

FEBRUARY 28th—PROBLEM STATEMENT DUE

The Assignment: Choose and outline a case of knowledge in use

The case analysis assignment provides you an opportunity to analyze a case of knowledge in use or abuse (or both, as the case may be)—something you care about and want to understand in greater depth, using selected concepts from the course. *MIT students should link this assignment to the required first-year research paper.*

The assignment is in two (2) parts:

1. A **problem statement** of no more than 500 words due at 5PM on February 28th on the course website. After 5PM (and some time before the next class meeting), ***you should skim your colleagues' posted problem statements and make any comments you can on their work***; and
2. An **analytic paper** of no more than 2,500 to 4,000 words, due online 5PM on May 18th, a few days after our final class session.

This first set of instructions helps you choose a case and think about the assignment as a whole, not just write the problem statement (“set the problem clearly”).

Preparing your Problem Statement

Format: No more than 500 words, double-spaced, show word count at end of document.

As we've already discussed, setting up problems well is a key part of being able to solve them, and *how* we set them up does much to determine how we go about the solving. Many bad solutions or roadblocks in thinking can be traced to the failure to set up a problem well or, at minimum, to consider alternatives for setting up a thorny problem, and this includes intellectual problems. Likewise, the most effective written cases tend to grow out of clear initial outlines or draft versions that give us room to discover what's essential, interesting, worth learning about (before you plunge into the details).

The first step in this assignment, therefore, is your preparation of a concise, well-framed problem statement that outlines your case and what the problem(s) are at its core *that relate to our core concepts*.

A few of the big questions for you to consider early on are: What makes a good case topic? And what constitutes a problem(s) worth analyzing?

A. Choosing a Real-world Case

In general, you should choose a “situation”—a defined set of parties, issues, and events in a setting (context)—that ...

- **You are motivated to understand well and willing to re-think carefully**, not one about which your strong views will tempt you to merely append elaborate arguments to conclusions you have already drawn. Events in which you have been personally involved may score high on the “motivation” dimension but make it hard for you to be objective about other parties’ interests and motives. Given the practical value of such personal case development, though, I do not want to discourage you outright from writing up a plot in which you are an actor/actress.
- **Is either “resolved”** (in that some key outcome was reached) **but not well understood OR not yet resolved** (thus presenting major, identifiable decision challenges ahead for the parties involved).
- **Is sufficiently complex to warrant close analysis.** If you can immediately think of 1-2 very satisfying explanations of what went on, and feel that everyone would agree on them, you may not have the right case for analysis.
- **Involves knowledge in use in some important, if puzzling, way.** The use of research versus other forms of knowledge (“different forms of expertise”) would be especially appropriate. The nature of practitioner knowledge or user/client knowledge, which might be overlooked by researchers and decisionmakers in the problem area, would also be fair game. The blending of various forms of knowledge could certainly be worth analyzing.
- **Lends itself to analyzing data that you can acquire fairly quickly.** That is, the case you define would afford you access to news stories and other online reportage, published articles or books or parts of books, accessible phone interviews or other readily obtainable data. Collecting raw data from key informants can add a great deal, but it’s not required and not expected. Plan to rely on secondary sources for the most part or your own knowledge of a situation.

B. Some Past Examples

See the sample(s) posted online (under “Materials” on the course website). Note that the samples didn’t respond to exactly the same expectations and guidance (this document), but the premise was identical: Tell us about a case you want to analyze in depth, and tell us which course concepts you think you should use.

Some students have chosen to analyze knowledge in use in policymaking settings, others practice stories and practitioner learning (“in the trenches”). Some have considered long-run historical developments and some specific decision windows or other critical episodes.

C. Organizing and writing your problem statement

Be clear but concise.

(perhaps 200 words) Describe what is (or was) at issue and for whom, why the key issue(s) was important, and (briefly) why it is of interest to you. One useful model is the stakeholder model: key *players*, the *issues* at stake, and the *interests* those players seem to have in those issues—all in brief. If there are many players and issues, pick some core that seems most important—i.e., the players and issues that can make or break a significant resolution.

(perhaps 50-75 words) How would you identify the key *problem* at the heart of this case, in a sentence? **That is, what is the interesting knowledge-in-use question in terms of the course?** What are 1-2 alternative ways to frame that problem?

(perhaps 200-225 words) What sort of learning are you hoping for, and what primary *course concepts*, whether covered to date or lying ahead, seem most applicable to your case?

There are no wrong answers to the last question, but try to focus your statement of the analysis that lies ahead, even if you later change course dramatically. A fascinating situation and a pile of concerns (on your part) do not a focus make. So tell us what concepts seem *most* useful as you think about what it will take to gain better understanding of the complex real-world issues involved.

If you wish to outline a second case option, that's OK, but stick to the 500-word limit for each, and try to outline what you see as the essence, the pros, and the cons of each case choice. Which is more amenable to good treatment using our course concepts? On which can you get better data in the time available? Etc.

Post your statement to the Homework section of the course website.

After 5PM on submission day, you should skim the problem statements your classmates have posted. The faculty will provide you feedback within about a week.

Grading and Feedback

We will not grade this first part of the assignment, but we will provide feedback on it to help you focus the next stage of your work, which may include choosing a new case or taking a radically different approach to your first choice.

Our commitment to you includes providing feedback that is candid, clear, and as detailed as possible. In return, we ask you to meet professional standards—

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to be organized, to submit work on time, to proofread and spell check your work, and to observe word-count limits and other requirements.