

## **Problem Structure in Academic Writing**

### **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.

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 worksheet below to explore the elements of the academic problem you're considering.

#### **PROBLEM STATEMENT:**

1. What is the issue or conflict? There must be some tension, a gap, a goal - something unknown, undone, unresolved, or confused.
2. What is preventing the conflict from being resolved? To be a problem, a situation must have some changeable cause of condition that is preventing the issue from being resolved, the gap from being filled, or the goal from being met.
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 follow from the failure to resolve the conflict.

#### **PROPOSED RESOLUTION:**

1. What benefits will be gained from addressing this issue?
2. 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, more important than just understanding something we didn't understand before.