Choose a problem for which you can propose a solution.

When choosing a problem, keep in mind that it must be

- important to you and of concern to your readers;
- solvable, at least in part;
- one that you can research sufficiently in the time you have.

Choosing a problem affecting a group to which you belong (for example, as a classmate, teammate, participant in an online game site, or garage band member) or a place at which you have worked (a coffee shop, community pool, or radio station) gives you an advantage: You can write as an expert. You know the history of the problem, you know who to interview, and perhaps you have already thought about possible solutions. Moreover, you know who to address and how to persuade that audience to take action on your proposed solution.

If you already have a problem and possible solution(s) in mind, skip to Test Your Choice below. If you need to find a problem, consider the possible topics following the readings and the suggestions in the following chart. Keeping a chart like this could help you get started exploring creative solutions to real-life problems.

	Problems	Possible Solutions
School	Can't get into required courses	Make them large lecture courses. Make them online or hybrid courses. Give priority to majors.
Community	No safe place for children to play	Use school yards for after-school sports. Get high school students or senior citizens to tutor kids. Make pocket parks for neighborhood play. Offer programs for kids at branch libraries.
Work	Inadequate training for new staff	Make a training video or Web site. Assign experienced workers to mentor trainees (for bonus pay).

TEST YOUR CHOICE

After you have made a provisional choice, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I understand the problem well enough to convince my readers that it really exists and is worth their attention?
- Do I have some ideas about how to solve this problem?
- Do I know enough about the problem, or can I learn what I need to know in the time allotted?

To try out your choice of a problem, get together with two or three other students:

Presenters. Take turns identifying the problem you're thinking of writing about.

Listeners. Briefly tell each presenter whether the problem seems important, and why.

As you plan and draft your proposal, you may need to reconsider your choice (for example, if you discover you don't have any good ideas about how to solve the problem) and either

refocus it or choose a different problem to write about. If you have serious doubts about your choice, discuss them with your instructor before starting over with a new problem.

Frame the problem for your readers.

Once you have made a preliminary choice of a problem, consider what you know about it, what research will help you explore what others think about it, and how you can interest your readers in solving it. Then determine how you can frame or reframe it in a way that appeals to readers' values and concerns. Use the questions and sentence strategies that follow as a jumping-off point; you can make them your own as you revise later.

To learn more about conducting surveys and interviews, consult Chapter 16, pp. 414–19. For advice on listing, cubing, and freewriting, see Chapter 8, pp. 282–84, 288, 290–91.

WAYS IN

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

What do I already know about the problem?

Brainstorm a list: Spend 10 minutes listing everything you know about the problem. Write quickly, leaving judgment aside for the moment. After the 10 minutes are up, you can review your list and highlight or star the most promising information.

Use cubing: Probe the problem from a variety of perspectives:

- Describe the problem.
- Compare the problem to other, similar problems, or contrast it with other, related problems.
- Connect the problem to other problems in your experience.
- Analyze the problem to identify its parts, its causes, or its effects.
- Apply the problem to a real-life situation.

Freewrite: Write without stopping for 5 or 10 minutes about the problem. Don't stop to reflect or consider; if you hit a roadblock, just keep coming back to the problem. At the end of the specified time, review your writing and highlight or underline promising ideas.

WHY SHOULD READERS CARE?

How can I convince readers the problem is real and deserves attention?

Give an example to make the problem specific:

▶ Recently, _____ has been [in the news/in movies/a political issue] because of [name event].

Example:
    Lately, the issue of bullying has been in the news, sparked by the suicide of Tyler Clementi . . . , a gay college student who was a victim of cyberbullying. (Bornstein, par. 1)

Use a scenario or anecdote to dramatize the problem:

▶ [Describe time and place.] [Describe problem related to time or place.]

Example:
    It's late at night. The final's tomorrow. You got a C on the midterm, so this one will make or break you. (O'Malley, par. 1)

Cite statistics to show the severity of the problem:

▶ It has recently been reported that _____ percent of [name group] are [specify problem].

(continued)

What do others think about the problem? Conduct surveys:

- Talk to a variety of students at your school (your friends and others).
- Discuss the problem with neighbors or survey shoppers at a local mall.
- Discuss the problem with coworkers or people who work at similar jobs.

Conduct interviews:

- Interview faculty experts.
- Discuss the issue with business people in the community.
- Interview local officials (members of the city council, the fire chief, the local labor union representative).

What do most of my readers already think about the problem?

▶ Many complain about _____ but do nothing because solving it seems [too hard/too costly].

▶ Some think _____ is [someone else's responsibility/not that big of a problem].

▶ Others see _____ as a matter of [fairness/human decency].

Who suffers from the problem?

▶ Studies have shown that _____ mostly affects [name group(s)].

Example:

> Research has shown that . . . parents with young children and working welfare recipients—the workers who need access to paid leave the most—are the least likely to have these benefits. . . . Children, in particular, pay a heavy price. (Kornbluh, pars. 10, 13)

Example:

> Today fully 70 percent of families with children . . . are working 10 more hours a week than in 1979 (Bernstein and Kornbluh). (Kornbluh, par. 1)

Describe the problem's negative consequences:

▶ According to [name expert/study], [state problem] is affecting [name affected group]: [insert quote from expert.]

Example:

> Sian Beilock, a psychology professor at the University of Chicago, points out that "stressing about doing well on an important exam can backfire, leading students to 'choke under pressure' or to score less well than they might otherwise score if the stakes weren't so high." (O'Malley, par. 2)

Why should readers care about solving the problem?

▶ We're all in this together. _____ is not a win-lose proposition. If [name group] loses, we all lose.

▶ If we don't try to solve _____, no one else will.

▶ Doing nothing will only make _____ worse.

▶ We have a moral responsibility to do something about _____.

Ask two or three other students to help you develop your plan to define the problem.

Presenters.   Briefly explain how you are thinking of framing or reframing the problem for your audience. Use the following language as a model for presenting your problem, or use language of your own.

▶ I plan to define the problem [not as _____ but as _____ /in terms of _____] because I think my readers [describe briefly] will share my [concerns, values, or priorities].

Listeners.   Tell the presenter what response this way of framing the problem elicits from you and why. You may also explain how you think other readers might respond. Use the following language as a model for structuring your response, or use your own words.

▶ I'm [also/not] concerned about _____ because [state reasons].

▶ I [agree/disagree] that _____ because [state reasons].

Use statistics to establish the problem's existence and seriousness.

Statistics can be helpful in establishing that a problem exists and is serious. (In fact, using statistics is offered as an option in the preceding Ways In box.) To define her problem, Kornbluh uses statistics in three different forms: percentages, numbers, and proportions.

<table>
<tr><td>percentage</td><td rowspan="5">Between 1970 and 2000, the percentage of mothers in the workforce rose from 38 to 67 percent (Smolensky and Gootman). Moreover, the number of hours worked by dual-income families has increased dramatically. Couples with children worked a full 60 hours a week in 1979. By 2000 they were working 70 hours a week (Bernstein and Kornbluh). And more parents than ever are working long hours. In 2000, nearly 1 out of every 8 couples with children was putting in 100 hours a week or more on the job, compared to only 1 out of 12 families in 1970 (Jacobs and Gerson). (par. 7)</td></tr>
<tr><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>number</td></tr>
<tr><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>proportion</td></tr>
</table>

Percentages can seem quite impressive, but sometimes without the raw numbers readers may not appreciate just how remarkable the percentages really are. In the following example, readers can see at a glance that the percentage Kornbluh cites is truly significant:

In addition to working parents, there are over 44.4 million Americans who provide care to another adult, often an older relative. Fifty-nine percent of these caregivers either work or have worked while providing care ("Caregiving"). (par. 8)

To establish that there is a widespread perception among working parents that the problem is serious, Kornbluh cites survey results:

In a 2002 report by the Families and Work Institute, 45 percent of employees reported that work and family responsibilities interfered with each other "a lot" or "some" and 67 percent of employed parents report that they do not have enough time with their children (Galinsky, Bond, and Hill). (par. 9)

This example shows that nearly half of all employees have had difficulty juggling work and family responsibilities. The readers Kornbluh is addressing—employers— are likely to find this statistic important because it suggests that their employees are spending time worrying about or attending to family responsibilities instead of focusing on work.

For statistics to be persuasive, they must be from sources that readers consider reliable. Researchers' trustworthiness, in turn, depends on their credentials as experts in the field they are investigating and also on the degree to which they are disinterested, or free from bias. Kornbluh provides a list of works cited that readers can follow up on to check whether the sources are indeed reliable. The fact that some of her sources are books published by major publishers (Harvard University Press and Basic Books, for example) helps establish their credibility. Other sources she cites are research institutes (such as the New America Foundation, Economic Policy Institute, and Families and Work Institute), which readers can easily check out. Another factor that adds to the appearance of reliability is that Kornbluh cites statistics from a range of sources instead of relying on only one or two. Moreover, the statistics are current and clearly relevant to her argument.

To find statistics relating to the problem (or possible solution) you are writing about, explore the state, local, or tribal sections of USA.gov, the U.S. government's official Web portal, or visit the Library of Congress page "State Government Information," www.loc.gov/rr/news/stategov/stategov.html, and follow the links. In particular, visit the U.S. Census Bureau's Web site (www.census.gov), which offers reliable statistics on a wide variety of issues.

Assess how the problem has been framed, and reframe it for your readers.

Once you have a good idea of what you and your readers think about the problem, consider how others have framed the problem and how you might be able to reframe it for your readers.

> WAYS IN

HOW HAS THE PROBLEM BEEN FRAMED?

Sink or Swim Argument

Example: Providing tutoring for students who are failing a course is wrong because students should do what they need to do to pass the course or face the consequences. That's the way the system is supposed to work.

Don't Reward Failure Argument

Example: Providing tutoring for students who are failing a course is like a welfare

HOW CAN I REFRAME THE PROBLEM?

Teaching Should Not Be Punitive Argument

Example: Providing tutoring for students who are failing a course assumes the purpose of education is learning, not testing for its own sake or punishing those who have not done well.

Encourage Success Argument

Example: Providing tutoring for students who are failing a course encourages students to work hard and value doing well in school.

system that makes underprepared students dependent and second-class citizens.

Reverse Discrimination Argument

Example: Providing tutoring for students who are failing a course is unfair to the other students who don't need assistance.

Win-Lose Argument

Example: Providing tutoring for students who are failing a course ignores the fact that grades should fall on a bell curve — that is, an equal proportion of students should get an *F* as get an *A*.

Level Playing Ground Argument

Example: Providing tutoring for students who are failing a course is a way to make up for inadequacies in previous schooling.

Win-Win Argument

Example: Providing tutoring for students who are failing a course assumes that it would be a good thing if every student earned an *A*. Providing tutoring enhances learning.

Develop a possible solution.

The following activities will help you devise a solution and develop an argument to support it. If you have already found a solution, you may want to skip this activity and go directly to the Explain Your Solution section (p. 226).

WAYS IN

HOW CAN I SOLVE THIS PROBLEM?

One way to generate ideas is to write steadily for at least five minutes, exploring some of the possible ways of solving the problem. Consider using the following approaches as a jumping-off point:

- **Adapt a solution that has been tried or proposed for a similar problem.**

  Example: Bornstein's solution to bullying is to teach children empathy, as the Roots of Empathy program does.

- **Focus on eliminating a cause or minimizing an effect of the problem.**

  Example: O'Malley's solution to stressful high-stakes exams is to eliminate the cause of the stress by inducing instructors to give more frequent low-stakes exams.

- **See the problem as part of a larger system, and explore solutions to the system.**

  Example: Kornbluh's solution is for employers to work with employees to enhance job flexibility.

- **Focus on solving a small part of the problem.**

  Example: Kornbluh could have focused on an aspect of workplace flexibility such as guaranteed paternity leave.

▪ **Look at the problem from different points of view.**

Example: Consider what students, teachers, parents, or administrators might think could be done to help solve the problem.

▪ **Think of a specific example of the problem, and consider how you could solve it.**

Example: O'Malley could have focused on solving the problem of high-stakes exams in his biology course.

For more idea-generating strategies, see Chapter 8.

Explain your solution.

You may not yet know for certain whether you will be able to construct a convincing argument to support your solution, but you should choose a solution that you feel motivated to pursue. Use the questions and sentence strategies that follow to help you put your ideas in writing. You will likely want to revise what you come up with later, but the questions and sentence strategies below may provide a convenient jumping-off point.

WAYS IN

HOW CAN I EXPLAIN HOW MY SOLUTION WOULD HELP SOLVE THE PROBLEM?

It would eliminate a cause of the problem.

▸ Research shows it would reduce

_____.

It has worked elsewhere.

▸ It works in _____, _____, and _____, as studies evaluating it show.

It would change people's behavior.

▸ _____ would [discourage/encourage] people to _____.

HOW CAN I EXPLAIN THAT MY SOLUTION IS FEASIBLE?

It could be implemented.

Describe the major stages or steps necessary to carry out your solution.

We can afford it.

Explain what it would cost to put the solution into practice.

It would not take too much time.

Create a rough schedule or timeline to show how long it would take to make the necessary arrangements.

Research your proposal.

You may have already begun researching the problem and familiarizing yourself with alternative solutions that have been offered, or you may have ideas about what you need to research. If you are proposing a solution to a problem about which others have written, use the following research strategies to help you find out what solutions others have

proposed or tried. You may also use these strategies to find out how others have defined the problem and demonstrated its seriousness.

- Enter keywords or phrases related to your solution (or problem) into the search box of an all-purpose database, such as *Academic OneFile* (InfoTrac) or *Academic Search Complete* (EBSCOHost), to find relevant articles in magazines and journals; in the database Lexis/Nexis to find articles in newspapers; or in library catalogs to find books and other resources. (Database names may change, and what is available will differ from school to school. Some libraries may even combine all three into one search link on the library's home page. Ask a librarian if you need help.) Patrick O'Malley could have tried a combination of keywords, such as *learning* and *test anxiety*, or variations on his terms (*frequent testing, improve retention*) to find relevant articles.

- Bookmark or keep a record of the URLs of promising sites, and download or copy information you could use in your essay. When available, download PDF files rather than HTML files, because these are likely to include visuals, such as graphs and charts. If you copy and paste relevant information into your notes, be careful to distinguish all material from sources from your own ideas.

- Remember to record source information and to cite and document any sources you use, including visuals and interviews.

For more about searching for information, consult Chapter 16; plagiarism, see Chapter 18; documenting sources, consult Chapter 19 (MLA Style) or Chapter 20 (APA Style).

Develop a response to objections and alternative solutions.

The topics you considered when developing an argument for your solution may be the same topics you need to consider when developing a response to likely criticisms of your proposal—answering possible objections to your solution or alternative solutions readers may prefer. The following sentence strategies may help you start drafting an effective response.

WAYS IN

HOW CAN I DRAFT A REFUTATION OR CONCESSION?

To draft a refutation, try beginning with sentence strategies like these:

▶ Some people think we can't afford to do [name solution], but it would only cost $_____ to put my solution in place compared to $ _____, the cost of [doing nothing/implementing an alternative solution].

▶ Although it might take [number of months/years] to implement this solution, it would actually take longer to implement [alternative solution].

▶ There are critics who think that only a few people would benefit from solving this problem, but _____ would benefit because _____.

(continued)

▶ Some may suggest that I favor this solution because I would benefit personally; however, the fact is we would all benefit because _____ .

▶ Some may claim that this solution has been tried and hasn't worked. But research shows that [explain how proposed solution has worked] *or* my solution differs from past experiments in these important ways: _____ , _____ , and _____ .

To draft a concession, try beginning with sentence strategies like these:

▶ I agree with those who [claim X/object on X grounds]; therefore, instead of _____ , I think we should pursue _____ .

▶ If _____ seems too [time-consuming/expensive], let's try _____ .

▶ Where _____ is a concern, I think [name alternative] should be followed.

▶ Although _____ is the best way to deal with a problem like this, under [describe special circumstances], I agree that _____ should be done.

Create an outline that will organize your proposal effectively for your readers.

Whether you have rough notes or a complete draft, making an outline of what you have written can help you organize your essay effectively for your audience. Compare the possible outlines below to see how you might organize the essay depending on whether your readers agree that a serious problem exists and are open to your solution—or not.

If you are writing primarily for readers who *acknowledge that the problem exists and are open to your solution*:

   I. **Introduce the problem,** concluding with a thesis statement asserting your solution.

  II. **Demonstrate the problem's seriousness:** Frame the problem in a way that prepares readers for the solution.

 III. **Describe the proposed solution:** Show what could be done to implement it.

  IV. **Refute objections.**

   V. **Conclude:** Urge action on your solution.

If you are writing primarily for readers who *do not recognize the problem or are likely to prefer alternative solutions*:

   I. **Reframe the problem:** Identify common ground, and acknowledge alternative ways readers might see the problem.

  II. **Concede strengths, but emphasize the weaknesses of alternative solution(s) that readers might prefer.**

 III. **Describe the proposed solution:** Give reasons and provide evidence to demonstrate that it is preferable to the alternative(s).

  IV. **Refute objections.**

   V. **Conclude:** Reiterate shared values.