Cause and Effect Essays: Purpose and Organization

Inquire: Cause and Effect Arguments

Overview

Cause and effect arguments are present in our everyday lives. Whether we’re trying to figure out why the waiter is taking so long or how we got sick, we’re wired to want to find the causes behind even the most mundane daily parts of our lives. These kinds of arguments are also seen frequently in writing, whether on their own or as part of a larger argument. So, it’s important that you can identify cause and effect arguments in all the forms in which they might appear.

Big Question: What is a cause and effect argument?

Watch: What Caused You to Do That?

“How did you get such a good deal on those shoes?” “Why did you stay out so late last night?” “Why did our economy crash in 2008?” “What lead the U.S. to get involved in WWII?”

These are the questions of curious minds. Some questions are serious, and some aren’t serious at all. What these questions have in common, though, is that they are all forms of cause and effect analyses.

We make cause and effect arguments all day long, but what do they look like in essay form? Really, they’re quite similar; they just have a lot more development. Cause and effect appear in all sorts of essays, not just cause and effect essays. In fact, you will most frequently see a cause and effect essay in a proposal essay, as someone tries to prove that their proposal will lead to positive or favorable consequences.

Cause and effect essays come in all sorts of different forms. You might do any of the following:

- Speculate about potential causes of an event or situation
- Argue that something unexpected caused a particular event or situation
- Or, predict future consequences or a proposed or planned action

For each of these kinds of cause and effect arguments, there are different ways to organize your ideas. In some forms, you might have to address potential counterarguments, or you might have to explain why other potential causes are wrong. In other forms, you might not have to do that work at all. The cause and effect essay is truly one of the most versatile forms of composition. It comes in many different varieties, just like the cause and effect arguments we have in our everyday lives.
If you think back through your day, you can probably think of at least ten times you asked questions like the ones at the beginning of this video: questions that begin with “how,” “why,” or “what.” These questions could all be the beginnings of truly great cause and effect essays.

What kinds of “how” or “why” questions have you asked yourself recently? Could you turn one of them into a compelling essay?

Read: What Exactly is a Cause and Effect Essay?

Overview
When a friend or family member tells us they were involved in a car accident, one of the first questions we ask is "how?" or "what happened?" Similarly, if a friend quit their job without warning, we would be inclined to quickly ask "why?"

This impulse to find the root cause behind an event or situation is one of the most basic parts of the human experience. We engage in this kind of thinking all the time in daily conversations, but it’s also a kind of thinking employed in the cause and effect genre of composition.

What is a Cause and Effect Essay?
A cause and effect essay is very much what it sounds like, though it is sometimes called a causal argument. Essentially, a cause is something that leads to an event, situation, or condition. An effect is the result of an event, situation, or condition. While the connection between the two concepts is clear, it can be deceivingly difficult to prove that there is a relationship between two things.

Consider how frequently newscasts argue that coffee gives you cancer, while another channel may be arguing that coffee is the key to a long life. There are many studies that conflict, so proving a clear relationship between one or the other proves to be nearly impossible.

The Purpose of Cause and Effect Essays
The purpose of a cause and effect essay can be slightly more difficult to discern than with some other genres of writing. That is, in part, because causal arguments are frequently a part of another argument. Causal arguments (or causal analyses) often appear as part of a proposal argument, which argues that a particular cause would or could lead to a desirable effect.

You can use a cause and effect argument for many different purposes, but no matter how you use it, it is a helpful tool to investigate the nuances of a particular event, situation, or condition.

Types of Cause and Effect Arguments
There are multiple kinds of causal arguments. You can:

1. Theorize about possible causes.
   a. In this form of causal argument, you will speculate about what has caused a particular phenomenon. This is an argument we see all too frequently in the news. Consider, for example, the current rash of school shootings. No one can seem to agree on what exactly has caused this particular epidemic. However, pundits and politicians have spent a lot of time theorizing about the potential causes: mental health issues, violent video
games, bullying, access to guns, and the list goes on. This kind of theorization is a causal argument.

   a. Secondly, you could use a causal argument to persuade your readers to consider an unexpected source for a particular problem. When and if this argument is poorly researched, however, it can cause problems. Consider, for example, the argument that vaccines cause autism. One person performed a study that connected the two. He published his findings, arguing that vaccines were to blame for the sharp rise in autism diagnoses. This was a surprising argument. He has since recanted his research under claims of falsification, but the shock and surprise of his argument has lasted, and people still latch on to his claim.

3. Predict potential consequences of a particular event, situation, or condition.
   a. The final kind of causal argument you will encounter with frequency is one in which the writer predicts potential future consequences. This kind of causal argument appears often in a proposal argument as the method of persuasion for or against a particular proposal. This kind of argument examines an existing, planned, or proposed event and the potential consequences that could result. One aspect of this kind of causal argument is the fact that it carries with it a cost/benefit analysis. By arguing about a potential consequence, you must also make an argument about whether the benefits of that particular consequence outweigh the costs.

Organizing a Cause and Effect Essay

You can organize your cause and effect essay in several different ways, depending on the kind of causal argument you employ.

If your argument focuses on explaining how a cause progressed into a particular effect, you might follow what is called a “causal chain.” For this kind of argument, you should structure your paper by first introducing your issue and stating your claim. The body of your essay should spend time explaining how the cause will lead to the effect. You need to explore each element of the chain that leads from cause to effect. Finally, you will conclude your essay.

If, however, your essay argues that multiple causes came together to create one effect, you will have a slightly different structure. Again, you will begin your essay with an introductory paragraph, but the body of your essay will need to discuss the multiple possible causes, and it will likely need to address potential counter-arguments from your audience.

Finally, you could write an essay that proposes a surprising cause or consequence. In this case, after your introduction, you would need to take part of the body of your essay to reject commonly assumed causes and consequences. You will spend the remainder of your body paragraphs arguing for your own surprising cause or consequence.

As you can see, the cause and effect essay has many moving parts that will change depending on your overall purpose in writing.
Reflect Poll: Daily Causal Arguments

What kind of causal argument are you most likely to get into on a daily basis?

- One about historical events
- One about politics
- One about a social situation
- One about work

Expand: The Rhetorical Situation in Cause and Effect Essays

Overview

When it comes to their use of the rhetorical situation, cause and effect essays are largely like other genres of writing. In short, you should consider your ethos, pathos, logos, and purpose as you write, particularly if you are writing your cause and effect essay for a particularly persuasive purpose.

The Rhetorical Situation

The rhetorical situation, as it applies to a cause and effect argument, is that this particular genre of writing is in fact more argument-based than other genres. You are more likely to encounter a resistant audience than you would encounter with, say, a narrative essay.

For this reason, you need to be aware as you construct your ethos. If your audience is particularly resistant, you will need to present yourself as authoritative and conscientious. As always, if your purpose is more casual and humorous, and your audience is familiar and friendly, you can worry less about constructing an authoritative ethos. You can even inject some humor and levity into your writing.

Cause and effect writing can also benefit from pathos-based appeals, depending on your purpose in writing. If your purpose is largely persuasive, you could benefit from some anecdotal evidence that draws on the emotions of your readers.

Logos is one of the most important aspects of cause and effect writing. Your reader has to be on board with your argument all along in order to buy into your ultimate conclusion. If you’re writing an argument that links multiple causes to one particular event, your reader might disagree or be unclear about the first cause. If so, they are unlikely to submit to your argument. You need to move your reader logically and thoroughly through each point, so they reach the conclusion you’re guiding them to.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Sample outline templates for cause/effect essays

- Link to resource: http://www.eluprogram.com/Cause_and_effect_organization_and_structure.pdf
A guide to sample essays for all sorts of genres, including cause/effect

- Link to resource:

More information on writing cause and effect essays

- Link to resource: https://essayinfo.com/essays/cause-and-effect-essay/

Lesson Glossary

causal argument: an argument focused on illustrating how one event causes another

cause: something that leads to an event, situation, or condition

effect: the result of an event, situation, or condition

Check Your Knowledge

1. Your ethos won’t change depending on your purpose.
   a. True
   b. False

2. “How” or “why” questions are often examples of causal arguments.
   a. True
   b. False

3. Different types of cause and effect arguments require different organizational forms.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

Lesson Content:

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