

PROBLEMS WITH SOME ESSAY TOPICS

Problem-solution essays are often assigned by teachers. Typically, the topics suggested are such as global warming, the danger of second-hand smoke, AIDS, illegal drugs, gun control, the death penalty, and so on.

According to George Hillocks, Jr., a writing instructor in both high school and colleges in the U.S., such topics are not good choices for the following reasons:

- *Students have no way to investigate these problems except through secondary sources.* Secondary sources do not provide raw data but opinions and judgements about data someone else has collected. Students do not learn to interpret data for themselves.
- *These problems do not involve genuine research.* The goal is to go to the library, find some material related to the topic, take notes, and then write an essay.
- *Since there are no original data, the only warrants are the presumed authority of the writers whose works the student has chosen to use.* This promotes the false idea that “if it’s in the book, it must be true.” In this kind of writing, the student can avoid any critical thinking. It is an invitation to plagiarism, whether intended or not.
- *Students come to school with already learned solutions to the policy questions suggested by most teachers and textbooks.* Not only have they learned these solutions, they have learned the reasons they offer to support these solutions. Critical thinking is discouraged or, worse, eliminated.

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