Cause and Effect Essays: Technique, Topic, and Style

Inquire: Cause and Effect: Causal Links

Overview

Cause and effect essays come in many varieties and serve many purposes. It’s important, before you begin the essay writing process, that you understand all the forms that exist, so you can go about choosing a topic that works well for you. Once you have that topic, you’ll have a good idea of the format that will work best for you as you begin writing. This lesson will introduce you to methods for finding your topic, and two ways you can go about making your argument in your essay.

Big Question: What are some methods for developing a cause and effect topic?

Watch: The Foundations of Cause and Effect Writing

Have you ever looked around at fashion trends and thought, “How did that become popular?” What about fitness trends? Food trends? Why the sudden popularity of something as simple as avocado toast? These kinds of questions can help you understand the process and purpose of writing a cause and effect essay.

Cause and effect essays can be just as difficult to start as any other kind of essay. So, how can you begin finding a topic? You’ve got to put in some work, but there are a lot of methods that can help you get started on developing a topic for a potential cause and effect essay.

To get started, you can try two strategies:

- You can begin thinking about consequences of proposed events or actions
- Or, you can begin thinking about some trends or cultural phenomena that don’t have any clear explanation.

Thinking in these ways can help you understand cause and effect writing. In particular, it’s important to understand that cause and effect writing can either focus on potential effects stemming from a proposed action or event, or it can focus on finding the root cause of some event or phenomenon that already exists.

This is the point at which you get to write a paper that is important and relevant to your life. Is there an issue at work or school that you could tackle? Is there a procedure or process you don’t understand? If so, you could write an essay exploring why the procedure came to be, or you could write a paper discussing the potential consequences if the procedure were to be eliminated or changed.
You can think about school in this same way. What proposals exist that might have important consequences? What about proposals to move start times back? What about proposals to lengthen the school day? What about proposals to eliminate homework? What would the effects of those proposals be?

These are only two examples, but you can write about anything that surrounds you and impacts you. What about local construction projects, or changes in television programming?

Try to write your essay about something that impacts you. Writing an essay that is relevant to your own life can make the process so much easier!

What kinds of proposals exist in your life that would make good cause and effect essays?

Read: The Foundations of Cause and Effect Writing

Overview

We pose causal questions all the time. What were the primary causes of the Dust Bowl? Why did the South secede from the Union? Why do colleges and universities have such bad rates of retention? Why are completion rates for online courses so low? In addition, we spend a lot of time asking questions about potential effects, sometimes called consequence questions. What would be the consequences if the United States legalized recreational marijuana across all states? What would happen if Roe v. Wade were to be overturned? What were the consequences of the United States’ involvement in Afghanistan? What have been the consequences of Russia’s actions in Crimea?

These kinds of questions pop up in conversation on a daily basis, and these questions about causes and consequences can have enormous impacts on our lives.

Choosing a Topic

Since we spend so much time discussing causal arguments in our daily lives, you may already have a topic about which you’re very excited to write. If not, though, there are a few strategies that can help you generate some ideas.

Brainstorming Consequences of Proposals

First, you could begin by looking at one of the most common ways we use causal arguments: in a proposal. Any kind of proposal can work here.

- You can think of policies and procedures that have been proposed in your workplace: perhaps a new system for clocking-in, for cleaning the facility, or for human resources. Consider the consequences that could result from the implementation of this proposal: would your life be made easier or more difficult? Will it cost the company more money? Will it save them money? Ultimately, you want to find out if the benefits outweigh any potentially negative consequences.
- You can think of policies that have been proposed in the political sphere as well. Consider how many proposals we hear during an election year, even if you’re not invested in politics. What if we implemented stricter gun control? What if we offered vouchers for private schools? What if we closed our borders to immigration? Spend some time considering the potential consequences of these proposals, and you might find yourself with a solid and important paper topic.
Listing Seemingly Inexplicable Trends

One additional method for brainstorming potential paper topics is to identify trends or even events that you can't seem to explain. These can be silly things like the sudden resurgence of Birkenstocks in American fashion every few years, or it can be something serious like the resurgence of teen smoking with the advent of technology like the e-cigarette and the juul. This is a great opportunity to use a strategy like listing to generate a sizeable list of potential topics. Once you have a list of topics, you can begin considering what potential causes have led to the unusual trend.

Writing a Thesis

Especially if your argument is one that claims that a chain of complex causes led to a particular event or situation, thesis statements can be difficult to write for cause and effect essays. Generally speaking, thesis statements for this kind of essay can be really cumbersome or complex.

Thesis statements for cause and effect essays generally can be phrased as a claim using the word because. Generally, this is because you are trying to clarify the relationship between a cause (or a set of causes) and an effect (or a set of effects). So, a thesis might look something like this:

Students stopped contributing in class because the new seating arrangement made them uncomfortable and made conversation difficult.

In this case, the thesis begins with the effect and makes a claim about the underlying cause. If, however, you are writing something closer to a proposal argument, you might want to place greater focus on the proposal:

If the seating arrangement is altered, it will result in reduced and lower-quality student contributions.

Each thesis statement works to establish the same relationship between the cause and effect, but one is focused on an existing effect, while the other focuses on potential future consequences.

Whether you're focusing on an event that's already taken place or a proposed event, the goal of a cause and effect thesis statement is to establish the relationship between the two things.

Reflect Poll: Inspiration for Your Essay

Which area of your life is most likely to lead you to reflect on its problems and write about them in an essay?

- Work
- School
- Family
- Politics
Expand: Organizing Your Cause and Effect Essay

Overview
It’s one thing to know what you want to write your cause and effect essay about, but it’s another thing entirely to know how you’ll go about organizing it. For a genre of writing that can have so many purposes, there are a few strategies for arguing that one event caused another one.

Kinds of Phenomena
There are three kinds of phenomena you are likely to talk about in a cause and effect essay. Before you begin writing, you need to know whether you are dealing with a one-time phenomenon, a recurring phenomenon, or a perplexing trend.

A one-time phenomenon is a single episode or event in time: the sudden death of a close friend, the closure of a neighborhood restaurant, or your sister’s decision to go to cosmetology school.

A recurring phenomenon is one that can be studied at length, or things that occur for many people over a length of time, such as suicide rates, car accidents, or freshmen retention at universities.

Finally, a puzzling trend would be something that has popped up more recently in history and which has not been studied at length. Things that are rising or falling in popularity tend to fall under this category, for example, the rise of the Instagram model would be a puzzling trend.

Organizational Strategies
There are two methods, then, for explaining how an event causes another.

Firstly, you could explain the causal relationship directly. This often appears as a chain-link structure. A caused B, which caused C, which caused D. For example, you might write an essay that works to prove that stagnant teacher pay led to teacher walkouts, and teacher walkouts led to teacher pay raises, and teacher pay raises led to greater job satisfaction for teachers.

Secondly, and less directly, you can use inference to determine causal links. This kind of causal argument will be less obvious than the one described above. You will have to do more inference work to establish a link between your cause and your effect. You can accomplish this by looking for common threads, looking for individual differences, or looking for correlation between the two events.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings
A step-by-step guide for writing cause and effect essays
- Link to resource: https://blog.edusson.com/cause-and-effect-essay-topics

A guide for writing cause and effect thesis statements
More information on cause and effect essays
  ● Link to resource: https://www.roanestate.edu/owl/Cause.html

Lesson Glossary

causal questions: question that ask about the cause or causes of an event
consequence questions: questions that ask about potential consequences of a proposed event

Check Your Knowledge

1. Both causal and consequence questions can be used to begin the inquiry process for a cause and effect essay.
   a. True
   b. False
2. Rising suicide rates is one example of a puzzling trend.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Listing unusual or inexplicable trends can be a helpful way to find a cause and effect essay topic.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:
1. A  2. A  3. A

Citations

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