**Turning Problems into Possibilities**



**Introduction**

Not all opportunities come prepackaged in a volunteer or paid position. Sharpening your ability to identify ways to make a positive impact in situations around you helps you gain transferable skills and valuable experience that will help you stand out when applying to grad school or a position in a field that interests you.

This activity will show you how to turn problems into possibilities by analyzing the situation, considering possible solutions, developing allies, and gaining support for your ideas. Creating opportunities is much more satisfying than waiting for them.

**Step 1: Identify the Problem**

The first step is to identify the problem you want to focus on for this exercise. You may have become aware of this problem in one of your courses, through your [Envision YU](https://www.yorku.ca/research/project/eyudev/) research or through your own experience. You don’t need to have a full understanding of the problem yet; you simply need to be able to describe it in a sentence or two.

**For example:**

Jasmin is studying environmental management and works part-time in a coffee shop. Although her employer uses recycled paper cups and napkins, and sustainably grown coffee, she notices that the coffee grounds create a lot of waste. Because recycled waste is picked up only once a week, most of the coffee grounds are put in the trash which is picked up twice a week. She can’t help feeling there's something missing here that could prevent so much recyclable waste going to landfill.

**Present State:**What is the current situation?

Describe the problem you identified and why you think it is a problem in the space below:

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**Step 2: Research the Gap or Need**

Once you have identified the problem you want to focus on, the next step is to do some research to understand it more deeply. You can talk to people you know who are or could be impacted by this problem (who could provide insight), search the internet or even consult one of the [Reference Librarians](https://www.library.yorku.ca/web/ask-services/) at the Scott Library for guidance on how to research your problem. While you are researching, take note of aspects of the problem that are within your ability to influence and that interest you.

**This is what Jasmin did:**

At first Jasmin considered advocating for City Hall to increase the amount of times recycling is picked up in a week, but she felt that was more than she could take on right now, so she began to do online research about ways in which coffee grounds have been reused rather than recycled elsewhere. She discovered there were many low scale and large-scale solutions for reusing coffee grounds, including a whole Wikipedia site dedicated to this issue. She was even able to do some of this research as part of a course assignment.

\*\* The [**Developing Strong Community Relationships**](https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/envisionyu/chapter/developing-strong-community-relationships/)exercise will guide you through working with collaborators to address problems.

How are you going to research your problem? List at least three strategies in the box below:

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**Identified Gap**: What gap or need exists in the current state?

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**Step 3: Identify Possible Solutions**

When you have completed your research, you should have a better understanding of what is causing your problem and can start to consider the aspect(s) you can most realistically influence.

**This is what Jasmin did next:**

Jasmin identified several small businesses similar in scope to her employer’s and learned how they were supporting urban gardens by donating coffee grounds for their compositing programs. She did more research and discovered that there were at least half a dozen urban gardens within a few miles of the coffee shop where she worked, and she began to formulate a plan which she pitched to her employer. After several meetings with her employer and the people from the urban gardens, they agreed to a six-month pilot program where the gardeners would pick up coffee grounds for their gardens weekly. At the end of the pilot, they would reassess whether the initiative should continue.

**Desired State:** Describe the desired situation.

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**Step 4: Create strategies**

Based on your understanding of the problem you identified, in what ways could you make a positive impact? List two or three ideas below, indicating which seems most manageable to you.

**Suggested Strategies:**How can the desired state be achieved?

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If you would like to put your ideas into action, you can start a project! You might be able to do this as part of a course, or on your own initiative with a student or community group. The [Student Project Toolkit](https://learningcommons.yorku.ca/projecttoolkit/) provides suggestions and resources to guide you through your project.