

## PRINCIPLES OF PROBLEM SOLVING

There are no hard and fast rules that will ensure success in solving problems. However, it is possible to outline some general steps in the problem-solving process and to give some principles that may be useful in the solution of certain problems. These steps and principles are just common sense made explicit. They have been adapted from George Polya's book *How To Solve It*.

### 1 Understand the Problem

The first step is to read the problem and make sure that you understand it clearly. Ask yourself the following questions:

*What is the unknown?*

*What are the given quantities?*

*What are the given conditions?*

For many problems it is useful to

*draw a diagram*

and identify the given and required quantities on the diagram.

Usually it is necessary to

*introduce suitable notation*

In choosing symbols for the unknown quantities we often use letters such as  $a$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$ ,  $m$ ,  $n$ ,  $x$ , and  $y$ , but in some cases it helps to use initials as suggestive symbols; for instance,  $V$  for volume or  $t$  for time.

### 2 Think of a Plan

Find a connection between the given information and the unknown that will enable you to calculate the unknown. It often helps to ask yourself explicitly: "How can I relate the given to the unknown?" If you don't see a connection immediately, the following ideas may be helpful in devising a plan.

**Try to Recognize Something Familiar** Relate the given situation to previous knowledge. Look at the unknown and try to recall a more familiar problem that has a similar unknown.

**Try to Recognize Patterns** Some problems are solved by recognizing that some kind of pattern is occurring. The pattern could be geometric, or numerical, or algebraic. If you can see regularity or repetition in a problem, you might be able to guess what the continuing pattern is and then prove it.

**Use Analogy** Try to think of an analogous problem, that is, a similar problem, a related problem, but one that is easier than the original problem. If you can solve the similar, simpler problem, then it might give you the clues you need to solve the original, more difficult problem. For instance, if a problem involves very large numbers, you could first try a similar problem with smaller numbers. Or if the problem involves three-dimensional geometry, you could look for a similar problem in two-dimensional geometry. Or if the problem you start with is a general one, you could first try a special case.

**Introduce Something Extra** It may sometimes be necessary to introduce something new, an auxiliary aid, to help make the connection between the given and the unknown. For instance, in a problem where a diagram is useful the auxiliary aid could be a new line drawn in a diagram. In a more algebraic problem it could be a new unknown that is related to the original unknown.

**Take Cases** We may sometimes have to split a problem into several cases and give a different argument for each of the cases. For instance, we often have to use this strategy in dealing with absolute value.

**Work Backward** Sometimes it is useful to imagine that your problem is solved and work backward, step by step, until you arrive at the given data. Then you may be able to reverse your steps and thereby construct a solution to the original problem. This procedure is commonly used in solving equations. For instance, in solving the equation  $3x - 5 = 7$ , we suppose that  $x$  is a number that satisfies  $3x - 5 = 7$  and work backward. We add 5 to each side of the equation and then divide each side by 3 to get  $x = 4$ . Since each of these steps can be reversed, we have solved the problem.

**Establish Subgoals** In a complex problem it is often useful to set subgoals (in which the desired situation is only partially fulfilled). If we can first reach these subgoals, then we may be able to build on them to reach our final goal.

**Indirect Reasoning** Sometimes it is appropriate to attack a problem indirectly. In using proof by contradiction to prove that  $P$  implies  $Q$ , we assume that  $P$  is true and  $Q$  is false and try to see why this can't happen. Somehow we have to use this information and arrive at a contradiction to what we absolutely know is true.

**Mathematical Induction** In proving statements that involve a positive integer  $n$ , it is frequently helpful to use the following principle.

**PRINCIPLE OF MATHEMATICAL INDUCTION** Let  $S_n$  be a statement about the positive integer  $n$ . Suppose that

1.  $S_1$  is true.
2.  $S_{k+1}$  is true whenever  $S_k$  is true.

Then  $S_n$  is true for all positive integers  $n$ .

This is reasonable because, since  $S_1$  is true, it follows from condition 2 (with  $k = 1$ ) that  $S_2$  is true. Then, using condition 2 with  $k = 2$ , we see that  $S_3$  is true. Again using condition 2, this time with  $k = 3$ , we have that  $S_4$  is true. This procedure can be followed indefinitely.

**3 Carry Out the Plan**

In Step 2 a plan was devised. In carrying out that plan we have to check each stage of the plan and write the details that prove that each stage is correct.

**4 Look Back**

Having completed our solution, it is wise to look back over it, partly to see if we have made errors in the solution and partly to see if we can think of an easier way to solve the problem. Another reason for looking back is that it will familiarize us with the method of solution and this may be useful for solving a future problem. Descartes said, "Every problem that I solved became a rule which served afterwards to solve other problems."

These principles of problem solving are illustrated in the following examples. Before you look at the solutions, try to solve these problems yourself, referring to these Principles of Problem Solving if you get stuck. You may find it useful to refer to this section from time to time as you solve the exercises in the remaining chapters of this book.