

CHAPTER THREE: CAUSE-EFFECT RELATIONSHIPS

Cause and Effect Essay

We all understand cause-effect relationships; for example, lightning can cause fire. As a student you know that if you stay up late the night before a test to watch a movie and do not study, you may not perform well on the test the following day. A **cause-effect essay** tells how one event (the cause) leads to another event (the effect).

A cause-effect essay can do one of two things:

- It can analyze the ways in which one or more effects result from a particular cause.

(Focus-on-Effects Method)

- It can analyze the ways in which one or more causes lead to a particular effect.

(Focus-on-Causes Method)

In other words, your essay may focus more on the effects of a cause or more on the causes of one effect. Either approach provides a useful means of discussing the possible relationship between the two events. It is not a good idea to mix several causes and several effects in an essay because your focus may become unclear.

In cause-effect essays, it is easy to suggest that because one event preceded another event, the former event caused the latter. Simply because one event follows another one sequentially does not mean that the two actions are related. For example, people often complain that as soon as they finish washing their car, it starts to rain. Obviously, washing a car does not cause rain. Writers need to be sure that the causes and effects they describe are logically connected.

How is a Cause and Effect Essay Organized?

There are two basic ways to organize a cause-effect essay: **focus-on-effects** or **focus-on-causes**. If your assignment is to write a cause-effect essay on the topic of global warming, you could write two kinds of essays:

- In a **focus-on-effects essay**, you would write about the threatened habitat of polar bears as a result of global warming and the melting of large parts of the Arctic Circle.

Your essay might include five paragraphs and look like this:

| | | |
|---------------------|-------------|---|
| INTRODUCTION | Paragraph 1 | Hook Connecting information Thesis |
| BODY | Paragraph 2 | Effect 1: dangerous swimming conditions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sea ice platforms farther apart |
| | Paragraph 3 | Effect 2: scarcity of food <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fewer hunting opportunities |
| | Paragraph 4 | Effect 3: reduced population <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Females with less body weight have lower reproduction rates. |
| CONCLUSION | Paragraph 5 | Restated thesis Suggestion/opinion/prediction |

- In a **focus-on-causes essay**, you would write about the causes of global warming, such as excessive carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. In this case, the organization for this essay could have five paragraphs and look like this:

| | | |
|---------------------|-------------|--|
| INTRODUCTION | Paragraph 1 | Hook Connecting information Thesis |
| BODY | Paragraph 2 | Cause 1: human activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • carbon dioxide from vehicles • not recycling (requires creating more products from scratch) |
| | Paragraph 3 | Cause 2: increased industrial activity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • greater carbon dioxide from burning fuels to run factories |
| | Paragraph 4 | Cause 3: deforestation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased human population requires more space, so trees are cut down. • Fewer trees mean less oxygen, which causes a higher percentage of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. |
| CONCLUSION | Paragraph 5 | Restated thesis Suggestion/opinion/prediction |

Great topics for Cause-Effect Essays

What is a great topic for a cause-effect essay? This type of essay may focus more on the causes or more on the effects, but most writers answer this question by thinking of an

effect or a final result. The brainstorming stage then requires thinking about one or more causes of that effect.

When selecting topics for this type of essay, a good writer should consider relevant questions such as:

- What is the end effect?
- Is there one primary effect, or are there several effects?
- Is there one primary cause, or are there several causes?

As you read this list of some general topics that lend themselves well to a cause-effect essay, notice that the last two in each group do not use the obvious words *cause* or *effect*:

| Focus on Causes | Focus on Effects |
|---|---|
| the causes of the high divorce rate in some countries | the effects of pollution in my country |
| the causes of World War I | the effects of high salaries for athletes |
| the causes of low voter participation in elections | the effects of the Internet on how businesses are run |
| the reasons new teachers quit | the impact of technology on education |
| why only a small percentage of people read newspapers today | what happens when a large percentage of adults cannot read well |

ACTIVITY 1 Identifying Topics for Cause-Effect Essays

Read these eight topics. Put a check mark (✓) next to the four that could be good topics for cause-effect essays.

- _____ 1. The reasons that the earth's weather has changed so much in the last century
- _____ 2. Bangkok versus Singapore as a vacation destination
- _____ 3. A trip to visit my grandparents
- _____ 4. The increasing use of computers in schools
- _____ 5. Explaining dietary guidelines for children
- _____ 6. How to play the piano
- _____ 7. Why a student received a scholarship
- _____ 8. Why the birth rate is falling in many countries

Can you think of two additional topics that would be excellent for a cause-effect essay?

- 9. _____
- 10. _____

Supporting Details

After you have selected a topic, your task is to determine whether you will focus more on the causes of the issue or the effects of it. This process will also help you to select and develop supporting details for your essay, which is an important step in constructing a solid essay.

When you brainstorm your plan for this essay, a useful technique is to make two lists. One list has as many causes as you can think of. The second list has as many effects or results as you can think of. The list that is bigger—the causes or the effects—should determine the primary focus of your essay.

Here is an example for an essay about the difficulty of learning English:

| Causes | Effects |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 14 vowel sounds | Some people study it for years. |
| unpredictable spelling system | People spend millions of dollars to learn it. |
| 12 verb tenses | There are many jobs for teaching English. |
| phrasal verbs | Some people never learn it well. |
| vocabulary from German and from Latin | Some people have a weak vocabulary. |

ACTIVITY 2 Brainstorming for Two Methods

Brainstorming for Two Methods

One of the topics that we hear so much about in today's society is stress. In this activity, you will use the space in the following boxes to brainstorm ideas for an essay on the topic of stress. In the first box, your organization will address the focus-on-effects method. In the second box, your organization will address the focus-on-causes method. After you complete these tasks, work with a partner or a small group to discuss your answers.

Focus-on-Effects Method

Cause:

Effects:



Focus-on-Causes Method

Causes:

Effect:



How Weather Has Changed World History

1 It is **tempting**, and often comforting, to think that humans control their **fates**. The decisions that people make in their daily lives can affect many things, and the **course** of their lives **cumulatively** reflects these many small decisions. On the other hand, people cannot control every aspect of their environments, and forces beyond human control frequently **intervene** in human affairs. Notwithstanding many people's opinion that the weather has little influence in their lives besides determining what clothes they wear on a particular day, the weather has in fact caused world history to radically shift in important ways that are still felt today.

2 Numerous examples from world history **document** the long-term effects of weather in the formation of cultures and nations. In the thirteenth century, Khubilai Khan ruled over the vast Mongol empire, which **spanned** from the Pacific Ocean in the east to the Black

Sea in the west, from present-day Siberia in the north to Afghanistan in the south. To expand his **reign** further, Khubilai Khan **mounted** two invasions of Japan. Two **monsoons**, however, caused him to end his attacks. Delgado (2008) describes legendary accounts of this event: "The legend, oft repeated in countless history books, speaks of gigantic ships, numbering into the thousands, crewed by indomitable Mongol warriors, and of **casualties** on a massive scale, with more than 100,000 lives lost in the final invasion attempt of 1281" (p. 4). Because of this unexpected defeat, Khubilai Khan decided to **stage** a third invasion of Japan, but he died before he could fulfill this **ambition**. Without these monsoons, Japan might have been defeated by the Mongols and thus lost its identity as a unique culture, with far-reaching consequences for Asian and world history.

3 In the early years of America's Revolutionary War, which began in 1775, it appeared likely that the British would **crush** the armies of her colonial territory and incorporate it back into the empire. The British troops were a well-trained and disciplined army that was feared worldwide. In contrast, the American troops were newly trained, sometimes poorly organized, and lacked sufficient resources to fight effectively. General George Washington could have easily been defeated in the Battle of Long Island on August 22, 1776. Historical records show that Sir William Howe, the British commander, was clearly defeating Washington on Long Island and was actually winning **handily** (Seymour, 1995). Nonetheless, the weather intervened when a heavy fog rolled in, so the American forces were able to **retreat**, regroup, and survive to fight

tempting: attractive; desirable

fate: the plan for the future that has been decided and that you cannot control

a course: a route or direction

cumulatively: formed over time by many parts or additions

to intervene: to become involved in something in order to influence the final result

to document: to maintain a written record of; to write about

to span: to extend from one point to another

a reign: a time of political control, especially for kings, queens, or unelected officials

to mount: to prepare something so that it takes place

a monsoon: a strong rain storm that happens at a certain time of the year

a casualty: an injury or death in a severe event such as an accident or a war

to stage: to plan, organize, and make something happen

ambition: a strong desire for power, wealth, or fame

another day. Because of this fog, the United States was not defeated in its struggle for freedom. Consequently, today's United Kingdom of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland does not include the United States. The United States is not a commonwealth of a mother country, as Canada and Australia are, though the United States still has strong ties to its colonial past.

4 When Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Russia in the early nineteenth century, he met with early successes that appeared to guarantee that he might eventually rule the world as his personal **domain**. His soldiers **captured** Moscow and destroyed the city, which encouraged him to push farther in his military campaigns. However, because of his dreams of glory, Napoleon **overlooked** the simple fact that Russian winters are extremely cold. When the temperatures fell below freezing, many of his soldiers and their horses died in the **brutal** weather. As Belloc (1926) writes in his classic study of the Napoleonic wars, "The cold *was* the **abominable** thing: The **dreadful** enemy against which men could not fight and which destroyed them" (p. 217). As a result of the failure of Napoleon's Russian campaigns, his own rule ended relatively soon after. His defeat led to a reorganization of power throughout the European nations, as well as to the rise of Russia as a major world power.

5 As these three examples **unambiguously** demonstrate, the weather has caused numerous huge shifts in world history as well as in power balances among cultures and nations. Without the rainy storms of the monsoon season, Japan might be the eastern outpost of Mongolia; without the appearance of **dense** fog, the United States might still be a territory of the United Kingdom; and without winter snow, Muscovites might speak French. Today weather **forecasters** can usually predict with a high degree of accuracy when thunderstorms, hurricanes, tsunamis, and tornadoes will strike, but the course of history cannot be fully isolated from the effects of the weather.

to crush: to destroy

handily: easily

fog: a type of weather similar to a cloud very near the ground

to retreat: to go back

a tie: a connection

domain: land that a ruler or government controls

to capture: to catch; to trap

to overlook: to fail to notice or know about

brutal: severe

abominable: disgusting; causing hateful feelings

dreadful: extremely bad; causing fear

unambiguously: not ambiguously; clearly and definitely

dense: thick

a forecaster: a person who predicts something, often the weather

Post-Reading

1. What is the topic of the essay? _____
2. What is the writer's thesis? _____
3. What is the cause that the writer describes in the essay? _____
4. What are some of the effects that the writer describes? _____
5. Write one detail that strongly supports the thesis statement. _____
6. How is this essay organized?
☐ focus-on-causes method ☐ focus-on-effects method
7. Can you think of any information that the author should have included to make the message of the essay stronger?

Strong Thesis Statements for Cause-Effects Essays

A strong thesis statement for a cause-effect essay indicates whether the essay focuses on causes or on effects. Sometimes the thesis statement uses the words *cause(s)* or *effects(s)*, but this is not necessary if either the cause or the effect is implied in the statement. In addition, a thesis statement sometimes includes a number, such as *three causes* or *two effects*, but this is also optional.

| Focus | Example thesis statement |
|------------|--|
| on causes | Many customers prefer to shop online for three important reasons. The increase in obesity in our country is due to food commercials, cheap fast food, and video games. |
| on effects | This essay will discuss the effects of watching too much TV on children's family life, interpersonal skills, and school life. Most people are not aware of the positive effects of simply walking for 20 to 30 minutes per day. |

ACTIVITY 6 Writing Strong Thesis Statements for Cause-Effect Essays

Write a thesis statement for each topic. When you finish, compare your answers with a partner's.

1. The causes of bullying _____

2. The effects of being an only child _____

3. The causes of choosing a vegan diet _____

4. The effects of society's love for computers _____

Transitions and Connectors in Cause-Effect Essays

Transitions and connectors are important in cause-effect essays because they help indicate causation or effect regarding the topic. Perhaps the most familiar cause-effect transition word is *because*: "X happened **because** Y happened." Precise use of transitions helps the reader to follow the writer's reasoning about cause-effect relationships.

The transitions for both a focus-on-causes essay and a focus-on-effects essay are the same because both kinds of essays discuss one or more causes or one or more effects.

| Transitions and Connectors Commonly Used in Cause-Effect Essays | | |
|---|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| as a consequence | due to | on account of |
| as a result | (the) effect (of X) | owing to (for this) reason |
| (X can be) attributed to (Y) | (a key) factor of (X) | (X is the) reason for (Y) |
| because | for this reason | (X is a) result of (Y) |
| because of | furthermore | (X) resulted in (Y) |
| caused | if (X), then (Y) | since |
| (X is the) cause of (Y) | in addition (to) | so |
| (X is) caused by (Y) | in order to | therefore |
| (one) consequence of this (is that . . .) | (X) influences (Y) | this means that . . . |
| consequently | (X) leads to (Y) | thus |