

## ***Guidelines for a Cause-and-Effect Paper\****

Cause-and-effect papers examine causes, describe effects, or do both. "Cause" refers to the reasons that something happened; "effect" refers to what happened as a result of something. For example, a person might identify several reasons (the causes) that she dropped out of high school, or she might discuss what happened as a result of her dropping out of high school (the effects). For a longer paper, though, she might write about both the causes and effects.

When you write a cause-and-effect paper, consider the following:

### **Main and contributory causes**

You should understand the difference between the main (most important) cause and the contributory (less important) cause. Sometimes the main cause is obvious, but sometimes it is not. Once you identify the main cause, though, you are able to organize your paper more efficiently. You can emphasize the main cause and downplay the other causes.

### **Immediate and remote causes**

You should also understand the distinction between an immediate cause and a remote cause. An immediate cause closely precedes an event and is therefore easy to recognize. A remote cause, however, is less obvious because it might have occurred in the past or far away.

Don't assume that the most obvious cause is the main cause. Suppose that you are an insurance investigator, and the roof of a public building collapses as a result of a heavy rainstorm. You might assume that the storm was the immediate cause. However, if you investigate further, you might discover that faulty construction or poor maintenance was the main cause of the roof's collapse, not the storm. By examining both remote and immediate causes, you can avoid arriving at an incorrect conclusion.

Remember to avoid *post hoc* reasoning as well: Just because something occurred before something else does not mean that it caused that particular event. For example: A black cat crosses your path on the way to school, and you fail your exam that morning. You assume that you failed your exam because of the cat crossing your path when in reality your failure was the result of poor study habits the night before the exam.

### **Structuring your essay**

Make sure that your thesis statement tells your reader three things: the points you plan to consider, the position you will take, and whether your emphasis is on cause or effects, or both.

You should also consider the sequence in which you will present causes or effects. You can, of course, present causes or effects in chronological order--the order in which they occurred. You can also introduce the main cause first and then contributory causes. Another option is to begin by dismissing any events that were not causes and then moving on to what the real causes were. Finally, you can begin with the most obvious causes or effects and then discuss less obvious factors.

*\*(Always check with your instructor for specific requirements regarding your assignment.)*