



Planning a “Problem-Solution” Essay

Students are often asked to write essays that address a particular problem. Based on a series of questions, the Dewey Sequence was developed by educator John Dewey as a reflective method for solving problems. The idea is to work through the list of questions and use the answers you come up with as the basis for organizing and developing the ideas for your essay.

Step One: Define the Problem

1. What is the specific problem that you or your colleagues are concerned about?
2. In stating this problem, what terms, concepts, or ideas need to be defined?

Step Two: Analyze the Problem

1. What is the history of the problem?
2. What are the causes of the problem?
3. What are the symptoms of the problem?
4. What methods (approaches, laws, policies, etc.) exist for dealing with the problem?
5. What are the limitations of these methods?

Step Three: Determine Criteria for an Optimal Solution

1. What are the guidelines for a workable solution? Sample criteria may include cost, feasibility, enforcement, etc.

Step Four: Propose Solutions

1. After you have analyzed the problem and suggested criteria for a solution, try to envision possible solutions in tentative, hypothetical terms. You might begin by suggesting a variety of possible solutions without evaluating them.

Step Five: Evaluate Proposed Solution(s)

1. After you have compiled a list of possible solutions, select the best possible solution(s) in light of the criteria that the group developed in step three.
2. What are the disadvantages or downsides to the solution? Do the disadvantages outweigh the advantages?
3. Does the solution conform to the criteria you formulated in Step Three? (You may need to modify the criteria).

Step Six: Select a Solution

1. Weigh the merits and deficiencies of your top one or two solutions.
2. What would be the long-term and short-term effects of this solution if it were adopted?

Step Seven: Suggest Strategies to Implement the Solution

1. How can you get public support and approval (buy-in) for the proposed solution?
2. What specific steps are necessary to implement the solution? What’s the first step?
3. How can the group evaluate the success of its problem-solving efforts?