

Tasks for Purpose A: To get a problem on the public agenda

You want to bring public attention to a problem of concern to you. It might be known to others, but only recently familiar to you. Or, you might be aware of a problem of which others are unaware. In any case, you must understand the problematic conditions well.

To develop your understanding, follow an approach of observation and inquiry. Do the tasks below in sequence. Results of one task will help you perform the next one. (**Note:** This task outline assumes that you are a novice in problem definition.)

As you work through the tasks listed on the left, use the space on the right to begin developing responses to the task-related steps and questions.

Task 1: Describe the problem and identify the stakeholders	
Task Steps	Notes
Recognize problematic conditions.	
Characterize the problem that those conditions create.	
Specify individuals as well as collectives who have a stake in the problem or its solution.	
Choose methods of inquiry. To increase your awareness of the problem and to recognize public interests in it, you can proceed in any of the following alternative ways.	
Work from observation of experiences, practices, effects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Note likes/dislikes about your (or others') daily routine ▪ List good/bad aspects of your current or past job(s), or a family member's or a friend's job(s) ▪ Sit for an hour in the office of a service provider to observe people affected by the problem and to observe the practices of policy implementers ▪ Visit locales affected by conditions or by policy to observe impacts on physical environments 	
Work from subjective constructions: listen to or read stories (actual or imagined) that refer to the problem.	
Work from unfinished business: re-examine a neglected need; revive a former interest, return to an incomplete project.	

Work from anticipation: imagine the consequences if particular things continue as they are.	
Work from ignorance: choose a matter that concerns others (but is unfamiliar to you) that you want to know more about.	
Work from knowledge: informed by your (or others') expertise, consider the concern technically	
Work from values: informed by your (or others') ideals or commitments, consider the concern ethically or legally.	
Task 2: Specify the issues	
When a problem has been identified, it is not yet a policy matter until its issues for policy are specified. Issues refer to stakeholders' concerns, political disagreements, and value conflicts. To recognize issues, you might:	
Task Questions	Responses and Notes
Think about impacts of the problem: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who or what is affected by it? 	
Conceive the problem narrowly, then broadly: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is it individual and local, or more? 	
Conceive it broadly, then narrowly: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is it widely distributed, or concentrated? 	
Think about attitudes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do different stakeholders perceive the problem? What values (ideals, beliefs, assumptions) are expressed in their definitions? 	
Think about authority: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do stakeholders want to address the problem? Do they see government action as a solution? Do they agree or disagree on government's role? 	
Task 3: Offer solutions (if you are proposing a solution)	

Solutions typically rely on policy instruments (optional actions such as spending more or spending less, starting or ending programs, and so forth) that government can use.

If you already have a positive and feasible solution to suggest, do so. (Generally, problem descriptions with a proposed solution get more attention.)

If you need to think about it, or if you want to counter a proposed solution, or if you want to create fresh alternatives, stimulate your thinking with any of these approaches:

Task Questions	Responses and Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Review the problematic conditions with a fresh eye, looking for unnoticed solutions 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reconsider a tried-but-failed or a known-but-ignored solution to find new potential 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Look at the problem from a different perspective (a different stake holder's, for example). 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If government already addresses the problem, assign it to a different governmental level or jurisdiction. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consult with nonprofit groups and non-governmental organizations that are concerned about the problem 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consider doing nothing (keep things as they are). 	

Task 4: Write the document (problem description and definition).

Before you write, use the Method (chapter 2) to determine the rhetorical framework (audience, purpose, context, situation) for your communication. Then write with that framework in mind.

Choose an appropriate genre for your document. Problem descriptions can be presented in varied document types.

- If the type is prescribed for you, use it in accord with your rhetorical framework.
- If you are free to choose the document type, choose one that fits your audience, purpose, context, and situation.
- Here are two options:
 - Letter or essay describing problematic conditions, possibly identifying causes of the conditions
 - Letter or essay conveying informed opinion, possibly advocating an approach to the problem

Do not choose to write a letter or essay simply because those forms are familiar to you, the writer. Consider your readers' needs and expectations, too.

- Are busy readers likely to be impatient with the loose organization of an academic essay or the detailed nature of an informal letter?
- Might your audience want a succinct summary upfront? Might they want sub-headings to announce the contents of each sub-section?

If the answers are yes, use those devices. They are borrowed from the 'inverted pyramid' in news writing, and they are commonly used in professional communications, as well. They work for public policy communication, too, because they aid quick comprehension.

Cite the sources to which your communication refers. Use the citation style prescribed, or choose either

- APA (American Psychological Association) Style (described at www.apastyle.org)
- MLA (Modern Language Association) Style (described at www.mla.org).

Both APA and MLA style guides tell you how to cite a range of source types including government documents. (For example, see Citing Government Information Sources Using MLA Style at <http://www.library.unr.edu/depts/bgic/guides/government/cite.html>).

For further help with citing government sources, consult Garner, Diane L. and Diane H. Smith, 1993, *The Complete Guide to Citing Government Information Resources: A Manual for Writers and Librarians* (rev. ed.) (Bethesda, MD: Congressional Information Service)

Review, revise, and edit your document.

- After you write, check your document's quality against the Checklists (see "Communication in the Policy Making Process").