

The Meta-ProblemSM Method

A structured approach to choosing which problem to solve

Step 1: Define your focus

The world is a complicated and interconnected place. If you want to choose a good problem to solve, you need to know what open-ended question you hope to answer.

Examples: Which vacation do I want to take? What job is best for me? Do I need a new car?

Step 2: Understand your goals

We have many competing priorities and desires which vary by the day. Putting words to the things you value early helps clarify what you're trying to accomplish.

You might care about costs in time, money and effort, as well as benefits like different features, satisfaction and happiness. Each goal is an idea you value, "low cost," not a specific number.

Step 3: Identify your options

This is a brainstorming step to recognize the many ways you can achieve your goals. If your options seem too limited, revisit the previous steps to ensure your original question was broad enough and you covered all your goals.

For each goal, you can ask yourself what decisions you could make or what options you have to achieve it, or make it better.

Step 4: Balance tradeoffs

Each option you identify will have strengths and weaknesses when you rank it against your goals. Evaluating each option is how you understand what is possible and what isn't.

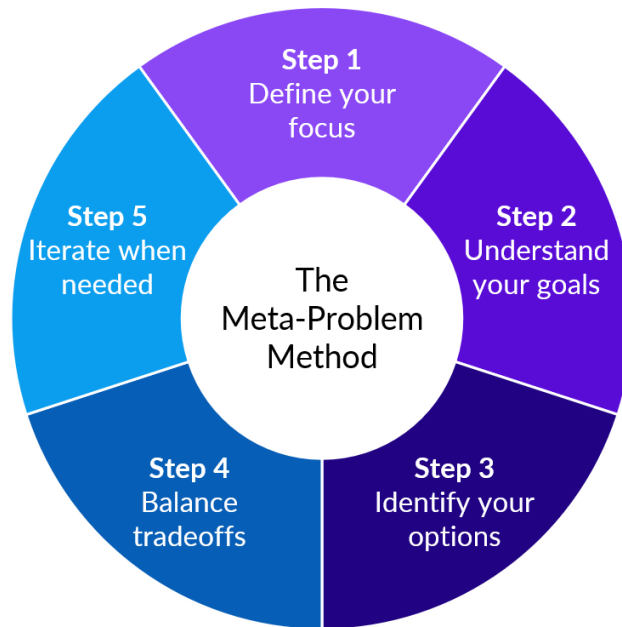
We have both objective and subjective factors that change our preferences. The best way to incorporate both is to compare our options based on ALL of our goals.

Step 5: Iterate when needed

Some decisions take time to implement which may reveal new information. When you learn something new that changes the expected results or reveals different options, revisit the tradeoffs to ensure you are still making the best decision.

It is often valuable to plan for iteration instead of attempting to solve the "whole" problem at once. What information would help you make the best choice? Sometimes the evidence is neutral. It does not suggest any one option over another. In that case, you have arrived at a choice (as opposed to a decision). All other things being equal, be guided by the greater good.

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Overview of how to use the method

The Meta-Problem Method is a tool to help you choose which problem to solve in order to get the best outcomes. If you have a choice in front of you but dislike all your options or think there may be something better out there, following this structure can help you either find a better alternative, or accept there isn't one.

Common mistakes:

1. Zooming in on a narrow question too early: "Which new van should I buy?" might leave out better options like other new vehicles, used vehicles, or repairing a current vehicle.
2. Missing key goals: If you're looking for a new job, are you considering both your immediate needs and longer-term career goals? What are other factors you need to consider?
3. Eliminating good options: If you don't consider a certain option, there's no way you can choose it. The more options you think of, the better your odds of finding something good.
4. Wishing for a perfect solution: Life has tradeoffs, and so only when we know what's possible can we decide how we want to balance the tradeoffs.
5. Falling for the sunk cost fallacy: There is always a risk you'll learn something after making a decision that will completely change your analysis. When that happens, it's always worth asking yourself if it's worth changing your plan.