Guidelines For Vignettes And Case Studies

Chapter-opening material, like vignettes or case studies, is the first thing a student sees when they read a chapter. This sets the stage for the rest of the material and ultimately, the rest of the text. Given how visible these features are, they are a key part of making a text more diverse and inclusive.

The sources for these features vary depending on discipline and approach. Some texts focus on real stories of individuals, situations, or organizations, while others have fictional scenarios. Typically, a text is consistent in having all-fictional or all-real case studies/vignettes. These features also vary in whether they highlight a success story (e.g., a case study about a company that prioritizes sustainability) or demonstrate a problem that is relevant to the chapter (e.g., a vignette about working with clients who are unhoused).

Since these features are so similar, our guidelines focus less on distinctions between case studies and vignettes and more on guidelines for the type of story represented and the nature of the situation that is being described.

Best Practices

Stick to the (Relevant) Facts

Consider a case study that profiles Oprah Winfrey and her accomplishments as a businesswoman. This case study would likely discuss the barriers she broke as a Black woman in entertainment, which would be important context. However, if that case study went one step further and discussed her appearance (e.g., her struggles with her weight) or her personal relationships (e.g., the fact that she is not married, despite being with the same partner for over 30 years), it may reveal biases regarding people’s bodies and relationship statuses. These details would be considered unnecessary and could negatively affect how readers perceive Winfrey or the text itself.

There’s no easy answer here; each vignette or case study needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis. When writing or reviewing these features, consider the following: Does the case study stick to the facts? If not, what purpose do these details serve? Is it possible that these details could skew the readers’ opinion of the people in the case study? Does this story perpetuate any stereotypes?
Consider the Impact of Traumatic Stories

We often use case studies and vignettes as a “hook” to get students interested in the chapter topic. In some disciplines, this may result in stories about traumatic events and situations that can be triggering for some students. Consider the impact such traumatic stories might have and evaluate which details verge on sensationalism.

For example, a chapter on criminal justice might have an opening vignette about police violence against people of color. This is a story that should be told, but some details may be traumatizing for students of color. It’s best to remain neutral and only relay the basic facts of a situation. Vignettes about the effects of racism don’t need additional details or commentary to prove that these are hateful, terrifying situations. Avoid unnecessary descriptions about the pain a shooting victim likely experienced or what their last few moments were like; this could be seen as mining another group’s trauma or pain in order to engage readers.

When vignettes/case studies have emotional, sensitive storylines, consider the following: How many vignettes/case studies in the book feature stories that could be considered traumatic? Whose trauma is being depicted? What purpose does this story serve? Are there any unnecessary details? Is there another way we could frame the issue?

Avoid Label Dumping

Imagine that you’ve worked to develop a list of case studies/vignettes that are inclusive of systemically marginalized groups. This is a great first step. However, we may try to show that the people in these case studies are “diverse” in ways that are clunky and unnatural. It’s not enough to include people who are part of one or multiple marginalized groups. We must consider how diverse subjects are described and whether those descriptions read as surface-level attempts to incorporate DEI.

For example, it is common (especially in fictional scenarios) for people to be described in the following way: “Kai is a 26-year-old bisexual immigrant from Japan who teaches geometry at a high school.” This is an example of label dumping. Kai’s age, ethnicity, immigration status, AND sexual orientation are all mentioned. If an author included this in a chapter, it would be clear that they were attempting to represent multiple marginalized communities, but they would be doing so in a way that could be read as inauthentic.

If the case study doesn’t discuss Kai’s romantic/sexual relationships or his experience as a bisexual man, should his bisexuality be mentioned from the outset? Probably not. These descriptors should only be mentioned if the case study engages in a meaningful way with that aspect of his identity.

An alternative to label-dumping is to highlight a person’s identity through the actions or details of a case. Perhaps Kai is having a difficult time at work because his ex-girlfriend is a substitute teacher who teaches at his high school, and he discusses this issue with his boyfriend. This would be a more subtle way of highlighting Kai’s bisexuality without specifically saying, “Kai is bisexual.” Not only is this a more natural way of representing diversity, it’s also better writing.
When describing the subjects of a case study, consider the following: Could this read as label dumping? Are all of these descriptors necessary? How could we portray someone’s race, immigration status, sexual orientation, etc. without using labels?

**Highlight Individuals’ Unique Perspectives**

Similarly to label dumping, it is also common to include individuals from marginalized groups but not engage with their background or perspective in a meaningful way. This would be considered a surface-level attempt at diversity and inclusion, as well. If, for example, the events of a case study would remain the same regardless of if it focused on a Black trans man or a white cis woman, we should reconsider the details of the case.

This is not to say that a case study should solely be about a person’s race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. There should be vignettes featuring marginalized people where their identity is not the main focus. For example, not every case about a person of color should focus on their race. White, cisgender, and/or straight individuals are able to exist in the world without their race, gender, or sexual orientation being the focus of everything they do. People from marginalized groups should be given the same treatment.

However, you should always consider how someone’s perspective may impact what is said and done in a case study. Consider a vignette about a state senator who works with an environmental group to develop a bill to curb carbon emissions. That senator might have different ideas about how aggressive that legislation should be based on his socioeconomic status. If he grew up in a lower-income neighborhood, he might have been more affected by climate change than if he grew up in a middle-class neighborhood. His socioeconomic status would not be the focus of the case, but it could affect how he approached this issue.

Moving forward, the following should be considered: What unique perspective might this character have based on their background? Would it affect the sequence of events in the case? Am I writing from my own perspective? How can I consider someone else’s perspective? What can I do to highlight how someone’s identity benefited them in this scenario?

**Find a Balance between Accurate and Equitable Representation**

As noted earlier, vignettes and case studies are extremely visible. Since chapters often begin with these features, they are an obvious way to make a text more inclusive and representative of different groups. You should not only consider representation on the chapter level, but across the entire book. A case study about a person of color, a person with a disability, or a person with a low income might be a great start, but it can be easily overlooked if the rest of the case studies focus on white, middle-class, straight individuals without disabilities.

- Authors should consider which groups have been historically underrepresented and systemically marginalized while aiming for equitable representation. This may be obvious, but the importance of representation cannot be overstated. A book that
primarily centers some identities over others can have a negative impact on students and instructors. Imagine how an education student from a Latinx background might feel if 12 of 15 case studies in a text were focused exclusively on white people, for example.

- At the same time, you should also aim for accurate representation regarding a profession or field. This is where data can help you determine how often certain groups should be represented. Consider a textbook on management that has 11 case studies focusing on men and 4 focusing on women in its first edition. This author might suggest revising this text so that there are 8 case studies focusing on women and 7 focusing on men. While this would result in more equitable representation, it may not be realistic given what we know about gender in the workplace.

In this situation, we should adjust the ratio of men to women for accuracy while also striving to represent groups that have been historically underrepresented. We could start by looking for data that gives more insight into gender demographics in the workplace. Let's say there is a national study that found that 67% of managers are men and 33% are women. If we adjusted the case studies for the text based on this data, we would have 10 case studies with men and 5 case studies with women. This would be accurate, but would it be equitable? If we went one step further and included 8 case studies with cis men, 1 case study with a trans man, and 6 case studies with cis women, this would strike a better balance between accurate and equitable representation. The descriptions or names used for these characters could also reflect diverse backgrounds.

Finding this balance can be more difficult depending on the discipline and the structural barriers in place. For example, a criminal justice text may have more case studies with Black people affected by the criminal justice system than white people. This may be more accurate, but, without more context, might also overlook systems that perpetuate inequality within the criminal justice system.

When considering representation across your case studies, consider the following: What do these vignettes tell students about this discipline or field? Could these stories isolate certain students? Is one group represented more than other groups? If so, does this match demographics in the field? How can I strive for better representation in this text?

### Consider Placement

Some texts may have both case studies and vignettes. If a text has both features, it’s important to consider how the placement of these elements may affect students. For example, are certain groups represented more in vignettes than in the case studies? This may be a problem, considering vignettes are often more visible than case studies.

Imagine the impact of a criminal justice book where the vignettes predominantly feature Black men committing violent crimes, while the case studies predominantly feature white men committing violent crimes. Since the vignettes open the chapter, they might perpetuate
the idea that Black men are more violent than white men. If a student consistently sees negative portrayals of a certain group at the beginning of each chapter, they may distance themselves from rest of the material in the chapter, and it may be too late to remedy the situation with more balanced representation in later sections. It's critical that more visible sections feature equal representation.

Ask yourself: Are certain groups represented more in vignettes than in case studies? Is one group painted in a more negative way than another group? If so, why is that? What can this text do to combat that portrayal?

Be Mindful of Which Groups Are Framed as “Problems”

As mentioned earlier, these features typically focus on success stories or problem scenarios. When writing problem scenarios, carefully consider which stories you’re representing and how they are framing the situation. Marginalized groups should not be overrepresented in these scenarios, since this could be perceived as biased or as perpetuating harmful stereotypes. For example, if a text has multiple new case studies about people of color, this might seem like a step in the right direction. However, these attempts at representation would be overshadowed if these case studies focused on Black or Indigenous people of color who were unhoused, struggling with addiction, or were involved in the criminal justice system.

In addition, consider what problems are represented in each scenario. Does the case study treat someone’s identity as a barrier or a problem? When discussing someone’s life circumstances, does the case study place blame on that individual or does it address the larger structures that contributed to this situation? Many of our case studies focus on issues that can be tied back to larger societal issues, such as racism, sexism, transphobia, ableism, classism, etc. If a text doesn’t acknowledge how these systems impact the people represented in the case, it may perpetuate the idea that an individual is completely at fault for whatever situation they’re facing.

Avoid Stereotypes

Case studies and vignettes should also try to avoid stereotypes. This can be easier with fictional stories since they don’t rely on someone’s real lived experience. After outlining topics/subjects for case studies, review how marginalized groups are represented throughout all the case studies. For example, are people from certain cultures depicted as meek while others are depicted as assertive in line with well-known stereotypes? Are women depicted as emotional, while men are depicted as practical? Are certain problems or life experiences only associated with people of a certain race, gender, or socioeconomic status? Think about whether these stories might perpetuate harmful stereotypes and how they can be revised to combat such stereotypes.