

How Do I Write a Cause-Effect Essay?

Your mission, should you choose to accept it (and since your composition grade hangs in the balance, the ARC's advice is to accept it enthusiastically), is to write a cause-effect essay. You'll need a thesis, of course, but before you can develop one, you'll need to establish a few cause-effect parameters.

1. What effect or effects will you be analyzing in the essay?
2. What causal chain leads to the effect?
3. What primary cause (also known as the main cause, or necessary cause, or first cause) is the basis for the causal chain, and thus, the basis for the effect? (It's imperative to establish a causal chain, but it's not enough. There can be more than one chain; there can be more than one effect; but there should only be one primary cause.)
4. What relationship will you be trying to establish between cause and effect (your topic), and why (your thesis)?

Causes

- ✓ First, of course, there is the primary cause. This is the necessary cause without which the effect could not occur; it's the first link in any causal chains that follows.
- ✓ Then there are the sufficient causes, which by themselves might produce the effect you've chosen to discuss in your paper, yet still find their root farther back along the chain in the primary cause.

Example:

Say that your topic is the causes for the effect of roommate feuds.

- Contributing causes might be sloppiness, bad music, and staying up all night.
- Trace that back a bit further in the chain and you may find a sufficient cause like the differences between two roommates (one's sloppy, one's neat; one likes Mozart, the other likes Snoop Dogg, one's a morning person, the other's a night owl).
- Many people stop here, and sometimes this is as far as you can go. But often a sufficient cause isn't the primary cause. Isn't it possible, in other words, for two people who are substantially different to co-exist? If you don't think so, your sufficient cause may in fact be your primary cause (and

you may have identified the point of your cause-effect analysis: People who are substantially different should not be expected to co-exist).

If, on the other hand, you're not such a pessimist and you believe that people who are substantially different can in fact co-exist, you'll want to trace the cause of roommate enmity back a bit further than how different the two people are—perhaps to their unwillingness to cooperate, to compromise, to adjust (and again, you'll have discovered not only a primary cause but also the point of your essay: People who are substantially different can co-exist, as long as they are willing to work at it).

Effects

- ✓ Not every cause-effect paper is about causes.
- ✓ Some may in fact center on the effects of a single cause.

Example:

Consider the topic of acid rain: there may be several effects worth discussing, all leading to the point of the essay: that acid rain is causing enough damaging effects in our world that it's worth taking the steps necessary to eliminate the problem. Eliminating that problem, of course, would be another paper—one that examines the causes of acid rain (thus making acid rain the effect of the paper). In the case of acid rain as cause, you might still want to briefly review what makes acid rain—in other words, you'd be acknowledging that acid rain doesn't exist in a vacuum. Acid rain thus temporarily becomes the effect caused by all sorts of environmental hazards, foremost among them air pollution. Your conclusion, then, could move back to that original cause, our insensitivity to our own environment, which is the primary cause in the chain leading to acid rain, and point to that cause as the culprit that needs to be addressed if we're to see an end not only to acid rain but to the environmental effects you've discussed in your essay.

Things to Watch for

How do you know when you've gone far enough?

Let's go back to the acid rain example. Suppose that we take as the primary cause industrialization in the second half of the 20th century. Already we're probably at the outskirts of what is feasible for an English 105 composition. And is this the primary cause, or does human greed fit into the picture somewhere even farther back along the causal chain? Sometimes too much of a good thing is just that:

- ✓ Don't lose control of an essay by trying to cover something too broad.
- ✓ Focus your analysis.
- ✓ Narrow your topic.
- ✓ Talk to the ARC, or best of all, talk to your professor.

A few other traps to avoid:

- ✓ Don't end up writing a process paper (getting caught up in the causal chain for its own sake—what's the significance of your argument?).
- ✓ Don't end up writing a comparison-contrast or classification-division paper (easy to do with something like the first example of the feuding roommates).
- ✓ Make sure you've got all those questions listed at the beginning of this handout covered, and you should be pretty safe.
- ✓ Finally, watch out for that famous missing link in the causal chain. A causal chain without one of its links is like evolution without those innovative amphibians: how would we ever have made it out of the water without them?

Structuring the Cause Essay

II. Introduction

- Provide thesis, basis for causal chain, and identify effect or effects; the key question is, What caused this?

II. Body

- Discuss various links in the causal chain, either tracing it backwards from effect to first cause, or beginning with the first cause.
- Use transitions to ANALYZE the process rather than simply providing what amounts to a glorified play-by-play narration (also known as process)
- Present the causes chronologically and without missing links.

III. Conclusion

- Return to thesis, then speculate on possible first causes to right a bad effect or possible other causes that might have destroyed or otherwise altered the good effect.

Structuring the Effects Essay

I. Introduction

- Provide thesis and basis for effects, describe primary cause; may use more than one paragraph. The key question is, What effects result from this cause?

II. Body

- Discuss each effect, tracing its path back to the causal chain and the root cause.

III. Conclusion

- Return to thesis; speculate on possible first cause to right each bad effect.