

Problem of Practice Quick Reference Guide

Ed.D. in Educational Leadership | Sul Ross State University

What is a Problem of Practice (POP)?

A **specific, actionable challenge** in your organization that you will address through **improvement science research** over three years. Your POP replaces a traditional dissertation and becomes the foundation of your doctoral work.

Requirements: Your POP should be actionable, organizational, feasible for sustained inquiry, and meaningful to rural/borderland/linguistically diverse communities.

Four Essential Components for Your Letter of Introduction (3–5 pages)

Component	What to Address
1. Problem of Practice	What problem are you solving? Why does it matter to your organization and communities?
2. Organizational Context	How did this problem emerge? What systems have prevented solutions?
3. Leadership Authority	What is your role? How does your position give you authority to lead change?
4. Organizational Support	What access do you have to data, stakeholders, and resources for sustained improvement work?

Core Principles

Narrow your focus – "How can we improve teacher collaboration around data use?" NOT "How do we improve the whole district?"

Think improvement science – Can you design iterative tests of change and measure impact over multiple cycles?

Stay within your authority – Can you actually implement and study changes in your current role?

Connect to context – How does your POP relate to rural, borderland, or linguistically diverse community needs?

Plan for evolution – Your POP at application is a starting point; faculty will help you refine it during the program.

Problem of Practice Self-Assessment Checklist

Before submitting your Letter of Introduction, verify:

- Is my POP **specific and focused** (not too broad)?
- Is it **suitable for improvement science** (iterative testing possible)?
- Is it **feasible within my role** (I have authority and access)?
- Can I **measure progress** (evidence possible within 1-2 years)?
- Is **organizational context clear** (explained how problem emerged)?
- Have I **demonstrated leadership authority** (role and influence evident)?
- Do I have **organizational support** (access to data, stakeholders, resources)?
- Does it **connect to rural/borderland contexts**?
- Have I **addressed all four required components** above?

Strong vs. Weak Problems of Practice

Weak POP	Strong POP
<i>Too broad:</i> "How can we improve student achievement?"	<i>Focused:</i> "How can we increase teacher use of formative assessment data in bilingual classrooms?"
<i>Outside authority:</i> "How can the state change policy?"	<i>Within authority:</i> "How can we redesign our schedule to expand dual credit access?"
<i>Not actionable:</i> "What does research say about PD?"	<i>Actionable:</i> "How can we develop peer-led professional learning in our multi-grade rural schools?"

Key Questions to Guide Your Writing

Problem: Why does this matter? What would improvement look like? What could you measure in 1-2 years?

Context: What makes this a problem? What's been tried? What are the barriers? How does rural/borderland context shape this?

Authority: What's your role? Why are you positioned to lead this? How does this connect to your daily work?

Support: What access do you have to data, stakeholders, and resources? Who supports this work? Is your role stable for 3 years?

Application Materials

Portal: ApplyTexas (opens end of January 2026)

Priority Deadline: April 15, 2026

Letter of Introduction: 3–5 pages addressing the four components above

Also Required: Video presentation, two letters of recommendation, transcripts, résumé/CV, organizational endorsement (recommended)

Contact

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