Problem 1: A Cat, a Parrot, and a Bag of Seed

A man finds himself on a riverbank with a cat, a parrot and a bag of seed. He needs to transport all three to the other side of the river in his boat. However, the boat has room for only the man himself and one other item (either the cat, parrot or seed). In his absence, the cat could eat the parrot, and the parrot would eat the bag of seed. Show how he can get all the passengers to the other side, without leaving the wrong ones alone together.

Define the problem:

The problem is that a man has a boat that is too small to transport all his belongings across a river at once. He can only transport one of three items at a time and if he takes the items out of order he may end up with an empty bag of seeds or a dead parrot. The goal is to get all items to the other side without compromise.

Break the problem apart:

The constraints are that only the cat and the bag of seed can be left alone together or else something bad may happen (or another way to say this is that the bird cannot be left with the other items). The goal is clear and there are no sub-goals to this problem.

Identify Potential solutions:

First solution: The man will take the bird with him first. He will then take the cat to the other side. He will take the bird back with him to the starting side and leave it there as he takes the seed. He will then go back finally for the bird. Second solution (similar to the first but the order of the cat and seed transfer reversed): Bird first. Then take the seed (instead of the cat this time). Bring the bird back on the trip for the cat (instead of the seed). Leave the bird again and take the cat to the destination and leave it with the seed. Finally go back for the bird.

Evaluate each potential solution:

Both solutions meet the goal. At no time will the bird be left alone with another passenger. No compromise will be made and all three items will be transferred successfully.

Choose a solution and develop a plan to implement it:

I will choose the first solution. The solution, in detail, is as follows: The man will take the bird with him, leaving the cat and seed, to the destination. He will then travel back alone to the starting side. He will then take the cat with him to the destination. He will then take with him the bird to the starting side, leaving the cat alone. He will then leave the bird alone as he takes the seed to the destination. He will leave both the cat and the seed alone as he goes back to the starting side. He will take the bird with him to his destination. All three passengers will now be at the final destination. This will work without fail because the potential problems will be avoided. At no time will the bird be left alone with another item.

Problem 2: Socks in the Dark

There are 20 socks in a drawer: 5 pairs of black socks, 3 pairs of brown and 2 pairs of white. You select the socks in the dark and can check them only after a selection has been made. What is the smallest number of socks you need to select to guarantee getting the following: a) At least one matching pair b) At least one matching pair of each color.

Define the problem:

There are two problems to be solved. Firstly, what is the smallest number of socks you need to select to guarantee getting at least one matching pair. Secondly, what is the smallest number of socks you need to select to guarantee getting at least one matching pair of each color. The overall goal is to find the number of socks that would need to be picked to guarantee a solution with only one chance to check them.

Break the problem apart:

The constraints are that only one check can be made and the solution must be correct. There are two problems that require different solutions and neither problem has a sub-goal.

Identify potential solutions:

The first solution would be to pick 4 socks. The second solution would be to pick 18 socks. You have a possibility of solving the problems with less socks but this would be the required amount to absolutely guarantee a solution every time.

Evaluate each potential solution:

Each of these solutions will meet the goals. Even though you have a possibility of solving the problems with less socks, these solutions guarantee the problem is solved because it looks at the worst case scenario.