

Writing Workshop

Problem-Solution Essay

► Introduction

In a problem-solution essay, you analyze a problem and propose a method for solving it. The problem you choose to analyze should be one that offers some challenges but is still possible to resolve. A problem-solution essay should have the following characteristics:

- a problem that needs to be solved
- a thesis statement that identifies the problem and points toward the solution
- identification of several possible solutions
- specific facts, details, examples, and reasons indicating why one solution is best
- an analytical tone

Assignment On the following pages, you will learn how to write a problem-solution essay. You will get step-by-step instructions. Each step will include an example from a sample essay discussing the Articles of Confederation.

Read the instructions and the examples. Then, follow each step to plan and write a 500–700 word essay.

Analyze a problem faced by the writers of the Constitution and discuss the solution that the Constitutional Convention chose.

► Prewriting

Define the problem to be solved. In order to write a problem-solution essay, you need to start with a clear vision of the problem itself.

Once you have broken your problem down and looked at it from different angles, sit back and look at the big picture. Think about your ultimate goal in solving the problem.

For a review of the steps in the writing process see the **Historian's Toolkit, Write Like a Historian.**

Sample notes about a problem arising from the Articles of Confederation

- The Articles did not include a central executive because the states didn't want to give up power to central authority.
- Congress had to manage everything.
- Nine states had to vote for any action to take place.
- Foreign governments saw the new nation as weak and ignored its demands.
- Americans also defied the national government (Shays' Rebellion).
- It was difficult for Congress to act quickly or make changes in policy.

Sample goal:

The problems with the Articles needed to be solved so that the new nation could survive and adapt to change.

Brainstorm to identify several solutions. Look for as many solutions as you can, even if they solve only part of the problem. List each solution and evaluate it. One good technique is to ask questions. Create a chart like this one to help you evaluate your various solutions.

Write a thesis statement. Write a thesis statement briefly identifying the problem. Your thesis statement may also indicate possible solutions, but you may also save that information for later in your essay.

Sample thesis statement:

The Articles of Confederation left the new nation too weak because they allowed for no central authority besides Congress. The Articles needed to be changed in some way—or something new had to replace them.

Gather supporting information. Look for facts, details, and reasons to support your solutions to the problem.

Problem	Possible Solution	Evaluation
The Articles of Confederation left the nation weak because there was no central authority.	Leave the Articles as is, persuade other countries and Americans to respect the new nation	Not practical—what would make more established governments and local rebels accept a weak authority?
	Leave the basic Articles in place but have Congress elect a new executive each year, rotating from state to state	Possible, but amendments needed to be agreed on by all the states. Also, how does the central authority work with the Congress, which was used to running everything?
	Get rid of the Articles, create an entirely new plan	Possible, but it would be a huge task to start all over again.

► Drafting

Decide how to organize your writing. The simplest way to organize a problem-solution essay is to begin by identifying the problem in the first paragraph, leading up to your thesis statement. Present the solution that you think works best, explaining why it is the most promising one.

Support your thesis with examples and details. Use your lists of supporting information to back up your ideas about the best solution to the problem.

Use an analytical tone. As you write your draft, remember that you are appealing to people’s ability to reason, not to their emotions. Describe the problem and the various possible solutions objectively.

Write a strong conclusion. In your final paragraph, restate your ideas about the problem and its solution.

► **Model Essay**

Read the following model of a problem-solution essay. Notice how it includes the characteristics you have learned about.

The Articles of Confederation: Problems and Solutions

In November 1777, the Continental Congress approved the first American constitution: the Articles of Confederation. Soon after the Articles were ratified by the states in 1781, problems arose. **One of the most serious of these problems was that the Articles of Confederation left the new nation too weak. It allowed for no central authority besides Congress.**

The thesis statement identifies the problem.

The Articles of Confederation created a loose alliance of 13 independent states. No state wanted to give up its power to a strong central government. Even Congress had little power. For example, Congress could pass a law, but nine states had to approve the law before it went into effect. Congress had no power to tax the states, so the nation could not pay its war debts.

This paragraph describes the problem in greater detail.

Recognizing that many problems existed with the Articles of Confederation, the Continental Congress met again in 1787. There were a number of solutions they could have considered. First, Congress could change the Articles so that Congress would elect a new central authority each year. Second, Congress could give itself more power. These solutions might solve some of the nation's problems, but not all. Finally, Congress could get rid of the Articles and create an entirely new plan of government.

Each paragraph describes possible solutions and discusses their pros and cons.

The delegates saw this as the best solution, but one that would take a great deal of work.

The analytical tone presents the information fairly, using straightforward language.

Most of the delegates to what became known as the Constitutional Convention recognized that the Articles of Confederation had serious weaknesses. Their decision to formulate a new plan of government was a bold one. Nevertheless, it proved to be the best solution. The delegates created a new and lasting form of government for the United States.

The conclusion restates the thesis. It shows the importance of solving the problem and explaining why the solution was a good one.

► Revising

After completing your draft, read it again carefully to find ways to make your writing better. Here are some questions to ask yourself.

Revise to strengthen your thesis and support

- Do the introduction and thesis statement identify the problem?
- Do the body paragraphs explain the problem thoroughly? Do they examine several solutions and describe the most effective solution clearly?
- Is your proposal supported by convincing reasons, facts, and examples?

Revise to meet written English-language conventions

- Are all sentences complete, with a subject and a verb?
- Are all the words spelled correctly? Use a spell-checker or a dictionary to make sure.
- Are all proper nouns capitalized, including names of people and places?
- Did you use proper punctuation? Check punctuation within sentences as well as at the ends of sentences.

► Rubric for Self-Assessment

Evaluate your problem-solution essay using the following rating scale:

	Score 4	Score 3	Score 2	Score 1
Organization	Supports the thesis with a series of paragraphs exploring a problem and its various solutions, ending with a discussion of the one proposed by the writer	Uses a reasonably clear organization, but occasionally wanders from the topic	Chooses an organization not suited to the topic (for example, presents the solution without having explained the problem)	Shows lack of organizational strategy
Presentation	Explores the problem and solutions thoroughly with facts, details, and reasons; links all information to the goal of solving the problem	Explores the problem and solutions adequately with several facts, details, or examples; links most information to the goal of solving the problem	Does not explore the problem and solutions adequately; does not link supporting information to the goal of solving the problem	Does not provide any facts, details, or examples to explore the problem and solutions
Use of Language	Varies sentence structure and vocabulary successfully; includes none or very few mechanical errors	Uses some variety in sentence structure and vocabulary; includes few mechanical errors	Uses the same types of sentences without varying them; repeats words; includes many mechanical errors	Writes incomplete sentences; uses language poorly; sounds confused; includes many mechanical errors