Problem Proposals

People write problem proposals when they want to bring about some kind of change within an organization they belong to or work for. This change could be a new method, system, or procedure for carrying out the organization's activities; a new program, a new facility, or new personnel. Any organizational change requires time, effort, and other resources, and any change may raise new problems, so a problem proposal should be detailed and persuasive.

Audience and purpose

Primary audience: The decision-maker who can make the proposed change or provide resources to allow others to make that change.

Secondary audiences: Those who are affected by the problem addressed in the proposal or who would be affected by the proposed change.

Purpose: To secure permission and/or resources to make the proposed change; to persuade the decision-maker to implement the proposed plan of action.

The content and structure of a problem proposal are driven by the writer's need to answer the questions a decision-maker brings:

- Does the problem actually exist? Is it widespread or urgent enough to warrant taking action? Is there evidence of the problem and its effects?
- Is the author adequately acquainted with the history of the problem and previous efforts to address it?
- What is the proposed plan of action? If implemented, would it actually solve the problem? Is it feasible? Will it create new problems?
- Who is affected by the proposed plan of action?
- Are there other plans of action that are cheaper or easier to implement? Why not adopt those?
- What is the budget? Is it reasonable? Is it adequate for implementing the plan of action?
- What are the additional benefits of addressing the problem with this proposed plan of action?

Sections of a problem proposal

Executive summary

This section provides an overview of the entire proposal; compose it after drafting the rest of the proposal. It should provide a one to two sentence version of the problem description, the plan of action, and the anticipated benefits.

Introduction *(Optional)*

Some proposals begin with background or context that helps readers understand the problem. For example, the introduction might provide some information about the organization's mission and goals, especially if the problem undermines that mission and those goals. Or the introduction could provide background about the organization's personnel, procedures, or recent changes, if these elements of the organization or situation are relevant to the problem.

Problem Description

This is a core section of the proposal. It defines and describes the problem, showing that the situation actually exists, that the situation has negative consequences, and that these effects are serious, widespread or urgent. The proposal should offer evidence for these claims. This evidence may be statistical; it may come from experts or authorities on the issue, or it may be anecdotal or narrative.

The problem description section should be well organized, not a random array of facts and figures. Most problem descriptions include a basic description of the situation or problem, a set of consequences of the problem (its negative or harmful effects), and an account of the cause or causes of the problem. Whatever the order you choose for these basic topics, discuss causes in one place, consequences in another; don't mix them up. These are some possible frameworks for organizing a problem description:

Framework 1	Framework 2*	Framework 3

1. The situation/problem
  -- Element 1
  -- Element 2
2. The cause(s) of the situation/problem
  -- Cause 1
  -- Cause 2….
3. The consequences (harmful effects) of the situation
  -- Consequence 1
  -- Consequence 2….
	1. The situation/problem
	2. The consequences of the problem
	3. The apparent cause of the problem
	4. The actual cause(s) of the problem
	
	Works well if the proposal is working against a commonly accepted cause of the problem
		1. a. Element 1 of the situation/problem
		  b. Consequences (harmful effects) of element 1
		2. a. Element 2 of the problem
		  b. Consequence (harmful effect) of element 2…
		3. Cause(s) of the problem

The problem description should end with a statement that summarizes the problem and its harmful consequences.

Objectives *(Optional)*

Proposals may include a brief section that lays out the criteria that any acceptable solution must meet. For example, a writer proposing *a new dining facility* might list four criteria that any plan of action must fulfill: It must be cost-neutral; it must not reduce existing options; it must accommodate up to 75% of personnel at once; and it must allow for future growth. The writer would explain the rationale for each of these criteria briefly.

"Objectives" sections are optional, but they can be effective for two main reasons: first, they demonstrate the writer is considering the "big picture" from the organization's point of view, and second, they set up the solution the writer will propose as an effective one.

Plan of Action
Another core section of the proposal, the "Plan of Action" or "Proposed Solution" lays out the writer's plan of action. It should begin with a brief overview, then provide a detailed version of the plan.

The writer should take care to present the plan of action as a logical fit to the problem, as the problem was described earlier in the proposal. If the problem has been described as "too many cars on campus," the proposed solution should not be "build more parking lots" (a solution that would bring still more cars to campus). Either the problem description would need to be revised ("not enough parking on campus"), or the plan of action reformulated ("expanded bus system to reduce the need to drive").

The "Plan of Action" section does not need to be structured exactly like the "Problem Description," but it should allow readers to see how the proposed solution does address all the elements of the problem, as they were described.

This section should provide plenty of detail, anticipating questions the decision maker might bring about the feasibility of the proposed plan.

If appropriate, build yourself in as taking on some of the work involved. If you're proposing an speaker series, for example, designate yourself as its coordinator.

<u>Alternative Solutions</u> *(Optional)*

Your audience may be aware of possible solutions different from the one you have proposed, and they may wonder why you have not opted for those solutions. If you think this is the case, you can include a section that describes these solutions and presents the advantages and disadvantages of each. By presenting these alternative solutions, you control the audience's interpretation of them.

<u>Budget</u>

Provide a detailed budget, with a rationale for each item. Most budget sections begin with a brief narrative that provides an overview of the budget and follow the narrative with a list, table, or other visual representation of the budget breakdown.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Provide a short conclusion that looks to the future and presents the anticipated benefits of addressing the problem with this plan of action.

Format

- Use headings for main sections of the proposal.
  - Instead of generic "Problem" and "Proposed Solution" headings, consider using more specific phrases such as "Gridlock on Campus" and "A Network of Shuttles."
- Single-space within paragraphs and double-space between them.
- If the proposal is long (4+ pages), provide a cover page with a title, your name, the date, and the name of the person you're presenting it to. If it's short, you may use a memo header with its To, From, Date, and Subject lines.

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