

Composition

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The Cause-and-Effect Analysis Essay

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WHEN we classify and divide, we are attempting to impose order on—or perhaps find order in—the world around us, thereby hoping to understand the world we live in. When we analyze a process, we are also seeking to understand something, in this case how a sequence of events leads to an expected end. Similarly, when we analyze causes, we are attempting to understand the relationship of events that brought about an end, but in this case, an end that was probably unexpected and not likely to be repeated in exactly the same way. When we analyze effects, we consider the results of some action. Unlike process analysis, the relationship among events in cause-and-effect analysis is not chronological; it is *causal*: Something causes something else, or many things cause something; something results from something else, or many things result from one thing.

Every day we try to figure out the causes for something. When a problem arises, we start to examine the cause for it. For example, when police cars were bursting into flames in a large metropolitan police department, officials immediately investigated to establish the reasons for the incidents. When any significant change in our lives occurs, such as the success of someone or something, we try to look at the factors that contributed to that change. When we identify an emotional problem, psychologists and other concerned people attempt to understand the causes. Understanding causes is not an idle pastime. We need to know why the police cars burst into flames in order to prevent the recurrence. We would like to know what it takes to be successful, so that we can try to be successful. We try to learn the causes of mental disorders so that we can cure the problem the person has. Understanding causes, therefore, is an important analytical process.

Likewise, we try to analyze—or, if the situation warrants it, predict—results, or *effects*. When a legislative body considers a tax cut proposal, for example, it must examine the probable results the tax cut will have in the

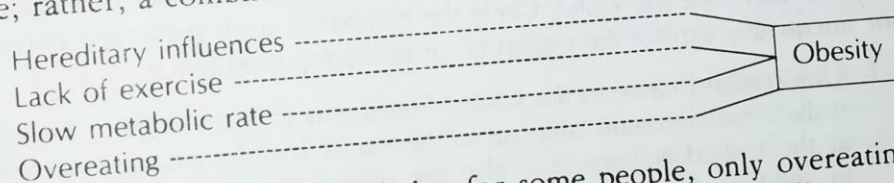
area. When Mt. St. Helens erupted in May of 1980, observers, scientists, and politicians all examined the numerous effects of the eruption in order to understand not only the magnitude of the problems the eruption caused, but also the changes it brought about and would bring about in the whole area of environment and economics.

In short, then, cause-and-effect analysis is an important analytical skill to develop. Writing the essay that analyzes causes and effects will require examining the topic carefully in order to be complete and logical. In this chapter, then, approaches to writing the cause-and-effect essay will be discussed.

Since student essays are ordinarily between 300 and 500 words in length, generally speaking these essays can only deal effectively and thoroughly with an analysis emphasizing one or the other—causes or effects. And since most topics have more than one cause or effect, focus here will be on cause-and-effect essays that analyze more than one cause or effect. There are three types of cause-and-effect papers that will be discussed here.

Multiple Causes → Effect

When we analyze the causes of something, we usually find that there are numerous contributing factors, or causes; just how many factors depends on the complexity of the problem. Each cause may or may not be sufficient to produce the effect. Usually, however, we find that it is a combination of the causes that produces the result. Take, for example, the problem of obesity. Obesity is a complex problem, for it does not mean simply overweight. A person is considered obese if he or she weighs 20 percent above the generally accepted desirable weight for his or her height and age, in addition to having a certain amount of excess body fat. A person can be overweight because he or she has large bones, for example, but he or she is not considered obese. What causes obesity? Usually there is not a single cause; rather, a combination of factors leads to obesity:



In this example we might find that for some people, only overeating and a lack of exercise lead to obesity; for others a slow metabolic rate might suffice; for still others, hereditary influences might be the culprit. Of course, in the discussion of overeating, one might find that behind it lies a deeper cause: emotional problems. A person might overeat to satisfy emotional deprivation. Or perhaps some people overeat because they have a deficiency in a certain enzyme that researchers believe is a factor in signalling the body to stop eating when it has had enough. And true, a further examination of the topic might yield even more causes, such as social or environmental factors.

In writing your analysis of this topic, then, you could plan to spend about one paragraph on each of the causes; each paragraph, too, would have to

provide an explanation of the cause to show how it contributes to the effect. To illustrate, look at how a paragraph explaining the factor of lack of exercise might be developed:

A lack of exercise is one of the major factors contributing to obesity. When we eat, we consume energy (measured as calories). When we exercise, we expend energy—or burn up calories. For example, when we run for an hour, we burn up approximately 450 calories, depending on our body size. When the number of calories we consume exceeds the number we burn up, the excess energy is stored in the body in the form of fat. If a person is inactive, it is more likely that he will not burn up all the calories consumed, so obesity can result. Moreover, studies have shown that inactivity can cause an obese person to expend less energy during a certain activity than a nonobese person. This is because inactivity lowers the basal energy rate (the basic minimum rate at which the body burns up energy). Therefore, if an obese person and a nonobese person try to run one mile, the obese person unused to activity will expend less energy because he has a lower basal energy rate.

EXERCISE 10 - 1

Answer the following questions about this paragraph.

1. What is the topic sentence? The controlling idea?
2. What kind of support does the writer use to explain the factor?

EXERCISE 10 - 2

Study the following paragraphs. Each one attempts to explain a reason, but not all of them are successful. Circle the number of each paragraph that does *not* adequately explain the reason given in the topic sentence.

1. One reason I came to the United States was to learn English. English is the most important language in the world. It is the language spoken at the United Nations; it is also the official language of diplomacy. In addition, English is useful in many occupations. For example, air traffic controllers all over the world must be able to speak English. Since English is so important, I decided to come to the USA.
2. Another reason I came to the United States was to go to college. In my country only a very small percentage of the applicants to the universities get accepted. Since I was unable to get accepted at a university at home, I had to go to a college outside of my country. I chose this university not only because I was able to get accepted at it, but also because it offers a program that I want to pursue: computer science.
3. I eat too much chocolate mainly because of its flavor. Everyone knows that chocolate tastes good. You see people eating chocolate all over

the world. In fact, it is probably the most popular candy in the world. I have eaten chocolate ever since I was a child. When I was young, my mother says that I ate it all of the time. I still eat it a lot because it tastes so good.

4. The most important reason that I eat a lot of chocolate is to satisfy emotional needs. When I am tense or depressed, I need something to make me feel better. Since I like the taste of chocolate, I usually seek out a chocolate candy bar. But why chocolate in particular? When I was a child and I felt bad, my mother would always give me some chocolate candy to make me feel better; and when I had done something good, she would give me a chocolate candy bar to reward my good behavior. Now I associate chocolate candy with the good feelings that my mother tried to help me feel when I was a child. Since I have a lot of problems at my job, I tend to feel tense and depressed often; therefore, I seek out chocolate frequently to soothe my feelings and emotions.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT 10 - 1

Select one of the paragraphs in Exercise 10-2 that does not explain the reason adequately. Rewrite the paragraph and explain the reason.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT 10 - 2

Choose one of the following topics and write three or four causes for that effect. Write complete sentences.

- What causes people to emigrate to the United States?
- What caused you to come to the United States?
- Choose a disease that you are familiar with. What factors cause it?
- Select a bad habit that you have. Why do you have that bad habit?

WRITING ASSIGNMENT 10 - 3

Select one of the causes that you wrote in Writing Assignment 10-2 and use it as a topic sentence for a paragraph. Write the paragraph by explaining the cause. Give good detail and support for your generalization. Use the paragraph on lack of exercise as a model.

Organizing the Causal Analysis Essay

When you are discussing multiple causes for an effect, you need to be aware of the types of causes you are analyzing. The causes may be unrelated to each other, but all are related to the effect. These types of causes are often called *factors*; they are not causally related to each other, but they do work to contribute to the effect. When discussing these kinds of causes,

as in the case of the obesity example, arrange the paragraphs (causes) according to your own preference. However, the most common principles are *order of familiarity* (obvious to less obvious) and *order of interest* (less interesting to more interesting). These two principles are useful when the causes are of equal significance. When one cause is more significant, order the paragraphs according to *importance*, with the most important last. Remember to identify the most important cause as the most significant.

Causes are not always unrelated, however. Sometimes a cause could not have brought about an effect unless certain *conditions* existed. In this case, the causes are related to each other. For example, the incident that launched Europe into World War I was the assassination of the Austrian heir to the throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, on June 28, 1914, by a young Serb nationalist. However, it is generally felt that this incident alone would not have caused the war if certain other conditions had not existed in Europe at that time: economic rivalries, heightened nationalism, imperialism, and so forth. In this kind of causal analysis, the causes that directly precede the effect are called *immediate* causes (sometimes also called *direct* causes) and those causes that are further removed in time from the effect are called *remote* causes (sometimes *indirect* causes). In the case of World War I the immediate cause was the assassination, but the remote causes were the conditions mentioned earlier, such as heightened nationalism.

Although remote causes are also often the most important ones (as in the case of the World War I example), they are not always the most important or the most reasonable ones. For instance, you might blame the overcrowded conditions in the public schools on overpopulation and overpopulation on the failure of the government to encourage birth control (remote), but a more reasonable explanation might be on the failure of the local officials to provide adequate educational facilities (immediate).

When you are analyzing causes that are not of equal importance or that are immediate and remote, it is generally a good idea to organize the paragraphs beginning with the immediate and proceeding to the remote, or from the less important to the most important.

EXERCISE 10 - 3

Following are two sets of causes, in no particular order. For each set decide which are immediate and which are remote causes. Then organize them into an outline for an essay.

A. Causes for My Fear of the Water

1. I can't swim.
2. When I was a child, my mother wouldn't let me go near the water.
3. I don't like the feel of being immersed in water.
4. My mother had an unreasonable fear of the water.
5. My eyes are very bad. When I take off my glasses in the water I can't see.

6. I don't trust the water. I don't think it will hold me.
 7. I associate the water with being disciplined by my mother.
 8. When I was ten years old, I saw someone drown.
- B. Causes for Air Pollution in Los Angeles
1. There are a lot of cars.
 2. There are a lot of factories and oil refineries.
 3. Weak legislation for antipollution devices in factories and refineries exists.
 4. People remove antipollution devices from their cars.
 5. The life-style requires that people live in suburbs a long distance from their work and commute to work.
 6. Air is trapped between the mountains, not allowing the winds to disperse it.
 7. Los Angeles is built in and around hills, so the suburbs are very spread out.
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The Thesis Statement for the Causal Analysis Essay

In a causal analysis essay the thesis statement does not have to be persuasive since a topic is being analyzed and the central idea is found in that analysis. A thesis statement for a causal analysis can simply state briefly the causes to be discussed, or it may express the most significant cause. Consider the example:

Conflicts over money, interfering relatives, and career problems all contributed to the demise of their relationship.

The topic is *the demise of their relationship* and the central idea is *reasons for its demise*.

Now study the following causal analysis.* As you read, try to determine whether the author is discussing causes of equal significance, causes that are of unequal significance, or immediate and remote causation.

A GOOD LIFE

[1] The people of the Caucasus Mountains of southern Russia have long been famous for attaining extremely old ages. Arab and Persian chronicles from centuries ago noted the existence of these longevous peoples. The latest Soviet census report that 70 percent of all people reaching 110 years or more live in the Caucasus region. An anthropologist described meeting a woman of 139 years. This does not seem old at all, however, compared to her first cousin who reached 146 and her great-grandfather who lived to be 160. When we consider that most people in the United States expect to live only half that long and that people in some parts of the developing world will live only one third that long, we cannot help wondering what the causes are for such

long life. Is it exercise, diet, physical environment, cultural environment, or what? Anthropologists have concluded that exercise and diet are not as important as a steady way of life with certain cultural expectations and roles.

[2] The people in most of the Caucasus Mountain region live a slow, regular, rhythmic lifestyle. There is continuity in all of the physical aspects of their life. First, most of the Caucasians live in mountain villages in a pastoral setting. They work as farmers, herders, or gardeners. Their lives are regulated by the rising of the sun, the steady rhythm of the growing cycle, the harvest, and the setting sun. Most of the longevous people have always held the same jobs. They learned their jobs young, and have continued in the same job until they are well past 100, some working until they are 120 or 130. The outdoor work and the mountainous terrain provide a good deal of exercise. Anthropologists feel that while exercise contributes to longevity, the rhythmic lifestyles is more important. There is also continuity in diet. The people of the Caucasus very much enjoy their traditional foods and have no inclination to change. They have eaten the same lean meat, grains, fruits, and vegetables from childhood to old age. Traditionally, Caucasians are lean people who do not overeat. Like exercise, anthropologists conclude that it is not the diet itself that is the secret for long life, although it does contribute. The real secret is the continuity in diet from birth to death. The consistent, unchanged diet and regular dietary rhythm allow the body and its digestive system to become entirely adjusted. Therefore, physiological stress on the digestive system is at a minimum. The overall evenness of pace in the Caucasian way of life makes for a feeling of well-being and encourages longevity.

[3] Another important cause of longevity among the Caucasians is a stable cultural environment with certain expectations. First, the goals of the Caucasians do not overreach the possibilities of attainment. Unlike many Americans who want to be chairmen of the boards or presidents of the companies, goals which they can never attain, the goals of the Caucasians tend to be realistic and attainable within their cultural milieu. Their goals are more people-oriented. They concentrate on being hospitable and generous towards others, goals which are not only attainable, but also contribute to the overall well-being of the social group. Because the goals of the Caucasians are realistic and attainable, emotional tensions are reduced. This contributes to long life. Second, the normal expectation within the region is for long life. Individuals expect to live far beyond the age of 100. On the other hand, the cultural expectation of people in the United States is for a maximum life span of about 80 years. These cultural expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies. Further, the Caucasians do not expect the old people to sit idly by, but to participate actively in all phases of life. A stable environment with realistic goals and expectations is a second cause for longevity among the Caucasians.

[4] Finally, longevity is also encouraged by the role of old people in the family and in the community. The Caucasians have large extended families of maybe 300 people or more. This provides a large network of people with mutual rights and obligations. The aged are respected as heads of the family. They make decisions about money, marriages, land sales, and other matters. They are also expected to be affectionate toward their grandchildren. The old people are also respected in the community. They continue to vote, hold office, and make decisions which will affect the future of the entire community. Because

of their important place in the family and in the community, the aged retain a feeling of individual self-worth and importance. Retaining a positive self-image reduces physical and mental problems, thus encouraging a longer life. [5] In conclusion, then, long life among the people of the Caucasus is the result of complete involvement in a stable environment. Life flows continuously from birth to death, creating a biological and spiritual rhythm. Individuals in tune with the rhythm have little emotional stress and thus live a long time. When we think of our society, we know that we cannot become Caucasians. But, we should realize that these people might point up ways of dealing with old age in our society, a time in our lives which we all must face.

EXERCISE 10 - 4

Answer the following questions about "A Good Life."

1. What is the thesis statement?
 2. What is the controlling idea of paragraph 2; in other words, what is the reason discussed in that paragraph?
 3. What are the controlling ideas in the next paragraphs?
 4. Is the writer discussing immediate and remote causes, or are the causes of equal significance?
 5. Does the conclusion follow logically?
 6. How does the role of old people in the family contribute to longevity?
 7. Make an outline of this essay.
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A Problem in Reasoning

When discussing causes and effects, be certain that your analysis is logical. One of the logical fallacies—errors in reasoning—to avoid is called *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, a Latin phrase meaning "after this, therefore because of this." This problem in logic occurs when the writer assumes that an incident that precedes another is the *cause* of that incident: "President X was elected in January. Three weeks later our nation suffered a severe depression. Therefore, President X caused that depression." This is an example of *post hoc* reasoning. In this example, the illogic is clear, but be careful not to confuse chronological order with cause and effect; in addition, be certain to explain clearly the cause-and-effect relationship.

EXERCISE 10 - 5

Study the following groups of sentences. If the relationship is only chronological, put "Time" in the space provided; if the relationship is also causal, put "C/E" (for cause/effect).

1. _____ Every time I ride my moped to school it rains. I am not going to ride it today, so it won't rain.
2. _____ Chemicals were dumped in the Love Canal area of New York. People who lived in Love Canal have a high rate of cancer.
3. _____ The sun came out. The dew on the grass dried.
4. _____ A meteor was seen in the sky over Los Angeles. An earthquake occurred the next morning.
5. _____ Last winter an unusually small amount of snow fell in the mountains. This summer the water supply in the plain below dried up.
6. _____ It rained last Tuesday. Now I have a cold.
7. _____ A strong hurricane formed in the Gulf of Mexico. Tidal waves hit the coast of Texas.
8. _____ There was a severe drop in car sales. Several workers were laid off.
9. _____ I touched a dead fish. The next day I developed pain in my fingers.
10. _____ Ten movies shown in movie theaters this year showed adultery. There is an increase in adultery in our society.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT 10-4

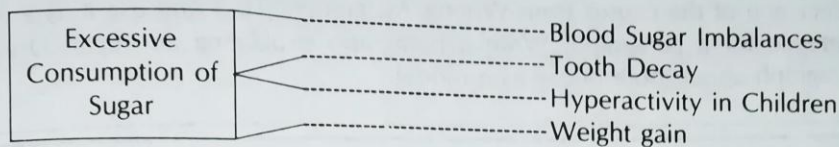
The following are some topics for a writing assignment for an essay explaining causes. After you choose a topic, decide on the causes. Are they multiple causes or factors? Can you distinguish immediate and remote causes? Using this information, decide on the organizational pattern. Be sure to support the causes with details and examples.

1. Finish the essay that you started in Writing Assignment 10-1.
2. Choose another of the topics in Writing Assignment 10-2.
3. Give the causes for your particular fear of something.
4. Give the causes for pollution in a particular area or city (either in the United States or in your country).
5. Give the causes for the short life span in the United States or in your country.

Cause → Multiple Effects

Just as an effect can have multiple causes, so can a cause have multiple effects. For example, several years ago most people thought that processes

sugar (such as granulated sugar) was a relatively harmless sweetener that produced a pleasant taste, provided a small burst of energy, and perhaps contributed to tooth decay. There was little concern about the seemingly minor effects of eating sugar. But in recent years our consumption of sugar has increased tremendously; in addition, we have begun to uncover some unpleasant and serious effects of eating so much sugar. Although sugar may not be the sole cause of some of the following more remote effects, research has shown it can contribute to them:



When an analysis is primarily of effects, as in this case, expect to devote a paragraph to each effect. The paragraph would have to explain the relationship between the cause and the effect. Note how the effect of tooth decay is explained in the following paragraph:

One of the major effects of eating too much sugar is a high incidence of tooth decay. When we eat something with sugar in it, particularly refined sugar, enzymes in the saliva in the mouth begin to work immediately to change that sugar into a type of carbohydrate. As one eats, particles of the sugary food get lodged between the teeth and around the gums. As the food changes its chemical composition, the resultant carbohydrate produces bacteria that begin to eat away at the enamel on the outside of our teeth. This is actually the decaying of the tooth. Now, if this process happens each time we eat sugar, we can see that eating excessive amounts of sugar causes more and more tooth decay. It is true that some tooth decay can be avoided with immediate brushing after eating, dislodging all the particles of food trapped in the teeth. However, sweets are often eaten as snacks between meals and during the day, times when people generally do not brush after eating. Therefore, the dangerous process of tooth decay is allowed to continue.

EXERCISE 10 - 6

Answer the following questions about this paragraph.

1. What is the topic sentence?
2. Does the paragraph show how eating too much sugar can result in tooth decay?
3. Is the paragraph unified? Coherent?

WRITING ASSIGNMENT 10 - 5

Select one of the topics below and write out three or four effects stemming from the cause. Write complete sentences.

1. What are some effects of drinking caffeine products such as cola and coffee?
2. What are some effects of smoking cigarettes?
3. Have you ever witnessed a disaster, such as an earthquake, a hurricane, or a severe storm? What were some effects of that disaster?
4. In what ways has coming to the United States affected you?

WRITING ASSIGNMENT 10 - 6

Select one of the causes from Writing Assignment 10-5 and use it as a topic sentence for a paragraph. Write a paragraph explaining an effect. Use the paragraph about tooth decay as a model.
