

## Causal Analysis (Cause and Effect) Essays

Every time you try to answer a question that asks “Why?” you engage in the process of causal analysis. You attempt to determine a cause for an effect. Showing causes, reasons, effects, and results or consequences is a natural way of thinking. We are using causal analysis whenever we dig behind an event or statement and ask, “Why did this take place?” or “What are the effects of such an act or statement?”

It is important to remember that some causal analysis essays focus only on the cause(s) of something; others analyze only the effect(s); still others discuss both causes and effects. Whether you are writing an essay which focuses on either causes or effects or treats both equally, you should follow these rules:

### **1. Present a reasonable thesis statement.**

It is unreasonable to expect a reader to believe a thesis statement which is highly exaggerated, over-simplified, or prejudiced. For instance, “Fluoridation in our nation’s water supply is a communist plot” would not be a reasonable thesis statement; it might bring a smirk to your reader’s lips, but it will not bring credibility to your paper.

### **2. Limit your discussion to major causes and/or effects.**

Although you may acknowledge minor causes and/or effects, you should spend most of your essay discussing major issues. As an example, the Confederacy’s firing on Fort Sumter was a *precipitating* cause of the Civil War, but it was not as important an issue as secession or slavery.

### **3. Include all steps in your cause and effect relationship.**

Many times, one cause leads to another and so on in a chain reaction. Unless you clearly discuss each important part of a sequence, your reader might get lost.

### **4. Do not over-simplify causes and/or effects.**

Many subjects contain more than one cause or effect. Do not assign one blanket cause or effect to an obviously more complex situation. For example, to say “I lost my job because the boss hates me” is to over-simplify the situation. If he does not like you, there are undoubtedly specific reasons for his feelings which led to your dismissal. It might prove helpful to outline several major causes and/or effects pertinent to your topic before you begin writing. However, do not manufacture causes or effects to pad your paper. Be sure you have treated the topic thoroughly and fairly.

### **5. Develop your thesis statement.**

State clearly whether you are discussing causes, effects, or both. Introduce your main idea, using the terms “cause” and/or “effect.”

## **6. Find and organize supporting details.**

Back up your thesis with relevant and sufficient details that are organized. You can organize details in the following ways:

**Chronological.** Details are arranged in the order in which the events occurred.

**Order of importance.** Details are arranged from least to most important or vice versa.

**Categorical.** Details are arranged by dividing the topic into parts or categories.

## **7. Use appropriate transitions.**

To blend details smoothly in cause and effect essays, use the transitional words and phrases such as:

### **For causes**

because, due to, one cause is, another is, since, one reason for, this led to

### **For effects**

consequently, as a result, thus, resulted in, one result is, another is, therefore

## **8. When writing your essay, keep the following suggestions in mind:**

Remember your purpose. Focus on immediate and direct causes (or effects.) Limit yourself to causes that are close in time and related, as opposed to remote and indirect causes, or effects that are related only indirectly. However, if it is necessary to understand a chain of events or causes, you must analyze and describe this chain to your reader.

Strengthen your essay by using reliable supporting evidence. Define terms. Offer facts and statistics, or provide examples, anecdotes, or personally conducted research that supports your ideas.

Qualify or limit your statements about cause and effect. Unless there is clear evidence that one event is related to another, qualify your statements with phrases such as "It appears that the cause was" or "It seems likely" or "The evidence indicates" or "Available evidence suggests."

**9. Unlike explanations of processes,** which follow a chronological order of events, cause and effect texts explore *why*, relying on research and causal reasoning. Your purpose is to answer:

Why is this phenomenon like this?

What is the effect, or result, of this phenomenon?

What is the cause of this problem?

Analyzing cause-and-effect relationships requires you to question how different parts and sequences interact with each other over time, which is often more difficult than reporting a chronological order of events, as you do when describing a process.

## 10. Humanize Abstract Issues

You can choose from a range of tones, personas and voices. No matter how technical your subject is, you should keep in mind that you are writing to other people. When you sense that the human story is being lost in abstract figures or academic jargon, consider adding an anecdote of how the problem you are discussing affects particular people. For example, Melissa Henderson, a student writer, began her report on the effect of crack on babies with the following portrayal of a newborn, which she composed after reading numerous essays about the effect of crack cocaine on human fetuses:

► Lying restlessly under the warm lights like a McDonald's Big Mac, Baby Doe fights with all of his three pounds of strength to stay alive. Because he was born prematurely, Baby Doe has an array of tubes and wires extending from his frail body which constantly monitor his heartbeat, drain excess fluid from his lungs and alert hospital personnel in the event he stops breathing. As he lies in the aseptic incubator his rigid little arms and legs twitch and jerk as though a steady current of electricity coursed through his veins. Suddenly, without warning or provocation, he begins to cry a mournful, inconsolable wail that continues steadily without an end in sight. As the nurses try to comfort the tiny infant with loving touches and soothing whispers, Baby Doe's over-wrought nervous system can no longer cope. Suffering from sensory overload, he withdraws into the security offered in a long, deep slumber. Welcome to the world, Baby Doe, your mother is a crack cocaine addict.

As you write drafts of your causal report, consider incorporating an anecdote—that is, a brief story about how people are influenced by your subject. For example, if you are researching the effects of a sluggish economy on our nation's poor, you might want to flesh out your statistics by depicting the story of how one homeless family lost their jobs, income, medical benefits, house, community, and hope.

## 11. Use Visuals

Readers appreciate visuals, particularly ones that illustrate the cause-and-effect relationship being addressed.

Readers particularly appreciate tables and graphs. Critical readers will often skim through a document's tables before reading the text:

## 12. Organization

When analyzing causal relationships, you must reveal to readers how different parts and sequences interact with each other over time. **Rather than merely reporting the order of events in chronological fashion as we do when describing a process, you need to identify the specific reasons behind the effects or causes.** Your organization needs to reflect the logic of your analysis. This is often difficult because a single cause can result in many different effects. Likewise, an effect can have multiple causes.

## 13. Provide Descriptive, Sensory Language

You can help your readers imagine your subject better by appealing to their senses. Whenever possible, describe how an object looks, sounds, tastes, feels, or smells. **However, do not overwhelm your analysis with sensory description or anecdotal narrative.**

In this excerpt from Carl Sagan's powerful essay on the effects of a nuclear war, "The Nuclear

Winter," notice how Sagan appeals to our visual sense in his description of the effect of a single nuclear bomb on a city:

In a 2-megaton explosion over a fairly large city, buildings would be vaporized, people reduced to atoms and shadows, outlying structures blown down like matchsticks and raging fires ignited. And if the bomb exploded on the ground, an enormous crater, like those that can be seen through a telescope on the surface of the Moon, would be all that remained where midtown once had been.

The lifeblood of effective writing is concrete and sensory language. A word, properly placed, can create a tone that angers or inspires a reader. Knowing the power of language to promote change, effective writers are selective in their use of concrete words—words that represent actual physical things like "chair" and "house"—and sensory words—words that appeal to our five senses. Selecting the right word or group of words is a crucial step in drawing your readers into your work so that they can fully understand your vision and ideas.

Note the masterful use of concrete and sensory words in this passage from a Newsweek essay, "Don't Go in the Water":

"Black mayonnaise": The problem for most landlubbers, of course, is that most of the effects of coastal pollution are hard to see. Bays and estuaries that are now in jeopardy—Boston Harbor, for example, or even San Francisco Bay—are still delightful to look at from shore. What is happening underwater is quite another matter, and it is not for the squeamish. Scuba divers talk of swimming through clouds of toilet paper and half-dissolved feces, of bay bottoms covered by a foul and toxic combination of sediment, sewage and petrochemical waste appropriately known as "black mayonnaise." Fishermen haul in lobsters and crab [sic] covered with mysterious "burn holes" and fish whose fins are rotting off. Offshore, marine biologists track massive tides of algae blooms fed by nitrate and phosphate pollution—colonies of floating microorganisms that, once dead, strangle fish by stripping the water of its life-giving oxygen.

#### **14. When Speculating, Use Qualifying Language**

When addressing complex issues and processes, you adopt an appropriate speculative voice by using words like "may cause" or "could also." Useful Qualifying Words and Phrases: may, might, usually typically, perhaps, can, it seems likely. As an example of carefully chosen qualifying words, consider the following passage from the US EPA's Web site on global warming impacts:

Rising global temperatures are expected to raise sea level, and change precipitation and other local climate conditions. Changing regional climate could alter forests, crop yields, and water supplies. It could also affect human health, animals, and many types of ecosystems. Deserts may expand into existing rangelands, and features of some of our National Parks may be permanently altered.