

CAUSE AND EFFECT

Cause and effect writing uses analysis to examine the *reasons for* and the *outcomes* of situations. They are an attempt to discover either the origins of something, such as an event or a decision, the effects or results that can be properly attributed to it, or both.

Cause and effect papers answer questions like the following ("A" is your topic):

- Why did A happen? (discovering the *causes* of A)
- What happened as a result of A? (discovering the *effects* of A)
- What might happen as a result of A? (*predicting* further effects of A)

You may write a cause and effect paper primarily about causes, primarily about effects, or a combination of both.

Discovering causes

Before you begin writing or even researching, make a list of all the causes of this event you already know about. Ask questions like these: Why did this happen? What preconditions existed? Were the results foreseen? Could they have been foreseen? Then do some preliminary research, using what you already know to guide the direction of your reading. Change or add to your original list of causes to reflect new information gathered from your research. Done in depth, this kind of analysis is likely to uncover an almost unlimited chain of linked causes, far more than you can effectively address in one paper. Identify one to three of them as more important (or interesting, or overlooked) than the others. Then, acknowledging that multiple causes exist, limit your discussion to those most important (or interesting, or overlooked).

As you brainstorm possible causes, do not fall into the trap of thinking that, simply because one event followed another, that there was necessarily a *causal* relationship. (The mere fact that four youths were seen running away from the scene of an assault does not itself logically implicate them in the assault; they could have been running for help, chasing down the alleged criminal, or simply jogging by.)

Also, do not confuse a necessary *precondition* for a cause: A large number of costumed students milling about in downtown Chico on Halloween night may be a necessary precondition for a riot, but it is not, in itself, the cause of a riot.

As you write, use the transitions, or signal words, that tell readers you are demonstrating causal relationships between your ideas:

- Led to
- Because
- Cause(s)
- Reasons(s)
- Explanation(s)
- So

The following example names the cause first, followed by the effect:

Because the technology program received independent funding from grants and federal Title I funds, it was relatively untouched by the school district's own budget cuts.

Discovering effects

If you choose to write about effects, first brainstorm: Make a list of all the effects you know about, and use this list to direct your research to learn more. Have the effects had great impact on history, culture, or your own life? Or have they had a small impact with few results? Again, be sure you can *demonstrate* the causal relationship.

Just as there are usually several causes for anything, there are a multitude of effects that proceed from any one cause. Don't try to address a long chain of effects in one paper. Acknowledge that many effects of various kinds exist, and then limit your discussion to the most important ones.

Transition words that suggest to the reader that you are discussing effects include the following:

- Therefore
- As a result
- Consequently
- Thus
- Then
- Thanks to

The following statement names a cause first, and then an effect:

Employees at companies that offer flexible work schedules are more productive and file fewer claims for mental-health benefits; consequently, the number of companies offering flextime is on the rise.

(As a matter of argument, you could claim that the example above shows *two linked effects* of the flextime policy: First, it caused employees to be more productive; and second, their enhanced productivity, in turn, caused more companies to adopt flextime. Linked causes and effects are typical of this type of paper.)

Predicting results

Cause and effect papers often make predictions based on known facts, trends, and developments. Prediction moves from the known and observable into the unknown and possible. Prediction tries to answer questions like these: What are the possible or likely consequences? Are these results likely to have great impact on my life or the lives of others? Are these results likely to have great impact on shaping public policy, society, or history? What preconditions would have to exist before my predictions could come about?

If you choose to make predictions, as is common, for example, in political science, education, science, and philosophy, be sure to use credible evidence and strong reasoning. If you do not handle predictions with finesse and ground them in established fact, they are apt to appear fantastic and unbelievable.

Avoid overstating your case; use language couched in an appropriate degree of uncertainty (*might, may well be, is likely to, can expect, is entirely possible*). Signal words and verb forms such as these suggest to the reader that you are making the move from observation to prediction:

- If
- When
- After
- As soon as

- Likely that
- Might/May
- Can expect
- Possible that

Here is a prediction using two of the above transitions:

If the governor fails to clearly declare his position and take a leadership role in reforming the state's workers' compensation system, voters are likely to take matters into their own hands and call for a statewide referendum.

A cause and effect paper relies heavily on your analysis of the situation. Although there are many ways to interpret any situation and the effects that it has produced, in the end the convincing power of your paper depends on specific evidence, clear and convincing language, and logical development.

Purpose

Cause

To show what caused something to occur

The reason(s) something happened, or exists.

ex: what caused my Aunt Marie to join an aerobic class

ex: causes that led to my best friend Louis joining the army

ex: what causes Uncle Mike to always eat at fast food restaurants and to eat unhealthy foods

Effect

To show what happened as a result of something

The outcome, ramifications of something happening existing

ex: what were the results of Aunt Marie going to an aerobic class

ex: effects that military service had on my best friend Louis

ex: the effects of Uncle Mike not eating good nutritious foods.

The Process

- Choose a manageable subject

- One that you can get to the bottom of because you know a lot about it.

ex: bad choice = cause of teenage rebellion

(much too large, and you really do not know the cause. You only have an opinion.)

ex: good choice = why my cousin Tania ran away from home at age 13

(good size topic, and you have first hand knowledge of the causes)

Choose starting point

- Look only as far back as necessary
- Beware of logical fallacy (Event A caused event B just because it came first)
- Beware of oversimplification EX: violence is a result of all those gangster shows on TV.
- Try to get a to the deep down reasons or results of something.

Checklist

- Does your writing focus on either the Cause, Effect or Both?
- Do you examine your issue from many angles, using sound reasoning?
- Is it developed with enough concrete techniques to support your thesis?
- Is it: original, unique, interesting, informative?