

A critical incident is a short description of an even that may be representative of a specific set of behaviors or actions generally undertaken in a specific environment or with an identified group of individuals. Often, a critical incident provides the theme for a broad discussion of similar behaviors/actions and offers an opportunity to apply theories to situations. It can be especially helpful to instructors to have a series of critical incidents on one topic; i.e. interviewing, process flow, corporate social responsibility.

Critical incidents serve as the foundation for the brief cases that we find in our textbooks. Like full-length cases, they are factual and use real people, real places, and real events. Like full-length cases, they may be disguised, and they require a release from the protagonist. Critical incidents differ from full cases in more than length, however. Critical incidents do not require a decision; instead, they require an analysis or a discussion. They may require a solution, but that is not a requirement of the format.

A case exercise also resembles a case, but is shorter (not as short as a critical incident) and focuses heavily upon an exercise designed to assist students in accessing topical- or process-learning. Instead of appearing in the instructors' manual, the exercise appears following the case itself, as part of the case.

Instructors' Manual

The IM helps the instructor determine how to use the critical incident or exercise within the context of their classroom. Therefore, the IM needs to contain the same kind of material included in the IM for a full-length case – a synopsis, indication of relevant classes/courses/levels of student, topics, learning outcomes, discussion questions and their answers, related theory, teaching strategy, and epilogue (if known). It is likely that the IM will be significantly larger than the critical incident or case exercise, as that is where the scholarly value resides.

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