

## 1.16 Situation-Problem-Response-Evaluation (SPRE) essays

This type of essay is a typical approach to academic questions: it is also known as the *Situation-Problem-Solution-Evaluation* or *Situation - Problem - Solution - Outcome* pattern.

In your essay, you are basically identifying the topic as a problem to be solved. The actual question won't explicitly specify this approach: you will need to identify it from the context.

Look at these questions:

- Why has privatisation of the railways been opposed by those who favour a public service?
- Lack of lowland national parks in the UK is regarded as a "striking weakness". Discuss to what extent you agree with this statement.
- Outline current scientific opinion on global warming. Is the situation irreversible?

The answer to these question will involve varying amounts of argument, of showing that you are aware of differing viewpoints. But whereas in a purely argumentative essay the focus is on this argument and counter-argument, in an SPRE essay there is more focus on the situation, with many points of view, perhaps all equally valid.

Let's look at another question in a little more detail:

*What were the main labour relations problems facing the Conservative government in the 1980s? How did they attempt to solve them and to what extent were they successful?*

Here, the situation is the UK in the 1980s led by a Conservative government the **problem** is labour relations, the **response/solution** is what the Government did about the situation, the **evaluation** is your view (backed up by evidence) on the level of success.

As well as for a complete essay or article, the approach can be used in an individual paragraph or longer section of writing.

Here is another very simple example:

I left school 9 months ago with good exam grades, but I am still unemployed. I am considering moving abroad and hope that this will increase my chances of finding employment.

The four components should be clear here.

Read and analyse the following short text about the ozone layer and identify the four stages of the SPRE approach:

Over the past year, scientific evidence has continued to mount showing that stratospheric ozone depletion is even more serious than thought only a few years back. This poses a major problem, because the ozone layer shields life from harmful solar ultraviolet radiation known as UV-B. Although ozone depletion has been most pronounced at the poles, its effects will be serious at other latitudes, since UV-B, like all solar radiation, increases in intensity toward the equator. At higher latitudes, people will face a greater risk of skin cancer; at lower latitudes, more crop damage and health effects such as cataracts and immune system impairment are likely to occur, and vital links in food chains on land and sea might be broken.

While the ozone problem has been caused principally by industrialized countries, developing countries will have to join them in reaching a solution. Their participation is currently facilitated by the 1987 Montreal Protocol (MP), but if the phaseout needs to be accelerated, additional financial incentives and a more flexible way of carrying out the accord would be required.

**Situation:** "stratospheric ozone depletion"

**Problem:** "At higher latitudes, people will face a greater risk of skin cancer; at lower latitudes, more crop damage and health effects such as cataracts and immune system impairment are likely to occur, and vital links in food chains on land and sea might be broken"

**Response:** "1987 Montreal Protocol (MP)"

**Evaluation:** "if the phaseout needs to be accelerated, additional financial incentives and a more flexible way of carrying out the accord would be required"

*Source of text: White, R. & McGovern (1994), D. Writing Harlow : Prentice Hall*

## How to create an 'S-P-R-E' outline

Your outline will have four main phases (although in a short essay or examination answer, the 'situation' may form your introduction, and the 'evaluation' your conclusion). We can illustrate this by looking at the following title:

'Lack of lowland national parks in the UK is regarded as a "striking weakness". Discuss to what extent you agree with this statement.'

This is the pattern	This is how the sample outline looks
<p><b>Introduction:</b> introduction of general topic (situation/problem); specific areas to be covered in this essay (responses/evaluation)</p>	<p><b>Introduction:</b> Many parks in UK, but no lowland parks; Economic/environmental pressure for change</p>
<p><b>The Situation:</b> Describe it. What caused it?</p>	<p><b>The Situation:</b> Parks in Britain = hill areas, in the North and West; High land in N. and W. = unfertile + remote; low land in S. and E. = in demand (for farming/housing)</p>
<p><b>The Problem:</b> Describe it</p>	<p><b>The Problem:</b> Great pressure on lowland countryside... because access to current parks = difficult; because population and economy in S. and E. growing quickly; because of lifestyle changes (e.g. commuting/increased leisure)</p>
<p><b>The Response or Solution:</b> Describe a response, + evidence; Describe any alternative responses, + evidence</p>	<p><b>The Response or Solution:</b> Local government response = protection for countryside and jobs at local council level, + details/examples; Economists' response = protection is bad for S.E. economy. All planning restrictions should end, + details/examples; Environmentalists' response = park is best way to protect countryside and protect local economy, + examples;</p>
<p><b>The Evaluation/Conclusion:</b> Which is perhaps the best response? What might be the end result of applying each response? Final statement</p>	<p><b>The Evaluation/Conclusion:</b> Best solution is perhaps the last, because... a) it allows co-ordination of policy over a wide area b) it ensures the protection of the countryside c) it also protects the local economy by promoting tourism Other responses may result in ... a) large-scale loss of countryside to houses/roads b) lack of central plan between councils Aim must be to defend irreplaceable resource for future generations, so you generally agree with essay title</p>

Adapted from White, R. and Arndt, V. (1991) *Process Writing*, London: Longman.  
Source: <http://www.efl.arts.gla.ac.uk/CampusOnly/essays/26web.htm>

Here is the essay based on the above outline:

'Lack of lowland National Parks in England and Wales is regarded as a "striking weakness". Discuss to what extent you agree with this statement.'

England and Wales possess some of the finest national parks in Europe. In terms of percentage of overall area protected, of natural beauty, and as models of organisation, they have a great deal to offer the visitor. However, controversy over the distribution of these parks has recently grown. Some in Britain have commented that, though numerous, the parks are not well-distributed (see, for example, Fisher [1999] and Smith [2000]). Marcus and Nabulsi (1999) have singled out the complete absence of any national park in lowland areas for specific criticism. This essay will examine the environmental/economic effects that have resulted from this. It will then evaluate some of the responses that have been put forward, and suggest that the argument in favour of lowland parks is a persuasive one.

The first national park, the Peak District, was instituted at the end of the Second World War to protect the highland area between Manchester and Sheffield. Over the following thirty years, another nine parks were added, but all cover highland areas (such as the Lake District), remote areas (such as the Pembrokeshire coast in Wales). The fact that English and Welsh national parks are found in hilly/inaccessible areas in the North and West of the country can be explained in part by the natural beauty of these areas, but also by their infertility and remoteness. Though parts of the lowland in the South and East are also of exceptional beauty, their value, whether as prime agricultural land or for building houses, has prevented their inclusion within the national park organisation.

This is now becoming a problem. The last fifteen years, in particular, have seen great pressure on lowland countryside, for several reasons. Firstly, access to the existing parks from the main urban centres is generally difficult; with the exception of the Peak District, most require car journeys of two or three hours (Millmore, 1998). Secondly, the economy (and hence indirectly the population) of S.E. England has expanded rapidly in this period, bringing in its wake increasing demands upon the surrounding rural area both for housing and recreational purposes (Slade, 1996). Finally, as Wink (1997) points out, there have been distinct lifestyle changes in recent years. Improved road communications, the birth of 'teleworking', and increased general wealth mean that many choose to work in the city but live in the countryside, or even to relocate completely to the countryside. Alongside relocation, lifestyle changes have also brought increases in recreation time; the number of visitors using the countryside for walking, cycling or (perhaps the greatest threat) merely for a day trip in the car, has grown considerably.

Though almost all recognise that a problem exists, agreement on the best response has not been easy to reach. Three main schools of thought can perhaps be identified: that of local government, that favoured by some economists, and the course of action preferred by environmentalists. Responsibility for areas of natural beauty (other than those within park boundaries) is currently held at local government level. These local administrative bodies are generally happy with the existing situation, which they argue is the best way to balance the need to protect the countryside with the importance of ensuring

employment and affordable housing for local inhabitants. Adopting this viewpoint, Marchmont (1999:45) argues that the current situation has evolved over time, and clearly balances a variety of needs. Any change is likely to upset this equilibrium and should, therefore, be regarded with considerable scepticism.

Certain economists, however, maintain that this situation presents an overly-fragmented and excessively restrictive response, one unlikely to sustain recent economic growth in Britain. Thomson (1999) and Linegan (2000) argue that attempts by local government to protect the countryside have had the effect of slowing prosperity. As the South and East of the country are considered to be the 'engine of growth', these economists argue that issues of conservation (regarding, for example, agricultural practices or planning permission) should not be allowed to outweigh decisions, whether agricultural, industrial or commercial, likely to lead to increased wealth. They cite the computer-based industries of the M4 corridor, leading Westward from London, as an example of what might be achieved on a wider scale, if planning restrictions are relaxed.

A final viewpoint is represented by the environmentalists. They argue that park status will not only protect the countryside, but also guarantee local employment. Firstly, there will be few new restrictions regarding agricultural practices. Secondly, the service industries required to cater for visitors will become a growth sector, providing a net increase in jobs. Wilkins and Nabulsi (1999: 55) note the overall gains in employment in the regions of the Stelvio and PreAlpi Carniche, Italy, since the foundation of national parks there, despite similar local worries.

Although these three schools of thought have been greatly simplified, the complexity of the issue is clear. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the approaches favoured by both local government and some economists present certain unacceptable drawbacks. The tendency at local government level to favour short-term employment over environmental considerations is one problem, but a more serious one is that of administrative fragmentation; an area of outstanding natural beauty may be divided between many councils, each with conflicting priorities on, for example, road-building or conservation. The response of the economists appears even less acceptable, as a course of action decided on purely financial grounds would ultimately result in large-scale loss of the countryside to roads and houses. For these reasons, the lack of lowland parks in England and Wales is a striking weakness. A national park allows the co-ordination of policy over a wide area, which is likely to benefit both conservation and employment; the government should act quickly in order to safeguard an irreplaceable resource for future generations.