Cause and Effect: Determining Reasons and Outcomes

Writing Paragraphs of Cause and Effect

Cause-and-effect relationships are common in our daily lives. A single situation may raise questions about both causes and effects:

_The car won’t start._

*Why?* (cause)

*What now?* (effect)

In a paragraph, you will probably concentrate on either causes or effects, although you may mention both of them. Because you cannot write about all causes or all effects, you should try to identify and develop the most important ones. Consider that some causes are immediate, others remote; some visible, others hidden. Any one or a group of causes can be the most important. The effects of an event can also be complicated. Some may be immediate, others long-range. The sequence of events is not necessarily related to causation. For example, _B_ (inflation) may follow _A_ (the election of a president), but that sequence does not mean that _A_ caused _B_.

Organizing Cause and Effect

One useful approach to developing a cause-and-effect analysis is listing. Write down the event, situation, or trend you are concerned about. Then, on the left side of the page list the causes and on the right side list the effects. Looking at the two lists, determine the best side (causes or effects) for your study.
First, evaluate the items on your list. Keep in mind that one cause, such as personal abuse, may have its own [remote, hidden, or underlying] cause or partial cause: frustration over job loss, mental problems, drug addiction, bad parenting, or weak character. In single paragraphs, one usually deals with immediate causes, such as in-law problems, money, and personal abuse. (These same principles can be applied to effects.)

After you have evaluated the items on your list, choose two or three of the most important causes or effects and proceed.

The causes could be incorporated into a preliminary topic sentence and then developed in an outline.

**Preliminary topic sentence:** The main causes of my divorce were in-law problems, money, and personal abuse.

I. In-law problems  
   A. Helped too much  
   B. Expected too much

II. Money  
   A. Poor management  
   B. Low-paying job

III. Personal abuse  
   A. Verbal  
   B. Physical

Your paragraph will derive its structure from either causes or effects, although both causes and effects may be mentioned.
Give emphasis and continuity to your writing by repeating key words, such as cause, reason, effect, result, consequence, and outcome. The basic structure of your paragraph will look like this:

- Topic sentence
- Cause (or Effect) 1
- Cause (or Effect) 2
- Cause (or Effect) 3

* Practicing Patterns of Cause and Effect

**Exercise 1** Completing Patterns

*Fill in the blanks to complete first the causes outline and then the effects outline.*

1. Causes for immigrating to the United States
   - I. Desire for a better education
   - II. __________________________
   - III. __________________________
   - IV. __________________________

2. Effects of getting adequate exercise
   - I. Muscle tone
   - II. __________________________
   - III. __________________________
   - IV. __________________________

* Examining Paragraphs of Cause and Effect

**Student Writers**

A Divorce with Reasons
Sarah Bailey

A few years have passed, and student Sarah Bailey can look back on her divorce and sort out the causes and effects of her
failed marriage. This paragraph, which focuses on three main causes, was developed through the listing and outlining shown on page 111.

I was married for almost five years. The first year was great, but each of the last four was worse than the previous one. The marriage was made in carefree leisure, and the divorce was made in a reality that just got colder and colder. Our first problem was the in-laws, actually his parents; mine live in another state, and we saw them only once a year. It was nothing deliberate. His parents wanted to help, and that was the problem. They expected me to be the daughter they never had and him to be a successful businessman and homeowner. They expected too much from both of us, and we couldn’t make our own choices. That cause was related to another one—money. Both of us had low-level jobs in industry. We were around people who were wealthy, but we couldn’t buy, belong, and participate as we wanted to. Then I started getting more promotions than he. Finally, he quit his job just at the beginning of a recession, and he couldn’t get another one. I told him I would be patient, but at times I was resentful that I was the only one working. As he became more and more frustrated, he started losing his temper with me and said things that hurt my feelings. One day he hit me. He said he was sorry and even cried, but I could not forgive him. We got a divorce. It took me a while before I could look back and see what the causes really were, but by then it was too late to make any changes.
Exercise 2  Discussion and Critical Thinking

1. Bailey says it took her too long to discover the causes of her divorce, so she was unable to deal with the problems. Looking at this case in speculation, would you say the problems can be found mainly in character or circumstance? Explain.

2. If Bailey had chosen to include more discussion of the effects of this divorce, what might she have mentioned?

More Than the Classroom

Richard Blaylock

Responding to an assignment on a topic organized mainly around causes and effects, Richard Blaylock chose to write about the consequences of his becoming a college student. With much trepidation, at thirty-three he had enrolled in the evening program at a local community college. The reasons for his being there were multiple, and so, surprising to him, were the results.

“We think you would benefit from our work-study program,” he said to me. He wasn’t my high school counselor, and I wasn’t 18. He was the division manager, and he had just offered to pay my expenses for attending a local community college. At 33, I was working for a large company in a dead-end job, dead-end because I wasn’t qualified for any management positions. Naturally, I enrolled in college. More benefits than I expected were to follow. I had hardly started when the first response greeted me: my family was clearly proud. I heard my two kids in elementary school bragging about me to kids in the neighborhood. They even brought me some of their tough homework questions. My wife had lots of questions about college. We talked
about taking a class together. Unlike me, she had been a good student in high school. Then I had had no interest in going on to college. Now I did, and one thing led to another. A geography class connected me with a geology class. A political science class moved me to subscribe to the *Los Angeles Times*. I became more curious about a variety of subjects, and I felt more confident in dealing with ideas. At work my supervisors started asking me to become more involved in ongoing projects and planning. By the time I had taken my second English class, I was writing reports with much more confidence and skill. Now, after receiving a good job review and being interviewed by my plant manager, I am in line for a promotion that I once thought was beyond my reach. I had expected mainly a classroom. I found much more.

**Exercise 3**  
Discussion and Critical Thinking

1. Is this a paragraph mainly of causes or effects?

2. Circle the topic sentence.

3. Underline each effect.

**Professional Writers**

*Neighbors from Hell*

Les Christie

*This paragraph is taken from an essay of the same title, first published on the Internet by Cable News Network in 2005.*

When Keili Gapski and her husband bought a house north of Detroit, they thought they had found paradise. then, new
neighbors moved in next door and soon acquired a Doberman-Rottweiler mix. The Gapskis bore the brunt of the animal’s incessant barking. Prevailing upon the dog’s owners accomplished little. Neither did bringing in the authorities. The neighbors bought another dog. The Gapskis spent $1,000 to put up a fence. They paid $40 for an anti-barking device, which emits an ultrasonic tone meant to quiet a dog. The neighbors even equipped their pooch with a battery-charged collar, which issued a shock when the dog barked. Nothing worked. So the Gapskis gave up. “We don’t deal with situations, we just move,” says Keili. When they tried to sell, the Gapskis learned that difficult neighbors aren’t just a nuisance—they can even drive down property values. Some states require sellers to disclose neighborhood nuisances [noise, smoke, odors], if they exist. That can discourage some homebuyers and give negotiating leverage. “Every time a buyer came to look at our house, the dog would go ballistic,” Keili says. “We started the house at $195,000 and had to drop it to $170,000.” She couldn’t blame the buyers. When she and her husband home-shopped, if they heard a dog bark, they would turn on their heels and get back in the car.

Exercise 4 Discussion and Critical Thinking

1. Is this paragraph mainly one of cause or effect?

2. How many effects are discussed, and what are they?

3. How many causes are there? Explain.

4. What other pattern (or patterns) of writing is used here? Discuss.

5. Does your experience tell you that this account is true to life in many instances? Could there be other factors unmentioned? Explain.

Results of Underage Drinking

Wayne D. Hoyer and Deborah J. MacInnis

In their college textbook Consumer Behavior, Professors Wayne D. Hoyer and Deborah J. MacInnis discuss the perils of underage drinking.
drinking as a major problem for both the individual drinkers and society.

Nearly 45 percent of college students have engaged in “binge drinking” (consuming more than five drinks in one sitting). Four million minors are alcoholics or problem drinkers. This often-downplayed behavior has a devastating impact on both themselves and society at large. Overuse of alcohol has been involved in 70 percent of campus violence cases, 68 percent of campus property damage cases, and 40 percent of academic failures, making it the primary discipline, emotional, and physical problem on college campuses. Alcohol is also involved in roughly half of teen highway fatalities, half of all youth suicides, and 90 percent of campus hazing deaths. Almost half of all schools polled say alcohol is the most serious problem they face. Alcohol is implicated even in the rising costs of college tuition. Now that colleges are liable for campus drinking incidents, the cost of insurance (and hence tuition) has skyrocketed. Accidents due to drinking also contribute to the high cost of automobile insurance for young consumers. To combat these problems, groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD) work to enact legislation to punish drinking and driving, use social disapproval to pressure students not to drink and drive, and institute programs that stress the importance of having a designated driver.

**Exercise 5  Discussion and Critical Thinking**

1. Circle the topic sentence.

2. Underline the concluding sentence that completes the developed idea. *Hint:* The topic sentence states the problem, the development gives support for that view, and the concluding sentence gives a final response to the topic sentence.

3. Is this paragraph organized around mainly causes or effects?

4. Complete the following list to show the main effects. Add additional points if you like.

   **Topic Sentence:** Underage drinking has devastating effects on both the consumer and society at large.
1. Campus violence
2. Campus ________________________________
3. Academic ______________________________
4. Teen highway fatalities
5. Youth suicides
6. Rising ________________________________
7. High cost of ____________________________

5. Which of these effects pertain more to four-year colleges with mostly resident students than to colleges with mostly commuter students?

6. This paragraph is concerned mainly with effects. What about the causes of alcohol abuse among underage drinkers? Your observations of the behavior of these underage drinkers may give you some special insights.

Topics for Paragraphs of Cause and Effect

Reading-Related and Text-Based Topics

“A Divorce with Reasons”
1. Write a paragraph about the effects of a divorce on someone you know, either a divorced person or a relative of a divorced person.
2. Write about the causes for or effects of the good marriage of a couple you know.

“More Than the Classroom”
3. Using this paragraph as a model, write a paragraph about the causes and effects of any new element in your life at any point. The element could be a relationship, death, health problem, marriage, college program, new job, or winning ticket in the lottery.

“Neighbors from Hell”
4. Discuss encounters you have had or have witnessed involving difficult neighbors. Refer to this paragraph and use quotations as you point out differences or similarities in causes and effects.
5. Write about intolerant residents who have been unreasonably concerned about neighbor behavior. Discuss where the line is in what should and should not be allowed. Explain how that line can be negotiated between neighbors. Refer to Christie’s paragraph and use quotations as you discuss your plan.

6. Discuss a case in which two combative neighbors were both “from hell.” Tie your discussion to Christie’s paragraph with references and quotations.

“Results of Underage Drinking”

7. Pick three effects of underage drinking from this paragraph and discuss them in relation to what you have specifically observed.

8. Using this paragraph as a model, write about the causes of underage drinking and conclude with a brief statement about what can be done to counteract those causes.

Cross-Curricular Topics

9. From a class that you are taking or have taken, select a subject that is especially concerned with causes and effects and develop a topic. Begin by selecting an event, a situation, or a trend in the class content and make a list of the causes or effects; that procedure will almost immediately show you whether you have a topic you can discuss effectively. Class notes and textbooks can provide you with more specific information. If you use textbooks or other materials, give credit to the sources. Instructors across the campus may have suggestions for studies of cause and effect. Some areas for your search include history, political science, geology, astronomy, psychology, philosophy, sociology, real estate, child development, education, fashion merchandising, psychiatric technician program, nursing, police science, fire science, physical education, and restaurant and food-service management.

Career-Related Topics

10. Discuss the effects (benefits) of a particular product or service on the business community, family life, society generally, specific groups (age, income, activities), or an individual.

11. Discuss the needs (thus the cause of development) by individuals, families, or institutions for a particular product or type of product.

12. Discuss the effects of using a certain approach, system, or philosophy in sales, human resources, or customer service.
General Topics

13. Write a paragraph about the causes of crime (for one individual involved in crime), unemployment (one person who is out of work), leaving home (one person who has left home), emigrating (one person or family), poverty (one person who is poor), school dropout (one person), going to college (one who did), or the success of a product or program on television (one).

14. Write a paragraph about the effects of disease (a particular disease, perhaps on just one person), fighting (one or two people involved in a dispute), fire (a particular one), alcoholism (a certain alcoholic), getting a job (a person with a particular job), early marriage (a person who married very young), teenage parenthood (one person or a couple), or dressing a certain way (one person and his or her style).

* Writer’s Guidelines at a Glance: Cause and Effect

1. Have your purpose clearly in mind.
2. Be sure that you have sufficient knowledge of the subject to develop it.
3. Distinguish clearly between causes and effects by using three columns. From your lists, select only the most relevant causes or effects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes</th>
<th>Event, Situation, or Trend</th>
<th>Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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4. Concentrate primarily on either causes or effects. You may refer to both causes and effects, but use only one as the framework for writing your paragraph.

5. Do not conclude that something is an effect merely because it follows something else.

6. Emphasize your main concern, cause or effect, by repeating key words such as *cause, reason, effect, result, consequence,* and *outcome.*