Inquire: The Rhetorical Situation in Cause and Effect Writing

Overview

Cause and effect essays can take many different forms and serve many different purposes. They might be part of a larger proposal, or they might simply seek to explore the causes of a particular event or situation. No matter the purpose, every cause and effect essay should have a focus on its rhetorical situation, and it will likely make appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos in order to accomplish its purpose. Rhetorically reading an example cause and effect essay can help us understand the relationship between the genre and the rhetorical situation.

Big Question: What does a rhetorical analysis of a cause and effect essay look like?

Watch: Cause and Effect Across Disciplines

Cause and effect essays are rarely just cause and effect essays, mostly because “cause and effect” is really just a form of inquiry. To write using the cause and effect structure is to ask the question “how,” “why,” or “what.” A lot of times, the cause and effect structure is used as a part of a larger essay that has its own unique purpose. A lot of times, cause and effect writing is part of a proposal, but it can also be used in all sorts of disciplines.

- A doctor might ask what the root cause is of a patient’s symptoms.
- An engineer might ask why a particular system has failed.
- A teacher might ask how she or he can better reach a student.
- A politician might ask “what happened?” after she or he loses an election.
- A salesperson might ask how she or he can better close sales.

In almost every field of work, we are always giving in to the impulse to figure out the root cause or the possible effects of a decision. One field that does this quite often is the field of anthropology. Anthropology is the study of groups of people and their unique behaviors. Oftentimes, anthropologists will see a particular behavior in a group and ask what, exactly, the root cause might be of this particular behavior. Whether it’s a rural American community or a tribal community on the other side of the world, anthropologists spend much of their time trying to figure out the historical or psychological root causes of the behaviors expressed by groups of people.

One famous example of a cause and effect anthropological exploration is Horace Miner’s “Body Ritual among the Nacirema.” This essay is an anthropological exploration of the “Nacirema” people. Ever heard of them? The terminology is pretty specific to the field of anthropology. Miner’s essay uses really technical language to describe the behaviors of the Nacirema people, who build shrines in their homes and who
have very specific rituals that are focused on the body. Miner’s ultimate conclusion is that the Nacirema people make many daily decisions based on the fact that they are ashamed of the human body, which they find to be inherently disgusting. As you read, you’ll see how Miner identifies multiple effects of this particular psychological cause.

What are some behaviors or rituals that are unique to you and your family? Can you identify any root causes?

Read: Horace Miner’s “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema”

Overview

Horace Miner is an anthropologist who lived through most of the 20th century. Miner, in the excerpt below, provides an introduction to the body rituals of the Nacirema people. This particular essay is a perennial favorite for anthropology professors to assign on the first day of school. As you read, be sure to pay attention to the kind of language Miner uses and his possible purpose; read carefully for his ethos, pathos, and logos.

“Body Ritual Among the Nacirema” by Horace Miner

Professor Linton first brought the ritual of the Nacirema to the attention of anthropologists twenty years ago, but the culture of this people is still very poorly understood. They are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles. Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they came from the east. According to Nacirema mythology, their nation was originated by a culture hero, Notgnihsaw, who is otherwise known for two great feats of strength—the throwing of a piece of wampum across the river Pa-To-Mac and the chopping down of a cherry tree in which the Spirit of Truth resided.

Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy which has evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people’s time is devoted to economic pursuits, a large part of the fruits of these labors and a considerable portion of the day are spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which loom as a dominant concern in the ethos of the people. While such a concern is certainly not unusual, its ceremonial aspects and associated philosophy are unique.

The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to debility and disease. Incarcerated in such a body, man’s only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of ritual and ceremony. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The more powerful individuals in the society have several shrines in their houses and, in fact, the opulence of a house is often referred to in terms of the number of such ritual centers it possesses. Most houses are of wattle and daub construction, but the shrine rooms of the more wealthy are walled with stone. Poorer families imitate the rich by applying pottery plaques to their shrine walls.

While each family has at least one such shrine, the rituals associated with it are not family ceremonies but are private and secret. The rites are normally only discussed with children, and then only during the period when they are being initiated into these mysteries. I was able, however, to establish sufficient rapport with the natives to examine these shrines and to have the rituals described to me.
The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. These preparations are secured from a variety of specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with substantial gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the curative potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required charm.

[...]

The latipso ceremonies are so harsh that it is phenomenal that a fair proportion of the really sick natives who enter the temple ever recover. Small children whose indoctrination is still incomplete have been known to resist attempts to take them to the temple because “that is where you go to die.” Despite this fact, sick adults are not only willing but eager to undergo the protracted ritual purification, if they can afford to do so. No matter how ill the supplicant or how grave the emergency, the guardians of many temples will not admit a client if he cannot give a rich gift to the custodian. Even after one has gained and survived the ceremonies, the guardians will not permit the neophyte to leave until he makes still another gift.

The supplicant entering the temple is first stripped of all his or her clothes. In everyday life the Nacirema avoids exposure of his body and its natural functions. Bathing and excretory acts are performed only in the secrecy of the household shrine, where they are ritualized as part of the body-rites. Psychological shock results from the fact that body secrecy is suddenly lost upon entry into the latipso. A man, whose own wife has never seen him in an excretory act, suddenly finds himself naked and assisted by a vestal maiden while he performs his natural functions into a sacred vessel. This sort of ceremonial treatment is necessitated by the fact that the excreta are used by a diviner to ascertain the course and nature of the client’s sickness. Female clients, on the other hand, find their naked bodies are subjected to the scrutiny, manipulation and prodding of the medicine men.

[...]

In conclusion, mention must be made of certain practices which have their base in native esthetics but which depend upon the pervasive aversion to the natural body and its functions. There are ritual fasts to make fat people thin and ceremonial feasts to make thin people fat. Still other rites are used to make women’s breasts larger if they are small, and smaller if they are large. General dissatisfaction with breast shape is symbolized in the fact that the ideal form is virtually outside the range of human variation. A few women afflicted with almost inhuman hyper-mammary development are so idolized that they make a handsome living by simply going from village to village and permitting the natives to stare at them for a fee.

Reference has already been made to the fact that excretory functions are ritualized, routinized, and relegated to secrecy. Natural reproductive functions are similarly distorted. Intercourse is taboo as a topic and scheduled as an act. Efforts are made to avoid pregnancy by the use of magical materials or by limiting intercourse to certain phases of the moon. Conception is actually very infrequent. When pregnant, women dress so as to hide their condition. Parturition takes place in secret, without friends or relatives to assist, and the majority of women do not nurse their infants.

Our review of the ritual life of the Nacirema has certainly shown them to be a magic-ridden people. It is hard to understand how they have managed to exist so long under the burdens which they have imposed upon themselves.
Reflect Poll: American Anthropology

Which aspect of American society do you find to be the strangest?
- The fact that we don’t often live with extended family
- How much more time we spend in education than with our families
- The obsession with health and wellness
- The obsession with obscene portion sizes

Expand: Rhetorical Analysis of a Cause and Effect Essay

Overview

So, what did you think of the “Nacirema” people? One of the reasons anthropology professors assign this text so frequently is because it has a hidden and surprising purpose. This essay is far more than a simple cause and effect essay, which becomes readily apparent once you realize that “Nacirema” is simply “American” spelled backwards.

Ethos

What kind of ethos does Miner project? A quick glance at his word choice reveals that Miner has written this in elevated, academic language. In fact, his language is so specific and so academic that it can cause the reader’s eyes to glaze over when he describes things like the location in which the Nacirema people dwell, which should be a dead giveaway that he’s discussing residents of the United States. Consider, for example, the “shrines” he discusses for bodily rituals: he’s actually talking about bathrooms. How would his purpose have been impacted if he had used language we’re more familiar with?

Pathos

So, for whom was Miner writing? Why didn’t he simply use the term “American?” What meaning would have been lost? Clearly, Miner was writing for an American audience, and the fact that he chose to make it seem like he was writing about a foreign group of people can help us better understand his purpose. He does not make many emotional appeals in this essay, but can you imagine the emotional response some Americans would have in hearing their own routines discussed in this way? For Miner, part of his goal is to get Americans to consider their rituals from a purely anthropological standpoint, but it can be hard to remove yourself enough to really get a good look.

Logos

Miner references quite a bit of research, though many of those sections were eliminated in the above excerpt. He does begin his essay by appealing to the authority of Professor Linton, who was a respected anthropologist. He provides multiple examples for his overall claim that the behaviors of the Nacirema people revolve around the fact that the human body and its functions are ugly and to be hidden.

Purpose

Miner asks his readers to consider the following cause and effect claim: “The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to debility and disease.” The remainder of the essay serves to show the effects of that claim. The hidden
bathroom practices, the discomfort of the hospital, the focus on diets, and even the presence of strip clubs all serve to support Miner’s claim that the American people are obsessed with and ashamed of their bodies. Miner’s refusal to outright use the term “American” allows American readers to evaluate the society without the personal emotions that come with considering the negative parts of your own life.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings
A link to another cause and effect essay and some guiding questions for reading
- Link to resource:
  https://courses.lumenlearning.com/englishcomp1v2xmaster/chapter/cultural-baggage-by-barbara-ehrenreich/

A link to another cause and effect essay and some guiding questions for reading
- Link to resource:
  https://courses.lumenlearning.com/englishcomp1v2xmaster/chapter/women-in-science-by-k-c-col/e/

A student’s cause and effect essay
- Link to resource:
  https://courses.lumenlearning.com/englishcomp1v2xmaster/chapter/student-sample-cause-and-effect-essay/

Lesson Glossary
None

Check Your Knowledge

1. According to Miner, the Nacirema people feel the body is ugly and shameful.
   a. True
   b. False

2. Cause and effect essays are less concerned with ethos, pathos, and logos than other genres of writing.
   a. True
   b. False

3. Miner does not cite outside sources in his original essay.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:
Citations

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