



Looking for Trouble: Finding Your Way into a Writing Assignment

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Looking for Trouble: Finding Your Way into a Writing Assignment

Catherine Savini

The main character in the movie *Misery* is a writer named Paul Sheldon, who after a serious car accident is “rescued” by his self-proclaimed “number one fan,” Annie Wilkes.* Annie holds him captive, withholding pain medications and torturing him mentally and physically while demanding that he write a novel that brings her favorite character, Misery Chastaine, back to life. The movie trailer for *Misery* reads, “Now Paul Sheldon must write as if his life depended on it . . . because it does.” This is no one’s ideal writing scenario, nor is it a common one, but the direct association of writing and suffering will not seem far-fetched to anyone who writes. Based on a Stephen King novella of the same name, *Misery* suggests that even a prolific writer like King, who has written screenplays, novels, short stories, and essays for the past thirty-five years, finds writing difficult, even painful.

Chances are, if you have ever written a paper, you’ve experienced the uneasiness caused by the combination of a blank page and a looming deadline. Though it may seem counterintuitive at the outset, one way to diminish the considerable difficulty of getting started on a new assignment is to look for something that troubles you, seek out difficulty, find problems. All academic disciplines seek to impart in their students the ability to identify, mull over, and sometimes solve chal-

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lenging problems. Not surprisingly, the benefits of a willingness and mental acuity to greet complex problems extend well beyond the classroom.

We all deal with problems of varying complexity on a daily basis. If we are successful in dealing with life's challenges, it's likely that we follow a particular process for meeting these challenges, whether we are conscious of it or not. Here is an example of this process:

Problem: My car broke down.

Questions that emerge from this problem: Can I fix it myself? If not, where should I take it to get it fixed? Whom can I trust? Could I get a recommendation from someone? In light of the estimate is it worth getting it fixed or should I turn it in to cash for clunkers and buy a new car? How will I get around while my car is in the shop?

What is at stake?: If you don't pursue these questions and you take your car to the first dealer you see, you might choose a mechanic who is notorious for overcharging or for sloppy work. Or you might be without wheels for awhile and unable to get to work. Precious time and your hard-earned cash are at stake here. In order to make an informed decision, we must sit with a problem and weigh our options.

Problems are an expected part of life, and our ability to deal with them can help determine our personal and professional success. In fact, recent studies suggest that the ability to wrestle with problems is what makes a successful leader. Successful leaders, according to Roger Martin, Dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, have one thing in common: the power of "integrative thinking." Martin borrows the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, author of *The Great Gatsby*, to define integrative thinking as "the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." According to Fitzgerald, integrative thinking is a sign of "first-rate intelligence"; according to Martin, who examined 50 successful managers for his book *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking*, it is the sign of a successful leader. Integrative thinkers embrace complexity. They sit with problems eschewing the easy answers. They tap into the tension between two opposing ideas to produce a third idea. And, ultimately, they pro-

duce new insights and develop new alternatives. This habit of mind can and should be cultivated (Martin 62).

PROBLEMS AS PROCESS

You can cultivate and take advantage of this mode of thinking any time you have a paper to write. Let us return to the question of how one uses problems to begin a writing assignment. Despite the fact that writing assignments vary from class to class, discipline to discipline, and university to university, looking for trouble can be an effective approach regardless of the assignment. In fact, sometimes writing prompts or essay questions direct you toward trouble. Here is an example of one such prompt:

Although Hegel differs from Rousseau in his hostility toward the notion of the noble savage and his rejection of origin stories, both Hegel and Rousseau are keen to understand contemporary civilization in light of historical processes. What is it, then, that allows them to come to such different conclusions about the present, with Hegel suggesting that freedom is on the march and Rousseau arguing that freedom is in retreat?¹

This essay question does the work of problem finding for the students. The instructor highlights the problem in the question by juxtaposing Rousseau's and Hegel's ideas and theoretical approaches. Most of you are probably familiar with the compare and contrast paper; this assignment essentially asks students to compare and contrast Rousseau and Hegel. By identifying a specific problem and posing a question, this instructor helps students avoid a common pitfall of the unsuccessful compare and contrast essay. Unsuccessful compare and contrast essays simply catalogue similarities and differences without developing an argument. While it is possible that your high school teacher did not expect you to develop an argument in a compare and contrast essay, your college professor expects you to do so, whether or not the assignment explicitly says so.

Sometimes it will be your responsibility to locate a problem. Here is an example of an assignment that specifically asks students to find a problem:

Identify and examine a human rights topic about which you would like to know more. You are welcome to consult with the instructors and TAs for ideas. You should use Internet, library, and other sources to gather information on this topic; this is not a full-scale research paper, so you need to find a small number of adequately comprehensive sources. Your essay should (1) identify the issue; (2) describe its scope and frequency in geographic, regime-type, temporal, socio-demographic, or other terms, as appropriate; (3) identify the sense in which it is a human rights violation (of what article of what covenant, or with respect to what norm); (4) tell us what you have been able to learn about its causes, and (5) identify political, social, cultural, economic or other factors that appear to contribute to its increase or decrease. You should critically assess biases or shortcomings in the information sources you used to research your topic.

While the prompt does not specifically use the term “problem,” it is clear that students are meant to focus on human rights “issues” or “violations” rather than successes in the area of human rights. In other words, these students have been sent out to look for trouble related to human rights. Other writing assignments will not even hint at problems. For example:

Food plays a significant role in Edith Wharton’s *Age of Innocence*. For this paper you should construct a persuasive argument in which you consider how the depictions of food and the rituals surrounding it reflect and promote the larger themes of the novel. Consider the following questions: Who is depicted eating and why? What do they eat and how? What is Wharton doing with acts of eating in her text? How does she use depictions of food to create narrative effects? What are these effects? What narrative effects does she use depictions of food to create?

While there is no direct or indirect mention of problems in this particular assignment, your process and your product will benefit from a focus on a specific problem.

At this point, you may be wondering “What’s all this about problems? What about thesis or argument?” Problems motivate good papers, and good problems will lead you to your thesis or argument.

Theses do not fall from the sky. Finding a rich problem can be a big step in the direction of developing a compelling thesis. But when you are left to find and articulate your own problem, how do you go about it?

Looking for Trouble in Four Steps

There are four steps toward finding problems and developing meaningful projects of your own:

1. Noticing;
2. Articulating a problem and its details;
3. Posing fruitful questions;
4. Identifying what is at stake.

Noticing

We all know that it is important to warm up before you exercise. Warming up decreases your chance of sustaining an injury and generally makes working out easier on your body. Noticing is the equivalent of warming up your mind. In your first encounter with a text, begin by noticing different aspects. In other words, look for anything that stands out to you as unique or odd, identify patterns, and consider how a text does or does not meet your expectations. For example,

- Identify a particular word, concept, idea, or image that strikes you as surprising or that is repeated several times;
- Notice something about the title;
- Focus in on something that perplexes you.

Keep in mind that there's no "right" or "wrong" when noticing. As you notice, take notes in the margins of the texts or on a separate sheet of paper. If you are like me, you might be in a hurry, and you might occasionally exercise without warming up. Similarly, you might feel compelled to skip "noticing." Here's a tip to keep in mind: the more complicated or unfamiliar the texts you are working with the more likely you'll want to spend some time noticing. You wouldn't dream of running a marathon without stretching, but you might bang out three miles without ever bending over to touch your toes (though I'm not recommending it!).

Articulating a Problem and its Details

After you've spent some time noticing, review what you've noticed and look specifically for tensions. Here are some approaches to finding problems worth pursuing:

1. Juxtapose texts from the same genre or on the same topic and identify tensions or contradictions in terms of their ideas and/or definitions of key concepts.
2. Identify conflict between your own experiences and the theories or arguments offered by the text.
3. Identify troubling assumptions that underlie the central arguments/ideas of a text.
4. Note a gap or something relevant the text overlooks.

Posing Fruitful Questions

Problems naturally lead to questions. Once you've identified a problem or two that strikes you as worth considering, make a list of questions each problem raises for you. Good questions will lead you toward developing an argument of your own, but all questions are not good questions. You will need to assess your questions in a variety of contexts to determine whether or not they are worth pursuing.

First, consider your questions in the context of the academic discipline and genre for which you are writing. As a college student you are in the process of gaining access to a variety of new discourse communities. Anne Beaufort provides us with a succinct definition of a discourse community: "a social group that communicates at least in part via written texts and shares common goals, values, and writing standards, a specialized vocabulary and specialized genres" (179). Just as discourse communities have specialized vocabularies and standards, different discourse communities pursue different kinds of questions. Let's take a big problem like global warming and focus on Alaska. An environmental scientist, a pathologist, an economist, and an anthropologist would raise different kinds of questions about the same problem. The environmental scientist would ask questions like: how much has the water risen since we last checked? How have the increasing temperatures and rising water levels affected the vegetation and animal life? A pathologist would take a different approach: what new diseases have emerged in correlation with global warming? Economists would ask how global warming is affecting the economic situation in

Alaska. How has the lumber or the fishing industry been affected by global warming? How has global warming affected tourism? An anthropologist might ask how global warming is affecting the ways of life of certain indigenous groups. Because questions vary significantly from discipline to discipline, or field to field, it is important that you assess your questions according to the discourse community you are writing within.

While you are not typically expected to be an expert in any discipline or a full-fledged member of a discourse community as an undergraduate, your instructor will more than likely expect you to pursue questions that are relevant to his/her discipline whether or not he/she is consciously aware of this. Once you've selected a major, one way to develop a sense of the types of questions posed in your selected discipline is to read articles published in that field. For example, read a few of the articles assigned in class or published in the field and identify the questions these articles raise at the beginning of the texts. Of course, these questions are not always explicitly stated, so identifying an article's motivating questions might take some work. Write the questions out, make a list of defining characteristics, and assess your own questions next to this list. Also, pay attention to the types of questions your teacher poses either in assignments or in class. These are the kinds of questions you should be asking when you write for that course.

In addition to assessing whether or not you are asking the type of questions relevant to the discourse community or discipline you are participating in, it is also essential to consider the feasibility of your questions. Here are some questions you should ask yourself to consider feasibility: Do I have the expertise or experience to pursue this question? Do I need to conduct research to consider this question? Can I explore this question fully within the amount of time or space I am allotted? Often my students come up with *really* interesting questions that are impossible to tackle in a single paper within the confines of a semester.

Finally, know that some questions will lead you down dead ends and others will bear fruit. What makes a question fruitful? A question is fruitful if it leads you to discover new information or a new idea. Fruitful questions tend to begin with "why," "how," or "what" and can't be answered with a quick "yes" or "no." If you have come up with a yes/no question that strikes you as fruitful, try adding a "why" or "how" to it. For example, one might ask: "Are water levels rising in

Alaska?” The answer to this question is a quick yes. But asking how rising water levels are affecting Alaska transforms a dead-end question into a fruitful one.

What Is at Stake?

The next qualification of a fruitful question is that the question must be worth asking. It's likely you've heard a teacher ask “so what?” or “what is at stake?” or even, “why is this important?” It can be difficult to explain what is at stake, especially if your teacher has written the assignment. Not surprisingly, your initial response might be that what is at stake is a decent grade. This is true, but in order to motivate yourself and interest your reader, it is essential to identify why the question you or your teacher has posed is worth pursuing. Composition and rhetoric scholar Joseph Williams articulates this best when he asks: “What will you gain from answering your question or what will be lost if you do not answer your question?”

These steps, unfortunately, don't always lead directly to a worthwhile project; don't be surprised if every problem you isolate and every question you pose doesn't lead you down a well-paved path to a meaningful project and a complex argument. Also, you'll have more success if you're willing to cycle back in the process and refine your project and questions over the course of planning and drafting. Developing meaningful projects is hard work and takes practice. The more you practice, like most things, the more efficient you'll become.

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE: PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Let's walk through the process using specific texts. A few years ago I was teaching an essay writing course at Columbia University, and I asked my students to read bell hooks's “In our Glory: Photography and Black Life.”² In this essay, hooks describes the important role played by family photographs displayed on the walls of African American homes. When she was a child and media representation of black Americans was either negative or over-simplified, this semi-public display of personal photos served as a site of protest. In other words, on these walls her race was depicted in rich and complex ways unlike anything in the mainstream media. Here's how I went through the process of noticing, articulating problems, posing and assessing questions, and identifying what is at stake:

Noticing

What struck me the most, and even surprised me, was hooks' idea that what we hang on our walls—even the walls of our homes—could be so meaningful or powerful.

Articulating Problems

This naturally led me to consider what hangs on my walls. At the time, an image I took while on vacation in Nicaragua was hanging on my office wall. Here's the image:



Fig. 1. Nicaraguan woman on a side street in Granada.

Once hooks' ideas entered my office, trouble was not hard to find. I hung this picture on my wall because it appealed to me aesthetically: the vibrant pastel colors, the distinct patterns, the candid look on the woman's face. After reading hooks' essay, this 16" x 20" framed image hanging on my office wall became fraught with tension. I genuinely became troubled by it and worried I that I should take it down. Here are some problems, or germs of problems, that I brainstormed:

1. There is a tension inherent in the juxtaposition of the woman's context with the context of the image: the streets of Granada in the second poorest country in the west contrasts with the image's context, the walls of an Ivy League University in the richest country in the western hemisphere.
2. I do not know this woman, and she does not know me; yet, she hangs on my wall. Somehow the woman represented in this photo has come to represent something about me. When people come into my office and ask about the image, it leads into a discussion of my trip to Nicaragua. People tend to walk away with the impression that I'm somewhat adventurous.
3. hooks and her family represented themselves in images on the walls in their homes and in this way challenged the mainstream media's representation of black Americans. The tourist photos that I hang on the walls of my office (a semi-public space) have the power to influence people's perceptions of Nicaragua, a poor country that has a long history of civil unrest.

Posing Fruitful Questions

Questions I asked that emerged out of the above problems:

1. What is the story of this woman's life?
2. What percentage of Nicaraguan women are in the work force, and what kinds of work do they do?
3. Should I hang this photo on my wall?
4. What are ethical responsibilities of tourists when it comes to displaying and/or sharing pictures of their travels?

The first question regarding the woman's life story is impossible to answer without flying back to Nicaragua, tracking the woman down on the streets of Granada, and hiring a translator to interview her. While I think this has the potential to be interesting, it is not feasible for a one-semester course. If I were to fly back to interview her, my interview would likely be more productive if I had a specific purpose and genre in mind: would I write a piece for a newspaper? Would I write an academic article? Both genre and discipline shape the kinds of questions people ask and their approach to the same questions.

Question two is looking for a statistic; a statistic is a factual answer rather than an idea or an argument. In this case, either the answer is out there to be recovered and reported, or I would have to conduct a study and write a book about women in the Nicaraguan work force. Simply reporting this answer would not lead me to write an interesting paper unless I raised some new questions. If I were to conduct a study, I would probably need some disciplinary expertise in the field of economics. So either the question is a dead end (you uncover the answer and that is it), or it is not feasible (too big of a project requiring a tremendous amount of time and a certain level of expertise).

At this point, I hope you are getting a sense of what kinds of questions might not be appropriate for an undergraduate, academic paper. That is not to say that questions one and two are not worthwhile. It is simply that they do not work in the context of a one-semester course.

Questions three and four, on the other hand, are headed in the right direction. The third question is a yes/no question, which as I've said tends to lead toward a dead end, but I can reframe it as a why question: why should I or shouldn't I hang this photo on my wall? This question has potential for an academic paper provided that I consider the question's ramifications within a larger context that extends beyond my office. In other words, I'll need to explain the impact of the images we choose to hang in semi-public spaces like an office.

The final question emerges from hooks's ideas about the power of images and her claim that, "the field of representation (how we see ourselves, how others see us) is a site of ongoing struggle" (57). This last question is the most promising in the context of the assignment for this class, which is: "Use hooks's essay as a lens to analyze a personal experience and develop an argument of your own."

What Is at Stake Here?

Let's say that I decide to pursue the final question: What are the ethical responsibilities of tourists when it comes to displaying pictures of their travels? What do we gain by answering this question and/or what do we lose by not answering it? By answering this question, we can develop an ethical approach to taking tourist photos and displaying them. Developing an approach and a heightened awareness of how we represent other cultures seems particularly important when the received idea of these places is negative and overly-simplistic. The stereotype is that Nicaragua is a violent and dangerous country, and while there are

unsafe pockets, this, of course, is not the whole picture. Additionally, tourism to Nicaragua has the potential to boost the economy; how I represent this country could influence people to either visit or to avoid the country. In fact, two separate friends of mine decided to visit after hearing about my trip. Considering what is at stake not only helps test the question's potential, it also leads in the direction of an argument. If I were to pursue this question with the help of hooks and my own experience, I might end up with an argument that goes something like this:

Individuals who visit locales that are not your typical tourist destinations should be careful in how they represent these places to others particularly in the form of images. Tourists should seek to present the many dimensions of a place and its culture, in both their photos and their stories, and avoid reinforcing common misperceptions.

A common pitfall when attempting to answer the so-what question is to assume that your contribution has to solve major world problems, but the truth is that most published scholarly articles add a bit of information in a specific corner of knowledge, or they provide us with a new way of seeing or thinking about something.

PROBLEMS AS PRODUCT

So far we've been thinking about problems as central to the process of developing a complex argument. The good news is problems can do double duty for us: articulating complex problems and posing fruitful questions is not only part of the process, but it is also part of the product. That is to say that most nonfiction opens with a problem that leads to a question. Below are a few examples of introductions that present problems, raise fruitful questions, and identify what is at stake. Notice that in some cases, it takes more than one paragraph to accomplish these three steps.

What follows is an excerpt from the dust jacket for Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, which was named by *The New York Times* as one of the ten best books in 2006:

What should we have for dinner? For omnivores like ourselves, this simple question has always posed a dilemma: When you can eat just about anything nature (or the supermarket) has to

offer deciding what you *should* eat will inevitably stir anxiety, especially when some of the foods on offer might shorten your life. Today, buffeted by one food fad after another, America is suffering from what can only be described as a national eating disorder. The omnivore's dilemma has returned with a vengeance, as the cornucopias of the modern American supermarket and fast-food outlet confronts us with a bewildering and treacherous food landscape. What's at stake in our eating choices is not only your own and our children's health, but the health of the environment that sustains life on earth.

This common and seemingly simple question—what should we have for dinner?—turns out to be not so simple at all. According to Pollan, behind this question is a national problem. This jacket blurb promises to present the complexity of the problem and pursue the question about what we should eat, and it also explicitly articulates the stakes of this question. The stakes in this case—the health of our children and the environment—are no small potatoes. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that Pollan is *not* asking the food question with the highest stakes: millions of people across the world do not have the luxury of deciding what to have for dinner because they do not know where their next meal will come from; how do we prevent the starvation of millions? There's a strong allure to ask the question with the highest stakes, and it is obviously important that people out there *are* asking these questions and working to solve these problems. It is also important to realize that smaller problems and questions are worth pursuing, and pursuit of these smaller questions in our everyday life can help us chip away at larger problems. Pollan's question ultimately suggests that individual actions can have large-scale implications.

The next excerpt comes from an article published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* entitled, "Should Physicians Prescribe Religious Activities?":

There is increasing interest among the general public and the medical community in the role of religion in medicine. Polls indicate that the U.S. population is highly religious; most people believe in heaven and hell, the healing power of prayer, and the capacity of faith to aid in the recovery from disease. The popular press has published many articles in which religious faith and practice have been said to promote comfort,

healing, or both. A report that 77 percent of hospitalized patients wanted physicians to consider their spiritual needs is consistent with this trend.

Interest in the connection between religion and health has also emerged in the medical community. The National Institute for Healthcare Research, a privately funded, non-profit advocacy organization, has published extensive literature reviews suggesting that religious faith and practice are positively associated with health status. The organization's World Wide Web site encourages physicians to pay more attention to religious matters and recommends that they take a spiritual history at the time of each complete physical examination, with any concerns raised by patients addressed during follow-up visits. In addition, the National Institute on Aging and Harvard Medical School sponsor meetings on the integration of spirituality and medical practice. A survey of family physicians found that they strongly support the notion that religious beliefs can promote healing. Some physicians believe that going to church promotes health, argue for spiritual and religious interventions in medical practice, hope that the wall between medicine and religion will be torn down, and assert that "the medicine of the future is going to be prayer and Prozac."

Nearly 30 U.S. medical schools now offer courses on religion, spirituality, and health. The American Association of Medical Colleges has cosponsored a conference entitled "Spirituality and Medicine: Curricular Development" for the past three years, and each year it has attracted more than 100 physicians, faculty members, and chaplains from hospitals and medical schools throughout the United States.

As chaplains in health care settings, representing a wide range of religious traditions, and as biomedical researchers, we are troubled by the uncritical embrace of this trend by the general public, individual physicians, and American medical schools. We are concerned that broad generalizations are being made on the basis of limited, narrowly focused, and methodologically flawed studies of the place of religion in medical practice. These generalizations fail to recognize the diversity among physicians, patients, and practice settings and fail to

distinguish between superficial indexes of religiousness, such as self reports of church attendance, and personal religious motivation. Such generalizations will lead to considerable confusion until more and better research is done. (1913–14)

In “Should Physicians Prescribe Religious Activities?,” Richard P. Sloan and Emilia Bagiella, et al. identify a significant problem in how medicine is practiced in America: the medical community has embraced the notion that religion plays a beneficial role in practicing medicine despite a lack of concrete evidence. The first three paragraphs pile up evidence of the medical community’s uncritical acceptance of religion’s curative powers. The question that emerges directly out of this problem is: “why should or shouldn’t physicians prescribe religious activities?” You may have noticed that the title of the article simplifies this question into a snappy title by posing it as a yes/no question, but the essay pursues a fruitful “why” question. The article goes on to articulate several reasons why physicians should not prescribe religious activities. It urges physicians to stop recommending religious activity until more and better empirical studies are conducted. The stakes of their question are articulated in the final sentence of the introduction: confusion among the medical establishment and patients will spread if the question is not answered.

Here’s one final example written by Johan, a student in my composition class at Columbia University. Johan happened upon this problem after reading an article by Steven Pinker published in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled “The Moral Instinct”:

You have two options: 1) wait in an endless queue for a kidney donation or 2) ask a friend or relative to donate a kidney. This was the dilemma Sally Satel, a 49 year old psychiatrist in Washington, was facing. She had been given a death sentence and the only possible appeal was to get a kidney transplant. This does not seem to be an insurmountable problem since “theoretically, kidneys should be in booming supply. Virtually everyone has two, and healthy individuals can give one away and still lead perfectly normal lives” (Satel 1). The National Organ Transplant Act of 1984, however, prohibits the sale of organs, leaving those in need of an organ to rely on altruistic donation. Sally found this very upsetting: “it was about the very fact that an organ had to be a gift” (Satel 4).

Sally's emotional reaction may be understood in light of the fact that her friends decided against donating a kidney to her and that "since 1999 more than 30,000 U.S. patients with kidney failure have died waiting for an organ that never arrived" (Hippen 2)—in short, altruism alone, as it now stands, is not enough to satisfy the demand of the many patients, like Sally, who urgently need an organ.

The majority of academic articles that discuss organ trading argue for legalizing a market in organs. Steven Pinker, a prominent experimental psychologist, asserts, however, that the general public considers organ trading taboo (38). This discrepancy in opinion between medical researchers and the public could be explained from the perspective that these researchers, unlike the public, have centered their arguments upon cost-effectiveness and number of lives saved rather than on morality *per se*. For example, Arthur J. Matas University of Minnesota, Minnesota, MN and Mark Schnitzler at the Washington and Minnesota Schools of Medicine respectively, found that organ trading could save "\$94,579 (US dollars, 2002) [per kidney vended], and 3.5 quality-adjusted life years" (1). Benjamin E. Hippen, a transplant nephrologist in North Carolina, also argues for the cost and medical benefits of organ trading (1). However, scientific data by itself is not normative and cannot tell us what we should do—which is what Hippen is trying to do: "The National Organ Transplantation Act of 1984 which prohibits the sale of organs should be repealed" (1).

If these proponents wish to repeal the organ act, they will have to discuss the moral element of organ trading. They will have to discuss how this moral obstacle against organ trading can be overcome or appeased. After all "millions of people are suffering, not because the organs are not available, but because morality does not allow them to have access to the organs" (Kishore 362). What argument should the proponents construct to make organ trading compatible with morality? What argument will encourage the public, who consider organ trading taboo—that it is even too sinful to think about—accept it as morally defensible? An answer to this question will either bring an end to a "terrible policy failure" and of "human lives

unnecessarily lost” (Hippen 1) or give us a more nuanced and rational rejection of the concept of organ trading—something that the many people dying from a lack of donor deserve.

The problem Johan has uncovered in his essay entitled “Organ Trading: Supply and Demand Meets Morality” is multi-layered. First, people in need of organ transplants are dying because there are not enough organs available. Second, despite the fact that donating an organ is a safe procedure, people are reluctant to donate even to close friends. Third, while the academic community is overwhelmingly in favor of organ sales, the general public on the whole rejects the practice. The third problem is the one that leads to his paper’s fruitful questions: “What argument should the proponents construct to make organ trading compatible with morality? What argument will encourage the public, who consider organ trading taboo—that it is even too sinful to think about—accept it as morally defensible?” Johan articulates what is at stake explicitly at the end of his introduction by identifying what will be gained if this question is answered.

Each of these texts offers a useful model for how to present rich problems, pose fruitful questions, and articulate what is at stake in an inquiry. Reading texts this way not only provides you with approaches you can imitate, but it will also help you read more effectively. Studies suggest that reading texts on unfamiliar topics in unfamiliar fields can have a disorienting affect on a reader, making comprehension more difficult. Much of what you read as a college student is unfamiliar in content and form and requires a more attentive, deeper read. One way to get your bearings is to approach an unfamiliar text by identifying its purpose. Once you’ve identified an author’s problem and question, you’ll have a better handle on the rest of the text.

CONCLUSION: WHAT’S YOUR PROBLEM?

While it’s unlikely that you’ll ever have to write for your life as Paul Sheldon did in the movie *Misery*, when a grade hangs in the balance, it might feel like a life or death situation. In these high-pressure, high-stakes situations, it helps to have a specific approach and to know the expectations of academic writing. You might be thinking that the process I’ve outlined here is quite labor intensive. You are right. It is. Developing a complex idea of your own requires hard work.

On any given day, I can be heard asking students in the classroom or in my office, “What’s your problem?” To a passerby it might seem like a rude question, perhaps the beginning of an argument. It is, in fact, the beginning of an argument but not the kind with raised voices. Academic arguments follow from problems. But obviously problems exist outside of the realm of academia, particularly problems that require quick solutions. The more you practice the process of articulating problems, posing questions, and identifying the stakes, and the more you cultivate your awareness of problems, the more successful you will be at writing academic papers and handling life’s complexities.

DISCUSSION

1. What is your process for developing an argument or a thesis? How do you approach a writing assignment that does not provide you with a specific problem or question?
2. Examine the writing assignments you’ve received in your classes. Have your instructors provided you with problems and/or questions? How do the types of problems and questions provided differ from course to course? What types of problems and questions are characteristic of writing in your major?
3. Look at papers you’ve written over the course of your academic career. Do you tend to present problems, pose questions, and identify what is at stake? How do your introductions unfold?
4. Examine the introductions of several newspaper and scholarly articles and books. For each text, identify the problem, the question, and what is at stake.

NOTES

1. Prominent European philosophers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) are credited with laying the groundwork for Marxism.

2. bell hooks is the pen name of feminist, author, and social critic, Gloria Jean Watkins. She intentionally does not use capital letters in her name.

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