When Plans Stall

How obstacles, tests, and expectations shape problem solving

P.4.7 "Discuss the obstacles and strategies involved in problem solving and explain the concept of learned helplessness."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two obstacles that narrow the committee's thinking, and circle two actions that help it test or improve a solution. Number the sentences showing Nia's past lack of control and her present response 1 and 2.

A Quieter Place to Study

1. At Ridge High, students crowd the library after school, but the only quiet corner has six seats. A student committee is asked to make room for more quiet study without buying furniture. At first, members keep proposing longer tables. That mental set, relying on a familiar approach, keeps them from considering other ways to use the space. One member also insists that the old rolling book carts are only for holding books. This is functional fixedness: seeing an object only in its usual role. Both obstacles narrow the options before the committee has tested any ideas.

2. The committee changes course by stating its real goal: reduce noise while keeping clear walkways. Members split the problem into seating, sound, and traffic. They measure the room, ask the librarian about safety rules, and try using two rolling carts as a temporary divider around chairs moved from a noisy area. A one-day trial reveals that the divider helps with sound but blocks a doorway, so they shift it. Instead of treating their first idea as proof they were right, they use the trial and feedback to revise it. The strategy turns a vague complaint into smaller, testable decisions.

3. Another student, Nia, has suggested quiet-study plans before. Each time, the school changed the library schedule without telling students, and her plans failed for reasons she could not control. Now she says, "Nothing we try will matter," and stops offering ideas, even though this committee can run a trial. Repeated experiences of having no control can produce learned helplessness, an expectation that effort will not change the outcome. It is not proof that Nia lacks skill. The committee invites her to track noise during the next trial and share what she finds. Seeing that her measurements help shape a change could rebuild her sense of control.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How do the committee's mental set and functional fixedness each limit its ideas?

2. How does the committee turn its broad problem into a solution it can test and revise? Give two actions from the passage.

3. Why does Nia's response fit learned helplessness rather than show that she lacks skill?

4. What result of Nia's new task could challenge her belief that trying will not matter?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Invent a school or community problem that is not about the library. In four or five sentences, describe a thinking obstacle, a way to test or revise a solution, and how someone who expects effort to fail could regain a sense of control.

When Plans Stall

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two obstacles that narrow the committee's thinking, and circle two actions that help it test or improve a solution. Number the sentences showing Nia's past lack of control and her present response 1 and 2. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How do the committee's mental set and functional fixedness each limit its ideas?	**The mental set keeps members proposing longer tables instead of other ways to use the room. Functional fixedness keeps one member from seeing the book carts as possible dividers.**
2	How does the committee turn its broad problem into a solution it can test and revise? Give two actions from the passage.	**The committee splits the problem into seating, sound, and traffic, then tests a cart divider for a day. When it blocks a doorway, members shift it.**
3	Why does Nia's response fit learned helplessness rather than show that she lacks skill?	**Her earlier plans failed because of schedule changes she could not control. She now expects effort to make no difference and stops contributing, even though the committee can run a trial.**
4	What result of Nia's new task could challenge her belief that trying will not matter?	**If her noise measurements help the committee make a change, she can see that her effort affected the outcome.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The school garden keeps losing seedlings during hot weekends. The club assumes more watering is the only fix, so a mental set keeps members from considering shade. They test shade cloth over half the beds and compare seedling survival in both halves. After several failed gardens, Eli thinks helping is pointless and stops volunteering. The club asks Eli to record the results and help choose the next adjustment, so Eli can see whether an action changes the outcome.

Accept other passage-supported actions and reasonable explanations of how Nia could see a connection between effort and outcome. For the original scenario, look for a clear thinking obstacle, a test or revision strategy, and a specific opportunity to rebuild a sense of control.