TRACING CAUSES AND EFFECTS

Among our most frequent questions are "Why?" "What brought this on?" and "What is going to come out of this?" In more specific terms it is "What drove Jane Bond to drink?" "Why did Tom Hopper beat up his wife?" "What makes the sky blue?" "What is going to happen to the world if we don't decrease the population growth?"

The thinking process behind these questions is causal analysis. We are seeking to locate and explain the causes or consequences of a given act, feeling, idea, condition, or event. We are trying to make sense of our world.

Tracing causes and effects may take any of several patterns. You may classify a list of causes or effects. You may establish the cause and effect connection between two events, showing how one directly caused the other. Or you may trace a whole chain of events in which A is the cause of B, which is the cause of C, which is the cause of D, etc. Or you may show how several otherwise unrelated events converge to cause something.

Analyzing causes and effects can be very complex. A given event, such as young man's robbing a gas station, may have a chain of causes reaching back several generations and may have consequences reaching far into the future. Also, a given event may have several causes or consequences, not just one. What looks at first like a significant cause may be very minor or might not be a cause at all, such as the old medical belief that letting blood was a cause of a person's recovering health.

Check these guides to help you think clearly about causes and effects.

1. **Distinguish immediate cause from remote cause.** What caused the death of Tim Johnson, who died in an automobile accident? The most immediate cause was brain concussion. A less immediate cause was the oil slick on the road that caused. Another less immediate cause was his heavy drinking, which led to an argument with his wife, which shook him up so much that he couldn't control his car. An even more remote cause was the pampering he received as a child form his mother, which made it difficult for him to cope with the problems of adult living, including his wife, and so on. A written analysis might logically stop at any point, of course, depending entirely upon your purpose.

2. **Look for several causes.** As you analyze causes and effects, don't fasten immediately on the first one that comes to mind and decide there is only one cause or one effect. There are probably several, all at once or in a sequence. It is likely hasty thinking to conclude that a young man took up hard drugs for one reason—to gain acceptance with the group. It is likewise shallow thinking to say that a divorce was caused by the wife's heavy drinking.

3. **Don't leave out any links in a sequence.** If you leave one link out of a chain of causes and effects, the reader may be lost. For example, a cause and effect series could run something like this.

Business losses depress the boss; boss nags secretary, secretary nags husband; ugly home scene drives son to gang; gang tests son; son robs gas station; police catch son; son ends up in jail.

If we leave out one link, such as "ugly home scene drives son to gang," we could not get a true account of the important events and conditions that led to the boy's ending up in jail.

4. **Don't confuse causal relationship with time relationship.** In logic, this error is called the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. ("after this; therefore because of this.") Just because one event happened at the same time or just after another event does not necessarily mean that the one caused the other. Your losing your wallet shortly after a black cat crossed your path was not likely to have been caused by the black cat. Many an incumbent politician campaigns by saying, "These glorious things occurred because I was in office." The truth of the matter is often that those things occurred not because but *while* he was in office, and he himself had little or no causal connection in producing them.

SUGGESTIONS TOPICS FOR WRITING

Polluting our waters	Losing a job
Buying a particular car	Getting sick
What causes a headache?	A dispute between two people
What makes the colorful sunset?	Alcoholism
Student cheating	A teenager's running away from home
Increase in crime	The popularity of a certain fad or fashion

Current general attitudes toward political leadership/voting

Cause and Effect. We are often concerned with causes and effects in our thinking, our speaking, and our writing. A cause is an agent (person, object, event) or an action responsible for so something's happening. An *effect* is the thing that happens as a result of the cause. The following paragraph uses cause and effect to structure its main idea:

> The rise of Southeast Asian piracy is an indirect outgrowth of the war in Indochina. The end of the conflict provided a bonanza of cheap surplus weaponry. At the same time, Thailand's fishing industry, which expanded to replace Viet Nam's war-torn fleet, had to sail farther and farther to meet demand. As seafood prices tripled, a number of fishermen discovered that it was easier and more profitable to hijack fish than to catch them. Since then, piracy has spread and diversified. . . . ("The Jolly Ranger Still Flies," *Time*)

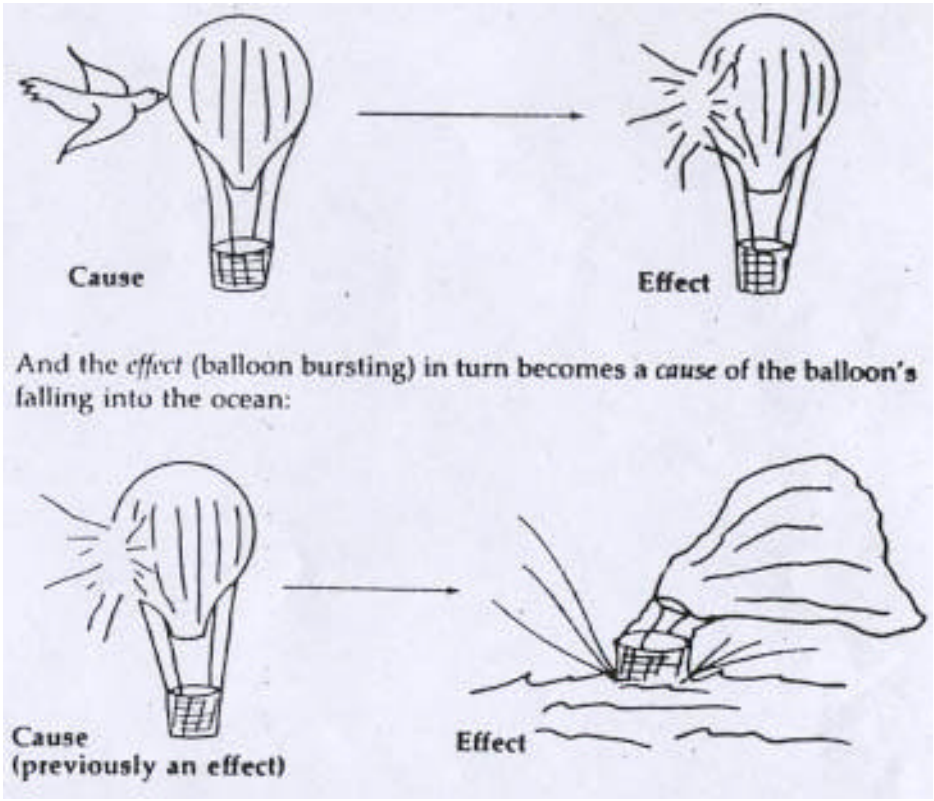
Here the effect is "the rise of Southeast Asian Piracy," mentioned in the first sentence. The overall cause is "the war in Indochina." More specific and detailed causes in the remainder of the paragraph.

When you use cause and effect as a technique for invention, ask:

1. Why does (did) this happen?

2. What happens (happened) next?

Any given effect not only is *caused* by something, but may itself *cause* a further effect. For instance, imagine that during an attempt at a transatlantic crossing, a helium-filled balloon bursts. The cause was the bird's sharp beak piercing the balloon.



During invention, the, you can usually start with any given event and work either backward to find its causes or forward to find its consequences or effects. For instance, Jane could take her experience with mononucleosis and ask herself the two cause-and-effect questions. Trying to answer "Why did this happen?" could lead her to this idea: "My bout with mononucleosis was in part caused by a growing carelessness about my body's needs for proper diet, rest, and relaxation." Answering "What happened next?" could lead her to this approach: "My experience with mononucleosis cost me not only time and money, but also an opportunity to get started in my acting career."

Notice how different these two approaches are. Starting with the same body of preliminary ideas, you can generate radically different ideas by using the two cause-and-effect questions.

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