

Identifying a Research Problem and Developing a Problem Statement

Learning to Pose Academic Problems

American academic writing is expected to build on previous research to create an original argument. There must be some tension, a gap, a goal—something unknown, undone, unresolved, or confused. Your job is to identify that problem, establish why it is significant for scholars in your field, explain what is currently keeping the problem from being resolved, and propose a course of action to resolve the problem (or to take steps towards its resolution).

Keep in mind that you are not necessarily expected to solve the problem you pose. Sometimes identifying a problem and suggesting some avenues for additional research can be as useful and productive as actually solving the problem.

Identifying a Research Problem

So how does a writer in the university go about posing a problem that is worth addressing? What elements are contained in the problem description as it is presented to readers? Use the questions below to explore the elements of the academic problem you're considering.

- 1) **What is the issue or conflict?** There must be some tension, a gap, a goal—something unknown, undone, unresolved, troubling, or confusing.
- 2) **What is preventing the conflict from being resolved?** To be a problem, a situation must have some changeable cause that is preventing the issue from being resolved, the gap from being filled, or the goal from being met. A problem that is truly impossible to change or solve may not be an appropriate issue to write about.
- 3) **What is the cost of not resolving the conflict?** This is the most important element, and it is the one most likely to be left missing. This element describes to readers the undesirable results that will follow from continued failure to resolve the conflict.
- 4) **What benefits will be gained from addressing this issue?**
- 5) **What is the significance of those benefits to readers as members of an academic field or profession?** Often the significance of addressing a conceptual issue is that we will understand something larger and more important than just learning something we didn't know before. For instance, will the knowledge you've uncovered about your particular topic lead to greater understanding of the principles of justice, ways to decrease violence or illness or unhappiness, or some fuller sense of how a system works?

Developing a Problem Statement

If you think that you've found a thesis, claim, conclusion—or at least a topic—try fitting it into one or more of the following problem statements.

1. **Most people believe that _____, but a closer look will show that _____.**

Writing in the university most often deals with saying something "new" or "against the grain." Although this sentence does not pose a problem per se, it can help you to arrive

at a thesis which will resolve some misunderstanding. To help you (and your readers) figure out why clearing up this understanding is important, you will need one of the other steps.

2. What we know about _____ is that _____; what we don't know is _____.

Not all "new" knowledge is made by showing that someone else has "misunderstood." If you can find a "gap" in what is known, you've also taken the first step to posing a problem. As with #1, however, you need to use one of the other statements to figure out why this gap is worth filling in.

3. If we (do not) understand _____, we will (not) understand _____.

This tip is especially helpful when you are still at the topic stage—when you know the subject you are writing about, but you don't yet know your thesis (what you want to say about it) or your organizational structure.

4. I am analyzing/comparing _____ so that I can explain/understand _____.

You have found a problem when you can say both what your paper will do and how you and your readers will benefit from your having done that. This step can work even if you are still searching for a thesis, as long as you know what you want the paper to do (e.g., analyze, classify, evaluate).

5. So what?

Why is it important that you've addressed this problem the way you've written about it? What meaningful insights will readers take away from your essay? Why should they take the time to read your essay? If you can answer some form of these questions, you have found a worthwhile "problem."