Analyze

The first step in solving a quantitative word problem is to read the problem carefully at least twice and to analyze the information in it. Note any important descriptive terms that clarify or add meaning to the problem. Identify and list the data given in the problem. Also identify the unknown—the quantity you are asked to find.

Plan

The second step is to develop a plan for solving the problem. The plan should show how the information given is to be used to find the unknown. In the process, reread the problem to make sure you have gathered all the necessary information. It is often helpful to draw a picture that represents the problem. For example, if you were asked to determine the volume of a crystal given its dimensions, you could draw a representation of the crystal and label the dimensions. This drawing would help you visualize the problem.

Decide which conversion factors, mathematical formulas, or chemical principles you will need to solve the problem. Your plan might suggest a single calculation or a series of them involving different conversion factors. Once you understand how you need to proceed, you may wish to sketch out the route you will take, using arrows to point the way from one stage of the solution to the next. Sometimes you will need data that are not actually part of the problem statement. For instance, you'll often use data from the periodic table.

Compute

The third step involves substituting the data and necessary conversion factors into the plan you have developed. At this stage you calculate the answer, cancel units, and round the result to the correct number of significant figures. It is very important to have a plan worked out in step 2 before you start using the calculator. All too often, students start multiplying or dividing values given in the problem before they really understand what they need to do to get an answer.

Evaluate

Examine your answer to determine whether it is reasonable. Use the following methods, when appropriate, to carry out the evaluation.
1. Check to see that the units are correct. If they are not, look over the setup. Are the conversion factors correct?
2. Make an estimate of the expected answer. Use simpler, rounded numbers to do so. Compare the estimate with your actual result. The two should be similar.
3. Check the order of magnitude in your answer. Does it seem reasonable compared with the values given in the problem? If you calculated the density of vegetable oil and got a value of 54.9 g/mL, you would know that something is wrong. Oil floats on water; therefore, its density is less than water, so the value obtained should be less than 1.0 g/mL.
4. Be sure that the answer given for any problem is expressed using the correct number of significant figures.