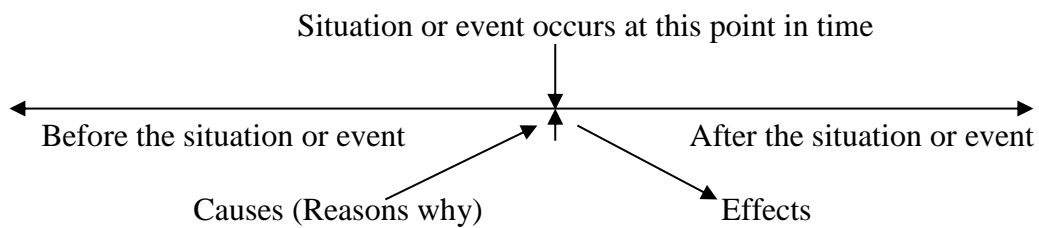


Cause/Effect (Causal Analysis) Thought and Essay Writing

Cause/effect, sometimes called **causal analysis**, analyzes the causes and/or the effects of a situation or event.

The situation or event in question can be in the past, present, or future.

First, consider this timeline:



Note that the situation or event is the *effect* of previous causes and the *cause* of later effects.

When writing a short cause-effect essay, it is often best to concentrate on causes **OR** effects rather than both.

Here's an example of a cause **OR** effect outline

- ⇒ Paragraph #1: Introduces and explains the situation or event in detail. The thesis sentence then specifies that the essay will analyze **either** causes **OR** effects.
- ⇒ Paragraph #2: Cause **or** Effect #1
- ⇒ Paragraph #3: Cause **or** Effect #2
- ⇒ Paragraph #4: Cause **or** Effect #3
- ⇒ Paragraph #5: Conclusion

PROBLEMS TO AVOID

Avoid Confusing Process Analysis with Cause/Effect Analysis

A longer cause-effect essay can analyze both causes and effects, but this structure needs to avoid the common error of confusing **process** thinking with **cause-effect** thinking.

Process thinking is concerned with **HOW** something happens (the sequence of events) while **cause-effect thinking** is concerned with **WHY** something happens (the causes or reasons for the event).

Here's an example:

Let's say you serve a loaf of delicious homemade bread to your neighbor.

If your neighbor asks **HOW** the bread came to taste so good (how the bread was made), you would explain the **process** from the first step of mixing the ingredients to the final step of baking the loaf. Your neighbor could then make his/her own loaf by following the steps of your process.

If, however, your neighbor asks **WHY** the bread tastes so good, you might credit the rapid-rise yeast, the use of 100% organic flour, and the proper baking temperature. Your neighbor would then understand what caused the bread's excellent taste (why) but would not be able to bake a loaf from your response.

When we include both causes and effects in a single essay, it is easy to unknowingly write a process essay instead.—an essay telling **how** things occurred (the sequence of events or process) rather than an essay telling **why** things occurred (causes or the reasons). This is because even though we are working with causes and effects, we present the causes and effects in the sequence in which they occurred. Doing this can make the essay sound more like a story (how things happened) rather than a cause/effect essay telling why things happened. So be careful if you include both causes and effects to not simply tell the sequence of events (a process).

Avoid the Post Hoc Error

Another error to avoid when thinking cause-effect is to assume that simply because two events happen about the same time, they are somehow causally related. This error is called the *post hoc* error (*post hoc* means “after the event”); it reasons that because Event A happened before Event B, Event A caused Event B to happen.

A silly example of the *post hoc* error is to assume that since the sun rises each day after your alarm clock goes off, the sun rises each day **BECAUSE** your alarm clock goes off.

To avoid the *post hoc* error, it is safer to assume that the events in question happened together only by coincidence until a causal relationship can be established. The goal of your development is then to establish and prove a causal relationship between the events.

Avoid Overestimating the Strength of a Cause

A final error to avoid is confusing the *relative strength* of causes. We tend to think of causes as equal in power, yet three gradations exist.

Contributory Cause (the least powerful)

A **Contributory Cause** is a circumstance that **might** be present for the event to take place (it's likely that it is present), but cannot by itself cause the event to occur.

Example: Being in good physical shape can contribute to winning a boxing match (it likely is present), but in order to win, other causes are needed as well (having boxing skill, knowing the rules, etc.). In addition, being in shape need not be present to win the match. (One could bribe the official, drug the opponent, etc.)

Necessary Cause (more powerful)

A **Necessary Cause** is a circumstance that **must** be present for the event to take place, but cannot by itself cause the event to occur.

Example: adequate water is necessary to grow a tasty tomato, but cannot, by itself, produce this effect. A tasty tomato also needs heat, sunlight, soil, nutrients, etc. So adequate water must be present (it's necessary) but is not powerful enough to produce the effect by itself.

Sufficient Cause (most powerful)

A **Sufficient Cause** is a circumstance that can produce the effect all by itself. A sufficient cause requires no other circumstances—it is *sufficient* by itself to cause the event to occur.

Example: your car could be tuned perfectly and have plenty of gas but it will not start (the event you want) if the battery is dead (a sufficient cause).

Accurately assessing a cause's strength is important to rational living. It can help us avoid distorted feelings and statements such as

If a certain event happens, we "will just die!" (Likely not)

If we get an 'F' on a test, we will have to drop out of college and all is lost. (Lots of alternatives exist)

If we don't get this/him/her, we can never be happy. (This confuses a contributory cause to happiness (the it, him, or her) with a necessary or sufficient cause (I have to have it/him/her or I will be sad forever).

Student Examples

"Effects of the i-Pod Generation"

"Media Exposure and the Effects on Body Image"

"Binge Drinking"