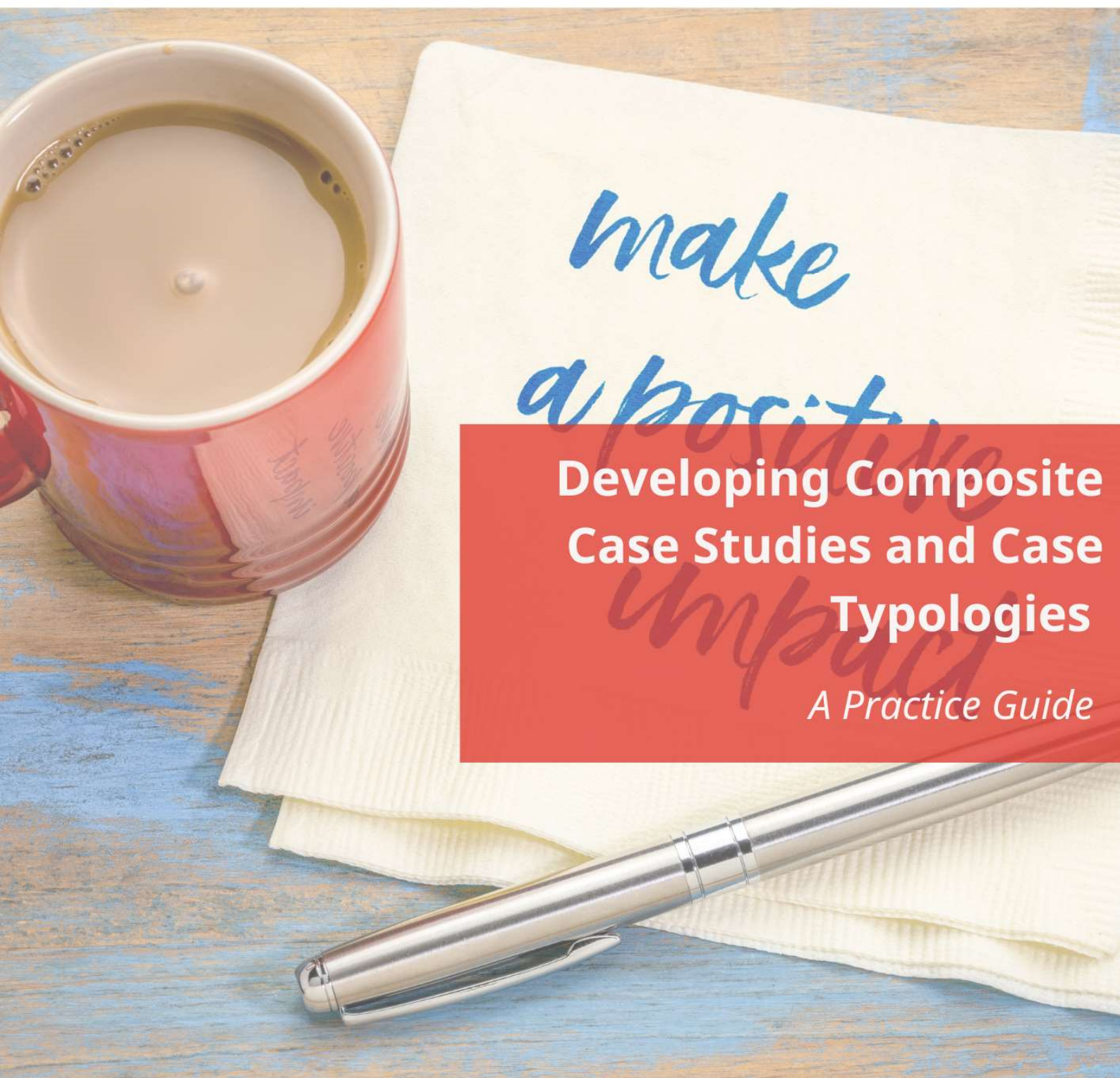




*Make
a positive*

**Developing Composite
Case Studies and Case
Typologies**

A Practice Guide

Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. What are case studies?	4
1.1. A (very) brief look at the literature on case studies	4
2. The Process	5
2.1. About Mary	6
3. Data Sources (what data does Mary have?)	6
4. Step-by-step	7
4.1. The steps	8
Step 1 – Create one case summary from each case	8
Step 2 – Pick the area for the composite cases to develop around	9
Step 3 – Group the cases based on a variable of interest	10
Step 4 – Analyse the cases based on the variable	10
Step 5 – Draft a pen portrait for each group	12
Step 6 – Produce the final composite case studies	14
5. Comparing Cases – typologies	15
6. References	17

How to cite this guide: Community Impact (2026) *Developing Composite Case Studies and Case Typologies: A Practical Guide*.

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1. Introduction

This case study tool is designed to help case workers and practitioners write case studies that are able to inform practice development, and better reflect the difference an intervention makes. It focuses especially on developing what are called ‘*composite*’ case studies based on multiple accounts of impact using routine case records. It is written for organisations that generate high volumes of case data, but do not want to rely on a single young person's story as if it represents the whole intervention.

The process described in this tool is based on the following logic. Instead of selecting one case and writing it up on its own, the practitioner works across a set of comparable cases, reviews the records in a structured way, identifies a recurring pattern, and then produces one composite case study that is grounded in more than one case. This means the final case study is not presented as a literal account of one individual with just a name changed for privacy, but one built from several similar cases, using the available evidence from practice records.

The purpose of this tool is to show the processes required to generate composite cases studies in a practical, step-by-step, way. The aim of the tool is not to produce case studies that stand up to academic scrutiny, but to turn routine practice data such as case notes, assessments, and activity data, into material that is ‘*operationally useful*’ and generalisable enough to support broader claims about how a service tends to work. The sections below break the process into a series of stages that a practitioner can carry out with ordinary records, a spreadsheet, and a bit of dedicated time. At each stage, the tool shows what to do, what to record, and what output should be produced before moving on. Throughout this guide, a 1-to-1 mentoring programme is used as the worked example to demonstrate how the process works.

2. What are case studies?

Charities often use the term case study to mean a short account of one person's experience. That is often acceptable for communications purposes, but it is less useful if the aim is to support broader claims about practice, response, or impact. This toolkit therefore uses the term differently to mean studies developed from multiple service-user journeys, where common challenges and responses to the support provided are brought together into a combined account that supports generalisable claims about the difference it made. For instance, in a mentoring intervention, a composite case study might bring together several similar mentoring journeys in which young people present with comparable needs, respond to the support in similar ways, and show a recognisable pattern of change over time. In this way, composite case studies are case studies constructed from more than one similar case. They can be used to describe recurring patterns such as the types of young people the service works with, what support is provided, how engagement develops, and what kinds of outcomes tend to follow.

Obviously, not all cases can be brought together into one composite study, and different composite studies would be developed from different clusters of similar cases. Those different composites can then be compared more systematically as part of what is called as case study 'typology'.

1.1. A (very) brief look at the literature on case studies

The composite case study approach is well grounded in the case study literature. Academics such as Yin argue that case study should be understood as a research strategy, rather than as a single method or a type of evidence in itself, and also makes clear that case study work can involve more than one case, with cases examined separately and then compared across a wider set (Yin, 1981; Yin, 2003). Gerring similarly defines case study as an intensive study of a unit used to shed light on a broader class of similar units (Gerring, 2004). George and Bennett (2005) are also

useful for supporting the composite case approach because they place strong emphasis on structured comparison across cases as a basis for explanation and theory development. Finally, Bennett and Elman (2006) note the value of typologies within case study work, which is relevant to the wider toolkit series in which composite cases may later be compared more systematically.

This toolkit follows the broad logic set out in above studies, but adapts it for more practical settings. Unlike much of the academic case study literature, which often uses cases to test or build theory, the aim here is more practical: *to describe recurring patterns in delivery and response using routine data*. This difference in purpose is deliberate and shapes the method used in this guide. It uses routine mentoring records as the evidence base, reviews cases one by one, compares them across the wider set, and then produces one composite case study from several similar cases. The method is therefore grounded in case study thinking, but the final product is designed for everyday charity practice.

2. The Process

To show how the composite case method works in practice, we use a fictional practitioner called Mary. Mary is the Chief Executive of Youth Employability, a small community-based charity with four staff and ten volunteers. The organisation delivers a grant-funded 1-to-1 mentoring programme for vulnerable young people referred through the MyEnds programme. Throughout this guide, we follow Mary as she develops an evaluation strategy and uses the composite case method to understand and demonstrate mentoring impact.

2.1. About Mary

Mary's charity, Youth Employability, delivers a 26-week 1-1 mentoring programme for young people. The programme is delivered through weekly one-hour mentoring sessions. Young people are referred into the service, allocated to a mentor, and supported over the course of the programme. As part of delivery, the charity produces and stores routine case material such as referrals, assessments, mentor notes, reviews, attendance records, action plans, and closure summaries.

Mary is using a case study tool to produce a composite case study from the records her organisation already holds. She is not writing up one young person's story as if it represents the whole programme. Instead, she is working across a set of comparable cases and using those records to build one composite case study. In this example, Mary has data from 38 mentoring cases. All 38 come from the same programme model, so they are comparable at a basic level: they are all 1-1 mentoring cases, delivered through the same broad offer, using the same overall structure and record system.

3. Data Sources (what data does Mary have?)

Mary is working with the records that mentoring organisations commonly generate during routine delivery. These records cover the young person's route into mentoring, their needs and risks at the start, what happened during individual sessions, how consistently they attended, the goals agreed with them, how the mentoring relationship developed, and how the case ended.

Some of this information is structured, such as referral details, assessments, action plans, attendance records, outcome measures, and case closure summaries. Other information is recorded through case notes, session summaries, staff reflections, and handover discussions that help explain important events, decisions, disruptions, and

changes during the mentoring journey. Table 1 summarises the main data sources Mary uses across the 38 cases:

Table 1 – Data Sources

Data source	Description
Referral information	Basic referral details, including who referred the young person, when they were referred, and the stated reason for referral.
Initial assessments	Early assessment material setting out the young person's circumstances, needs, risks, and suitability for mentoring.
Presenting needs and risks	The key issues identified at the start of mentoring, including behavioural, emotional, social, safeguarding, or offending-related concerns.
Mentor case notes	Ongoing notes recording what happened during the mentoring journey, including how the relationship developed over time.
Session summaries	Short records of individual mentoring sessions, usually noting what was discussed, what was done, and how the young person responded.
Action plans	Agreed goals, targets, or planned actions developed during mentoring.
Attendance and contact records	Records showing whether sessions took place, were missed, rearranged, or required follow-up contact.
Review notes	Periodic reflections or formal reviews of progress during the mentoring journey.
Outcome measures where available	Any structured outcome data collected during or at the end of mentoring.
Closure summaries	End-point records describing how the case finished, including planned exit or early disengagement.
Short staff reflections, handover notes, or discussions that help explain what happened in the case	Informal but useful contextual notes that clarify key events, disruptions, decisions, or shifts in the case.

This means Mary is not starting from scratch, and she is not relying mainly on retrospective interviews. She is working from the records generated through delivery.

4. Step-by-step

Mary develops composite case studies in five steps. In Step 1, she turns each usable mentoring case into a structured case summary, treating it as a pathway from referral to exit. In Step 2, she places those summaries side by side and compares them using the variables most likely to explain differences across the cases. In Step 3, she groups

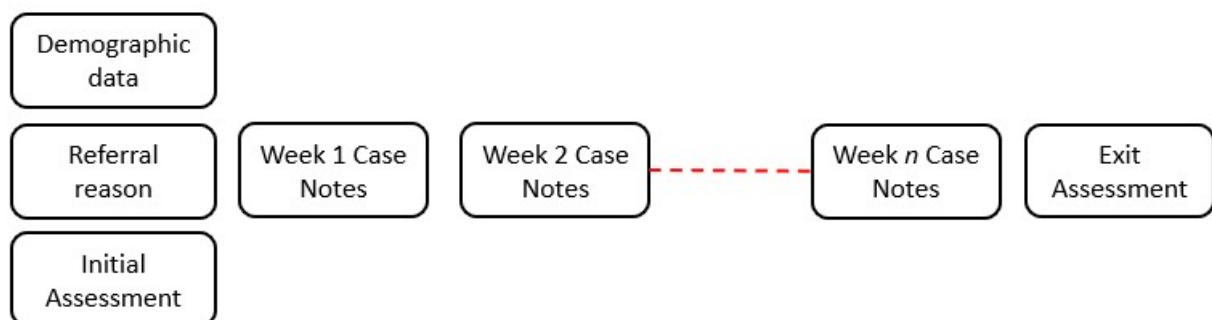
together cases that follow similar pathways. In Step 4, she writes a pen portrait for each group, describing both the common pattern and the variation within it. In Step 5, she turns each pen portrait into a final composite case study.

4.1. The steps

Step 1 – Create one case summary from each case

Mary has a number of sets of case data, however, these are not in a single document and are in different formats such as Word documents, Excel sheets, and assessment forms. The first thing Mary needs to do is to put these into a usable and comparable format. Because this is an example of a mentoring intervention, Mary begins by treating each mentoring case as a pathway running from referral to exit.

Figure 1 – A Case Summary – pathway



Mary has 38 sets of case notes to work from. She opens the organisation's case list or case management system and pulls out every case linked to the 26-week 1-1 mentoring programme. She creates one working list of the 38 cases, checks that each one belongs in the evaluation, and then gathers the records held for each case. These records typically include demographic data, referral reasons, initial client assessment, weekly case notes, and exit assessment. Mary then orders this material (as in Figure 1) so that each case can be read as one structured journey from start to finish, and writes a summary for each usable case so that the cases can later be compared side by side.

Step 2 – Pick the area for the composite cases to develop around

Mary now has comparable data in five areas: who the young people are; why they were referred to mentoring; their needs and circumstances at the initial assessment; what happened during the 26 weeks of mentoring; and their position at exit. Before grouping or analysing the cases, she needs to decide which area the composite case studies will focus on. Figure 2 shows how Mary organises her data to make case comparisons.

Figure 2 – Case comparison

Case 1	Demographic data	Referral reason	Initial Assessment	Week 1-26 Case Notes	Exit Assessment
Case 2	Demographic data	Referral reason	Initial Assessment	Week 1-26 Case Notes	Exit Assessment
Case <i>n</i>	Demographic data	Referral reason	Initial Assessment	Week 1-26 Case Notes	Exit Assessment

There are several possible choices. Mary could develop composite cases around different referral needs, levels of risk, starting points, mentoring outcomes, reasons for disengagement, or patterns of engagement with the mentor. This is simply a selection step: the area chosen will determine how the cases are compared and grouped in the next stages.

Mary's mentoring model is a relational intervention, meaning that its effectiveness depends partly on the quality of the interaction between the mentor and mentee. For this evaluation, Mary wants to understand how differences in that interaction affect the overall effectiveness of the programme. She therefore decides to develop

the composite cases around how young people engage with their mentor over the course of the 26 weeks.

Step 3 – Group the cases based on a variable of interest

Mary has decided to develop the composite cases around mentee engagement. Before she can group the cases, she needs to be clear about what engagement means in practice. In this example, engagement is not simply whether a young person attended. It includes how they responded to contact, how openly they communicated, whether they accepted support, how trust developed, whether they took part in setting goals, and how their relationship with the mentor changed over time.

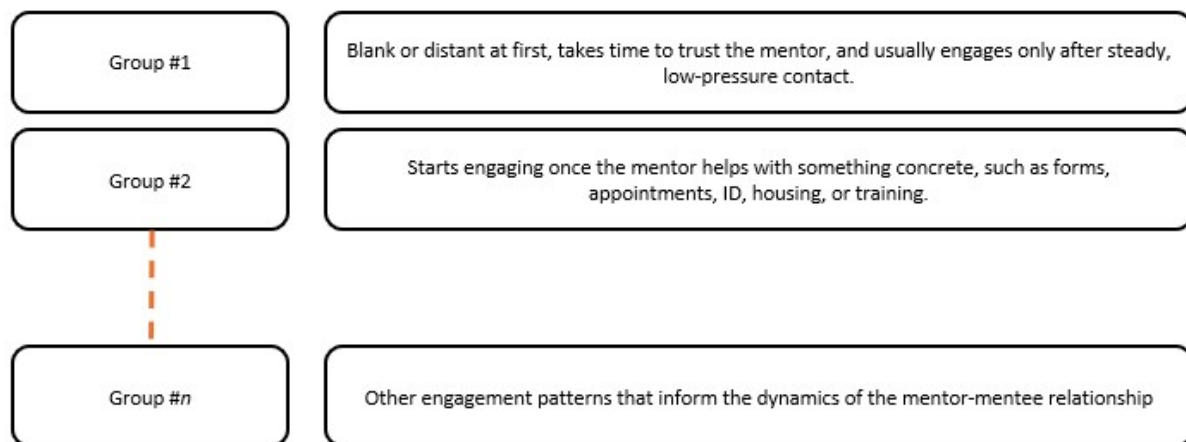
Mary now reads across the 38 case summaries and marks the main engagement pattern in each one. She looks for repeated features, such as young people who take a long time to respond, those who engage once practical help is offered, those who attend but remain guarded, and those who challenge the mentor or resist structured support. She then places together the cases that show broadly similar patterns.

The groups do not need to be perfectly uniform. Young people within the same group may differ in age, risk, referral reason, or outcome. At this stage, the purpose is simply to organise the cases around the recurring ways in which young people engage with mentoring. These groups will form the basis of the later analysis and pen portraits.

Step 4 – Analyse the cases based on the variable

Mary now takes one recurring engagement pattern at a time and tags every case that appears to fit it. As shown in Figure 3, she might tag as Group 1 the cases where the young person is blank or distant at first, takes time to trust the mentor, and begins to engage only after steady, low-pressure contact.

Figure 3 – Emerging Case ‘composites’



She then continues through the remaining cases, looking for other recurring patterns. Cases where engagement begins after the mentor provides practical help might be tagged Group 2. Cases where engagement changes once family issues are discussed might become Group 3. Another group might include young people who attend regularly but remain guarded, while a later group might include those who challenge the mentor or move in and out of engagement. The number and content of the groups come from the case data; they are not decided in advance.

Once the cases have been tagged, Mary analyses each group in more detail. She looks at how engagement begins, how it changes over time, what the mentor does in response, what appears to strengthen or weaken the relationship, and what happens afterwards. She also looks for variation within the group. Some young people may follow the pattern closely, while others may show only part of it or move between patterns during mentoring.

Mary then brings in other, external, information held on those cases. This might include age, referral reason, initial assessment, risk level, offending history, EET status, attendance, length of mentoring, incidents during delivery, reason for exit,

and the position recorded at the exit assessment. Where the data allows, she uses counts and percentages to show what is common across the cases carrying each tag.

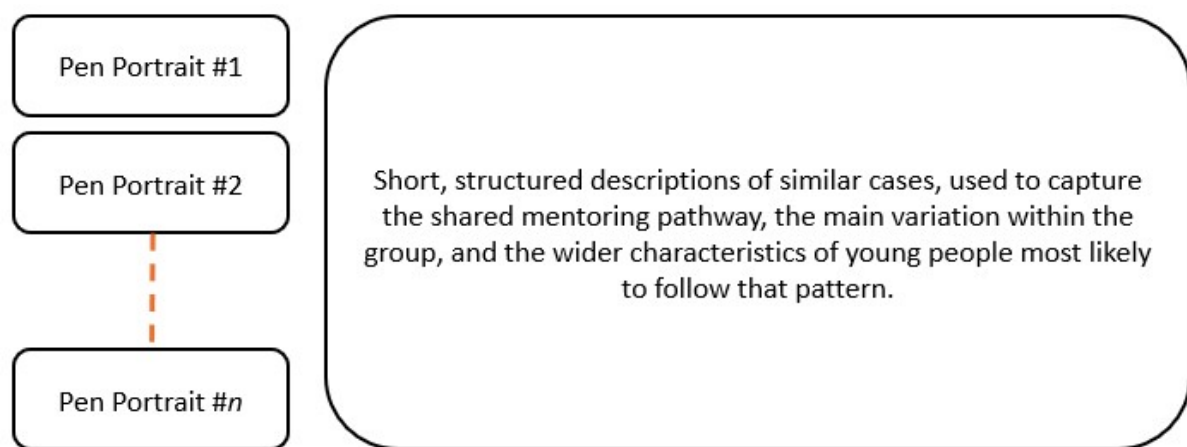
The purpose of the tagging is not to claim that every young person fits neatly into one fixed category. It is a practical way of organising the cases so that Mary can see which engagement patterns recur, how they differ, what kinds of young people are more likely to follow them, and what mentoring responses and outcomes are associated with each one.

Step 5 – Draft a pen portrait for each group

As shown in figure 4, Mary now takes each of the groups created in the previous step and writes a pen portrait for it. Pen portraits are concise composite accounts that describe the typical pathway shared by the cases within each group. They bring together the recurring features of several individual journeys to show how engagement usually begins, how the mentoring relationship develops, what helps or interrupts progress, and what outcomes tend to follow. They are not intended to represent a single real young person, but to provide a clear and readable description of the wider pattern found across a group of similar cases. These pen portraits then provide the foundation for writing the final composite case studies, which present each recurring mentoring pathway as a coherent narrative while remaining grounded in the evidence drawn from multiple individual cases.

She reviews the cases in the group together, rather than treating them as separate stories, and identifies the engagement pathway they appear to share. She begins with the mentoring journey itself: how engagement starts, how it changes over time, what helps move it forward, what interrupts it, and how the relationship between the young person and mentor develops. She then looks at the variation within the group, including differences in how quickly young people engage, how strongly they engage, whether engagement is interrupted, and what outcomes they reach.

Figure 4 – Pen Portraits



Mary then adds the wider, harder information held on the cases. This is the recorded evidence of what the young people actually did and what changed outside the mentoring sessions, rather than only what they or their mentors said had changed. It might include attendance and completion, school attendance, exclusions, incidents, offending, entry into education, employment or training, referrals to other services, length of engagement, reasons for disengagement, and the position recorded when the case closed. She also includes relevant background information, such as referral reason, age, initial needs, risk level and offending history. Bringing the pathway, background and recorded outcome data together allows Mary to describe what is common across the group and what kinds of change were recorded. This remains descriptive analysis. Mary is not testing for correlation or claiming that the engagement pattern caused the recorded outcomes. She is showing which characteristics, mentoring pathways and outcomes appeared together within the cases in each group.

The pen portrait combines the common engagement pattern with the main variation and the wider background and outcome data. At this stage, Mary is not writing a full

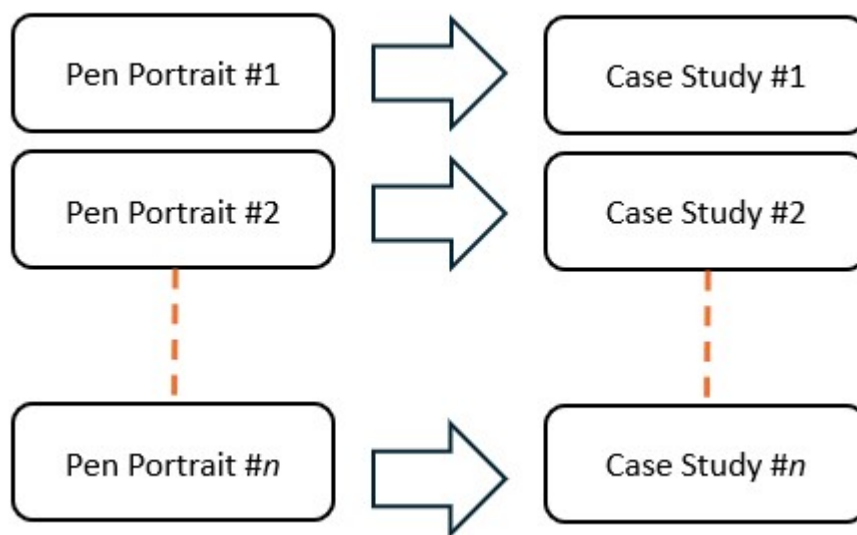
composite case study. She is producing a clear description of each group that can be used to develop the final case type.

Step 6 – Produce the final composite case studies

Mary now turns the pen portraits into the final composite case studies. Each pen portrait becomes one composite case study, so the number of composite studies produced will usually match the number of groups identified during the analysis.

She begins by replacing the temporary group numbers with clear names that capture the main engagement pattern. For example, Group 1 might describe a composite young mentee as **‘The Slow Starter’**, while another group might become **‘The Practical Engager’** or **The Closed Book’**. These names are used as the titles for the different composite case studies.

Figure 5 – Pen Portraits to ‘Composite’ Case Studies



Mary then rewrites each pen portrait as one readable case journey. Each composite young person is fictional, but the study is built directly from the shared features identified across the cases in that group. Their background, needs, mentoring journey, responses and outcomes are drawn from several real cases, not from one

individual. For each composite case study, Mary explains why the young person was referred, what their circumstances and needs were at the start, how they first responded to mentoring, what the mentor did, how engagement changed, and what was recorded by the end. The relevant pen portrait provides the evidence base for what is included in that study.

The composite case studies should also include the harder evidence of change identified in Step 5. This might include improved attendance, fewer incidents, completion of the programme, entry into education or training, reduced offending, or engagement with another service. Mary does not claim that mentoring caused these changes. She shows how the mentoring pathway and recorded outcomes appeared together across the cases used to create each composite.

Mary can include small details to make the studies clear and readable, but these must be grounded in the source material. She should not invent dramatic events, quotations, outcomes or personal characteristics simply to improve the stories. Any details that could identify an individual should be changed, combined or removed.

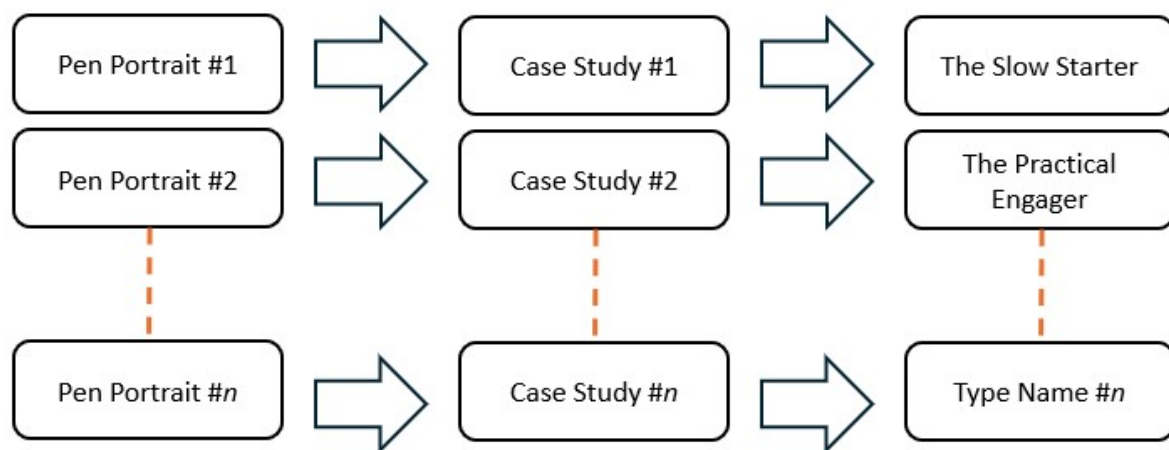
The final output is therefore a set of composite case studies, with each one representing a different case type. Together, they show the main ways young people engage with mentoring, how those journeys differ, and what kinds of change are recorded across the different groups.

5. Comparing Cases – typologies

Mary might choose to produce only one composite case study. However, producing a fuller set is more useful because it shows the different types of young people coming into your service and the different pathways they follow through it. This level of case data is operationally useful because it allows case comparisons. For instance,

practitioners can use these to compare the types of young people being referred, the needs and circumstances they arrive with, how they engage, how mentors respond, where engagement breaks down, and what kinds of outcomes are recorded. Taken together, the composite case studies form what is called a 'typology'. A typology, as shown in figure 6, is simply a set of case types built from the main similarities and differences found across the cases. In this example, the types are based on how young people engage with mentoring.

Figure 6 – Developing 'types'



Each type represents a recurring pattern found across several cases. It does not describe one real young person, and it is not intended to place every young person into a fixed category. Some young people may closely match one type, share features of more than one, or move between types over time.

Comparing the types also allows the organisation to see how impact differs across them. It can show what appears to work for different types of young person, why particular approaches are more effective with some groups than others, and at what point the young person's reason for engaging begins to change. For example, for some young people, the initial reason for attending may be mainly transactional: they want help with an appointment, ID, housing, school, training, or another immediate

problem. Over time, that reason may shift. The young person may begin to value the relationship itself, want to continue seeing the mentor, and become more willing to reflect, set goals, or make changes. Comparing case types helps show where and how that shift happens, which mentoring responses appear to support it, and where it does not happen. This is what makes a set of composite case studies more useful than a single success story. One case may show that change happened. A typology shows the main kinds of young person the service works with, how their journeys and outcomes differ, and what the organisation may need to do differently for each.

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