WHAT IS CAUSE AND EFFECT?

A process describes how something happens; cause and effect analyzes why something happens.

Cause-and-effect essays examine causes, describe effects, or do both.

In the following passage from a New York Times column entitled "The Pump on the Well," writer Tom Wicker considers the effects of a technological advance on a village in India:

[Cause] When a solar-powered water pump was provided for a well in India, the village headman took it over and sold the water, until stopped. The new liquid abundance attracted hordes of unwanted nomads. Village boys who had drawn water in buckets had nothing to do, and some became criminals. The gap between rich and poor widened, since the poor had no land to benefit from irrigation.

[Effects] Finally, village women broke the pump, so they could gather again around the well that had been the center of their social lives. Moral: technological advances have social, cultural sentence and economic consequences, often unanticipated.

Cause and effect, like narration, links situations and events together in time, with causes preceding effects. But causality involves more than sequence: Cause-and-effect analysis explains why something happened--or is happening---and it predicts what probably will happen.
Sometimes many different causes can be responsible for one effect. For example, many elements may contribute to an individual's decision to leave his or her native country and come to the United States.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes</th>
<th>Effect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political repression</td>
<td>Immigrants come to the United States</td>
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<td>Desire to join family members</td>
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<td>Desire for economic opportunity</td>
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<td>Desire for religious freedom</td>
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Similarly, many different effects can be produced by a single cause. Immigration, for instance, has had a variety of effects on the United States.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Effects</th>
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<tr>
<td>Immigrants come to U.S.</td>
<td>Diverse culture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>New goods and services</td>
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<td>Housing shortages</td>
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<td>Challenges to educational system</td>
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<td>New political agendas</td>
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Of course, causal relationships are rarely as neat as these examples suggest. Such relationships are often subtle and complex. As you examine situations that seem suited to cause-and-effect analysis, you will discover that most complex situations involve numerous causes and many different effects. Consider this example:

For over twenty years, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the college board scores of high school seniors steadily declined. This decline began soon after television became popular, and therefore many people concluded that the two events were connected. The idea is plausible because children did seem to be reading less in order to watch television more and because reading comprehension is one of the chief skills the tests evaluate.
But many other elements might have contributed to the lowering of test scores. During the same period, for example, many schools reduced the number of required courses and deemphasized traditional subjects and skills, such as reading. Adults were reading less than they used to, and perhaps they were not encouraging their children to read. Furthermore, during the 1960s and 1970s, many colleges changed their policies and admitted students who previously would not have qualified. These new admission standards encouraged students who would not have taken college boards in earlier years to take the tests. Therefore, the scores may have been lower because they now measured the top third of high school seniors rather than the top fifth. In any case, the reason for the lower scores is not clear. Perhaps television was the cause after all, but now -- with SAT verbal scores apparently starting to creep upward again, but with the percentage of students scoring below 400 still climbing steadily while television watching remains fairly constant -- nobody knows for sure. In such a case, it is easy to claim a cause-and-effect relationship without the evidence to support it.

To give your readers a balanced analysis, you should try to consider all causes and effects, not just the most obvious ones or the first ones you think of. For example, suppose a professional basketball team, recently stocked with the best players money can buy, has had a mediocre season. Because the individual players are talented and because they were successful under other coaches, fans blame the current coach for the team's losing streak and want him fired. But can the coach alone be responsible? Maybe the inability of the players to mesh well as a team is responsible for their poor performance. Perhaps some of the players are suffering from injuries, personal problems, or drug dependency. Or maybe the drop in attendance at games has affected the team's morale. Clearly, other elements besides the new coach could have caused the losing streak. Indeed, the suspected cause of the team's decline—the coach—may actually have saved the team from total collapse by keeping the players from quarreling with one another. In writing about such a situation, you must carefully identify these complex causes and effects.
Main and Contributory Causes

Even when you have identified several causes of an effect, the main cause is always more important than the others (the contributory causes). Understanding the distinction between the main or most important cause and the contributory or less important causes is vital for planning a cause-and-effect paper. When you can identify the main cause, you can emphasize it in your paper and downplay the less important causes. How can you tell which is the main, or most important, cause? Sometimes the main cause is obvious, but often it is not, as the following example shows:

During one winter a number of years ago, an abnormally large amount of snow accumulated on the roof of the Civic Center Auditorium in Hartford, Connecticut, and the roof fell in. Newspapers reported that the weight of the snow had caused the collapse, and they were partly right. Other buildings, however, had not been flattened by the snow, so the main cause seemed to lie elsewhere. Insurance investigators eventually decided that the design of the roof, not the weight of the snow, was the main cause of the disaster. The following diagram outlines the cause-and-effect relationships in the above situation.

Because the main cause is not always obvious, it is important that you consider the significance of each cause very carefully as you plan your essay, and that you continue to evaluate the relative importance of your main cause and to consider possible alternatives to it as you write and revise.

Immediate and Remote Causes

Another important distinction is the difference between an immediate cause and a remote cause. An immediate cause closely precedes an effect and therefore is relatively easy to recognize. A remote cause
is less obvious, perhaps because it takes place further in the past or farther away. Assuming that the most obvious cause is always the most important can be dangerous as well as shortsighted.

For example, look again at the Hartford roof collapse. Most people agreed that the snow was the immediate, or most obvious, cause of the roof collapse. But further study by insurance investigators uncovered remote causes that were not so apparent. The design of the roof was the most important remote cause of the collapse. In addition, perhaps the materials used in the roof's construction were partly to blame. Maybe maintenance crews had not done their jobs properly, or necessary repairs had not been made. If you were the insurance investigator analyzing the causes of this event, you would want to assess all possible contributing factors rather than just the most obvious. If you did not consider the remote as well as the immediate causes, you would reach an oversimplified and illogical conclusion. This diagram outlines the cause-and-effect relationships in the situation summarized above.

In this situation, the remote causes are extremely important; in fact, as we have seen, it is a remote cause - the roof design - that was the main cause of the accident.
The Causal Chain

Sometimes an effect can also be a cause. This is true in a causal chain, where A causes B, B causes C, C causes D, and so on ...

A

Cause →→→ B

Effect

(Cause) →→→ C

Effect

(Cause) →→→ D

Effect

(Cause) →→→ E Effect

If your analysis of a situation reveals a causal chain, this discovery can be useful in your writing. The very operation of a causal chain suggests an organizational pattern for a paper, and following the chain keeps you from discussing links out of their logical order. Be careful, however, to keep your emphasis on the causal connections and not to lapse into narration.

A simple example of a causal chain starts with the conclusion of World War II in 1945. Beginning in 1946, as thousands of American soldiers returned home, the United States birth rate began to rise dramatically. As the numbers of births increased, the creation of goods and services designed to meet the needs of this growing new population also increased. As advertisers competed to attract this group’s attention to these products, the so-called "baby boom generation" became more and more visible. Consequently, baby boomers were perceived as more and more powerful--as voters as well as consumers. As a result, this group’s emergence has been a major factor in shaping American political, social, cultural, and economic life. In a causal chain like this one, the result of one action is the cause of another. Leaving out any link in the chain, or putting any link in improper order, destroys the logic and continuity of the chain.