The Idea of Case and Declension in Latin

Case, in the grammatical sense, refers to the particular forms and uses (or functions) of nouns and pronouns, and of the adjectives that modify them.

Most Latin nouns, pronouns, and adjectives appear only in a limited number of different forms. For example, for the Latin word alâ (wing), you will generally see only these forms: âla / âlae / âlam / âlâ / âlârum / âlîs / âlâs. All words in the same "box" or declension as this word will have similar endings. So, for the Latin word vîta (life), which is in the same declension as âla, you will generally see only these forms: vita / vîtae / vîtam / vîtâ / vîtârum / vîtîs / vîtâs.

Note: A declension is essentially a fixed pattern of endings. There are only six major types of declensions in Latin, five regular ones and one special one for some pronouns and adjectives that has an -ius in the genitive case form.

These different forms of the word are called "case-forms" or simply "cases." The different endings indicate the different cases, which have special names (like nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, ablative). You can therefore say things like "Âlam is the accusative singular case of âla." Or, seeing the word âlam, you can ask "What case is âlam?"

The case-endings tell you in what case the word might be, and therefore how it is probably being used in the sentence (what its function probably is). For the proper name Brûtus, Brûtus is the nominative case form. Brûte is the vocative case form. Brûtum is the accusative case form.

Thus, since the nominative case is used to indicate subjects, you would have to say Brûtus venit. = Brutus is coming.

Since the vocative case form is used to indicate words of naming the addressee in direct address, you must say Et tû, Brûte! = Even you, Brutus!

And since the direct object of the common verb for I see is put into the accusative case, you say Brûtum videô. = I see Brutus.

Note: "Brûtus video" would have to mean "I, Brutus, am seeing."

Recommendation: learn to attend to the meanings of various case forms by doing exercises like those available at the Latin Teaching Materials website. If you see âlârum, do not think "wings," but "of the wings." Likewise, when you are learning your vocabulary, pick different case-forms for review, like the genitive plural, and try to visualize the meanings and pronounce aloud the forms of the words.

Example of how Latin cases correspond to English usage:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocative</th>
<th>Nominative</th>
<th>Dative</th>
<th>Accusative</th>
<th>Genitive</th>
<th>Ablative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marcus and Julia,</td>
<td>the carpenter</td>
<td>made</td>
<td>us</td>
<td>a new door</td>
<td>in the house's back room.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marcus and Julia are the people who are being directly addressed. These names would be put into the VOCATIVE Case. Carpenter is the subject, the agent that performs the action of the verb. It would be in the NOMINATIVE Case. Us is an indirect object here. Indirect objects tend to be put into the DATIVE CASE. Door is the direct object, the DIRECT receiver of the action of the verb. Latin tends to use the ACCUSATIVE CASE for direct objects, although some verbs govern other cases. House's is a noun indicating possession. We are speaking about the door that belongs to the house. Possession is frequently indicated by the GENITIVE case. Room is a noun that is used as an object of the preposition in (Ask "In where?" "In the back room."). This preposition in would take an object in the ABLATIVE case to indicate place where.

N.B. The LOCATIVE CASE, not illustrated here, is used to indicate place, e.g., "at Rome." In Latin, adjectives new and back have to be in the same case and number as the words they are modifying. New must be in the accusative singular form, back must be in the ablative singular form.