, but I think you should render this Scenario in the form of a first person narrative. Let's also tone down the facts a bit. And, perhaps you could make it a little more immersive and engaging?"*

Instructional Designer: *"What **does** the client want????? I thought I wrote a Case Study. All that research and struggle to get the content right is wasted. Worse still my project is going to overrun the planned effort."*

Could it have been avoided?

The term Case Study is often used loosely and interchangeably with the terms scenario and story-based learning. This often causes a lot of confusion. Some may argue "what's in name", but others, especially those who diligently practice the craft of instructional design, will empathize with me. Many unnecessary debates, discussions and re-scripting happen due to the lack of a common understanding of these terms. What if we could devise a method to elicit *exactly* what the client desires? But, is it possible to cut down the iterations and figure this out up-front? Well, we can definitely make an effort. Let's see how.

Case Study

Case studies are used to teach how knowledge is to be applied in real-world situations, and the consequences one could face while doing so. They are popularly used in higher education, especially in business schools, law schools, and medical schools. In recent years, case studies have become a popular way to train corporate professionals too.

A Case Study is often **lengthy** addressing all the dimensions of the topic under study. It is **high on facts**, and is mostly supported with **actual data and figures.** Rarely does it include any exaggerated or extraneous content. In short, it is a detailed description of a situation with accompanying data to analyze. Typically, it will include the following elements:

- A description of a problem and its context
- A dilemma that is to be resolved, or a decision to be taken
- Supporting data - Data tables, exhibits, interviews, supporting documents and so on

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Scenario

On the other hand, a scenario is normally **shorter** than a Case Study. It is a **fictionalized account of a situation** set in realistic settings. The context and environment is the real-world workplace, but the situation could be made up. As in a Case Study, scenarios can pose a dilemma to be resolved by the learner, a decision to be taken or a problem to be solved. However, scenarios usually do not have too much data or information to be analyzed. Typically, scenarios will include the following elements:

- A description of a problem and its context (real-world/workplace)
- A fictionalized account of a dilemma that is to be resolved, or a decision to be taken
- Supported by characters, dialogues and conversations

Story

Stories are great way to learn. Especially, if you are addressing the affective domain. The high emotional content in stories ensures high learning impact. The emotional content is what makes a story different from a case study or a scenario. This is added by way of a plot, theme, dialogues or even characterization. This is why stories stay with people much longer than facts or statistics – the emotional content gives meaning and context to information. Typically, a story used for teaching will include the following elements:

- High emotional content
- Writing style is exaggerated for immersion and impact
- Presence of fictional elements is a must – plot/theme, characters, dialogues and context

Case Study|Scenario|Story: A Comparison

	Length	Context & Settings	Facts, Figures & Data	Fictionalized Elements
Case Study	Long	Real	Yes	Not usually
Scenario	Short	Real	May be present; but not mandatory	Yes
Story	Can be short or long	Can be real or fictional	No	Yes

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Is your learning solution going to involve a case-study, a story or a scenario? Then, you need to plan for it up front. To assign the right resource, (and thereby estimate the right effort) and avoid rework/effort overruns, check out the following resource.

Case Study, Story, Scenario: Resource Allocation Guide