Ask a better question

A lesson for one class session, built on Chapter 2 of *Art & Mind*, which anyone can read free online. Students take a decision framed as a choice between options and open it into a question about what matters.

The reading

Tony's story and the two steps that open his question: Chapter 2, pp. 64 to 70, free to read at decisionart.app/reader/preview.

> *When structuring problems using only the first options that arise, your choice is limited to the quality of the best option under consideration. Your options may be OK, yet you'll probably be missing out on important opportunities which could be much better.*

Chapter 2, p. 65

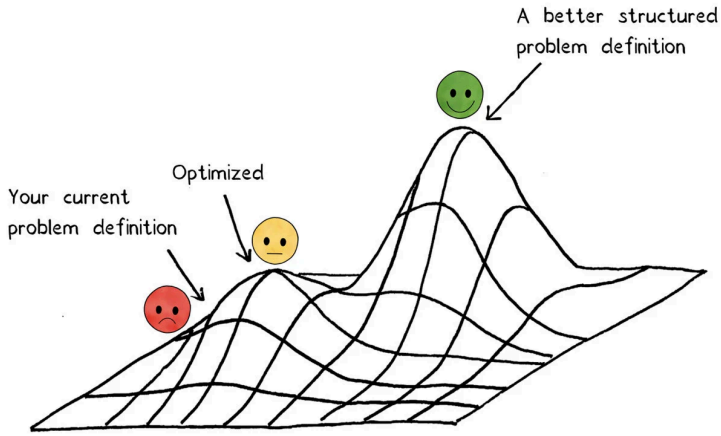
Tony's question

"Should I move to Dallas, or take a pay cut and move to Seattle?" *p. 65*

Opened up

"What work arrangement is best for my finances and the relationship I have with my children?" *p. 67*

Step #1: Eliminate all of your options p. 66
Step #2: Structure your question in an open-ended way p. 67



The solution landscape, Chapter 2, p. 68.

The class question

What was Tony's question, and what was his problem?

Adapted from p. 66: "So, what is Tony's problem?"

Art & Mind · A Chapter 2 lesson

In class: revise the problem statement

Pairs · 15 minutes

Give each pair the three closed questions first. When they have written their own opened versions, compare them with the versions from the exercise bank.

From the *Art & Mind* exercise bank, Chapter 2:

> Example decisions: How can you turn the following into open-ended statements?

Should I get married or stay single?	*"What type of relationship is best for my health, sense of security, and feelings of connection?"*
Should I move out of my parent's house or not?	*"What type of living arrangement gives me the most independence and financial stability?"*
Should I go to Vegas or stay home for my spring break?	*"What can I do over spring break to have a lot of fun, meet new people, and save money?"*

Closing discussion: pros and cons lists

Whole class · 10 minutes

From the exercise bank, Chapter 2:

> Discuss the common use of pros and cons lists. They are often mentioned as an everyday technique by people facing difficult decisions: "Just write down the pros and cons".
>
> What are the problems with this technique?

Points to draw out, for the instructor (exercise bank):

- The main answer in the context of this chapter: pros and cons lists only let us think about two options – or worse: only one option that we're contrasting with the status quo.
- Furthermore: pros and cons lists don't allow for a systematic comparison (This can be used as a teaser. Decision tables, which we will cover later, do a much better job at this, allowing for a systematic comparison of an unlimited number of options.)

Student handout · Adapted from Worksheet 1, Warning Signs and Problem Structuring

Open up a decision

Name (optional)

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1. Pick the decision you will work with.

○ A decision I am facing

○ A practice decision: where to live next year, which elective to take next term, or how to spend a free Saturday each week

A practice decision works just as well. Share only what you are comfortable sharing.

2. Describe the decision you are considering, with its definite courses of action (the alternatives) explained.

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3. What event triggered this decision?

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4. State the problem as a question. The first one that comes to mind is fine.

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5. Now structure it the way the book suggests: take all of your alternatives out of the question, and ask it in an open-ended form.

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6. Check your new question.

☐ It leaves the alternatives out ☐ It is open-ended ☐ It names what matters most

7. Is it OK if we talk about your decision, including your answers, as an example in class?

○ Yes ○ No ○ Yes, if anonymous

Teaching note

Running the lesson

In person, 50 minutes

0 to 5 minutes. Tony's story. Recap the case from Chapter 2 and read the key passage aloud.

5 to 15 minutes. The class question: "What was Tony's question, and what was his problem?" Draw out the two steps: take the options out, then ask openly and say what matters.

15 to 30 minutes. Revise the problem statement, in pairs, then compare with the opened versions.

30 to 40 minutes. Closing discussion: pros and cons lists.

40 to 50 minutes. Hand out the worksheet. Students begin in class and finish before the next session.

Asynchronously

Students read Chapter 2, pp. 64 to 70, free online. They post a closed question and its opened version, their own or a practice one, to the course discussion, then complete the worksheet. The 5 Whys tool, free and without an account, checks a question for the same three things.

Links

The free chapters: decisionart.app/reader/preview

The 5 Whys tool: decisionart.app/gap-analysis

For instructors: decisionart.app/instructors

The next class

Chapter 3, "Your Values" (from p. 91), turns what matters in an opened question into criteria a decision can be judged by. Later, the decision tables of Chapter 5 compare any number of options, where a pros and cons list compares two.

Getting the rest

Instructors get the full book and every chapter's teaching materials free, once their request has been reviewed.