Writing the Causation (cause-effect) Paragraph

Explanation

In writing, causation is the search for and explanation of causes and effects. When you investigate the reason for something, you are either answering the questions, why did this happen? Or, what will this do? The answer to the first questions is labeled the cause; the answer to the second questions is labeled effect. Cause explains what has happened in the past; effect predicts what will happen in the future. The problem is to discover the right causes and the right effects.

In order to identify and determine whether or not a cause-effect relationship is logical, you should look for certain signs. Some of the most common are described below.

Association

Suppose you find two events, A and B, in association. Their being together could imply that A causes B, or vice versa. However, B must ordinarily occur when ever A does; otherwise you probably don’t have a genuine cause-effect relationship. For example, your muscles should (B) hurt after (A) overexerting yourself. A student should receive an “E” grade (B) every time he does not (A) do an assignment.

Time Sequence

Because you often think of cause-effect within a time sequence, there is a major fallacy which may develop. Not everything that precedes an effect is for that reason its cause. Hence, in the development of our causal analysis, the connection between the given effect and the cause for it should be clearly shown.

Blurred and confused thinking results from the assumption that if B follows A, then A is the cause of B. (If you had stopped at Target before coming to school today and then passed your English test, it would be unwise to assume that stopping at target caused you to pass your test.) Of course, it is easier to detect other people’s fallacies than to detect your own.

Determining time-sequence is very tricky, and a special name ahs been given to the fallacy of misinterpreting it. The fallacy is called post hoc (short for post hoc, ergo propter hoc, which translates literally “after this, therefore because of this”).

Post hoc fallacy is easy to fall into. Suppose, for example, you have gone next door to wait for your friend Jack, who has promised you a ride to school. Jack arrives a few minutes later with his report
card which shows his English grade has dropped two grades. After one quick glance at the card, his father says, “I should have known better than to let you buy that car. The very day you brought it your school work began to suffer. It’s obvious that car ahs caused your grades to drop.”

This would not be the time to discuss logic with Jack’s father, yet you realize he has jumped to an unfair conclusion. You know several factors have caused Jack’s low grade. He had missed five days of school because he ahs the flu, he had not followed the correct procedure on an important assignment, and he had not considered class participation important. The father had mistakenly assumed that since Jack’s grades followed his getting the car, the car was the reason for the low grade. Keep in mind in your hurry to reach the solution that you too often tend to oversimplify matters-to act as if an event has a single cause. Keep in mind that there are usually many causes for an event.

When you explain a complex event, you may have to identify main causes and a series of contributing causes that lie behind it. An event may contribute to a cause, but it will not be necessary in itself to create an effect. You will need to distinguish between sufficient conditions and necessary conditions.

**Sufficient Conditions**

A sufficient condition is a combination of the factors in a situation which will allow the effect of the cause to appear. It is nit a cause. In order to be in an airplane crash, the pilot has to be in an airplane. In order to run, the airplane has to have oil, gas, and all the right parts. All of these elements make up sufficient conditions for the crash to take place, but the plane, oil, or gas do not cause the crash. A sufficient condition simply means all the elements that will allow a cause to produce its effects are present.

**Necessary Condition**

A necessary condition is a factor that must be present for the cause to have its effect, a condition for which there is no substitute. It didn’t matter to the pilot if he were flying a 747 or an F-14 [sufficient conditions], but he has to be flying a plane [necessary condition] in order to be in a plane crash).

**Suggestions for Writing Causation Paragraphs**

To convince a thinking audience that you have a reasonable solution to a particular problem, you must present arguments that will stand up under scrutiny.

Before presenting an argument based on a cause-effect relationship, test its soundness by asking yourself the following questions:
1. Is event A which you are assuming to be the cause of event B sufficient to produce event B?
   Example: We read on the paper about a teenager dead because of an auto crash (event B). The crash is an immediate cause of the death, and the moving auto (event A) is a sufficient condition to cause an accident.

2. Would event B always necessarily occur as a result of event A?
   Example: A moving car (Event A) is not necessarily always going to cause a fatal crash (event B), but it is a necessary condition. Therefore, other necessary conditions must be explained. The driver was intoxicated, was driving at a high rate of speed, was unfamiliar with the road, etc.

3. Could event B occur without event A?
   Example: The fatal car crash (event B) could not occur without the person driving the car (event A). The fatal car accident requires the car, the driver, and another object.

4. What other event occurred which may have contributed to produce event B?
   Example: Now that immediate causes have already been covered, you need to check for more remote causes. For example, was the teenager normally a poor driver, or was the state partially to blame for giving a license to anyone under 21? (HINT: Look for complicated involved causes at this point).

An Example of Cause-Effect Paragraph:

Original:

Bob Fraser’s missed block of an Acorn tackler caused the Rowdies to lose their opening game. 1) Because Fraser missed the pre-game meeting, he was not mentally prepared for this big game. The lack of readiness caused Fraser to slip and miss the onrushing tackler during a critical moment within the game. 2) Fraser should not have been allowed to play because of his tardiness, but Coach Baker allowed him to participate anyways because of the Coach’s congenial personality. Had it not been for Fraser’s bad block, the Rowdies would probably have won the game.

1) Post hoc fallacy
2) Incorrect association
Revision:

An unusual run of bad luck lost the game. Many blamed Fraser’s failure to block the tackler who caused the fumble that produced the winning touchdown. But even here, bad weather and bad luck shared the blame. Both teams faced a slippery field, of course. **1) But** Fraser was standing in a virtual bog when **2) he** jumped for the block and slipped. Moreover, **3) the** storm had delayed the bus for hours, tiring and frustrating the team, leaving them short of sleep and of opportunity to practice. Furthermore, **4) Hunter’s** throwing arm was still not back in shape from his earlier injury. Finally, one must admit, **5) the Acorns** were simply heavier, stronger, which is the real luck of the game.

1) **Sufficient condition**
2) **Immediate cause**
3) **Immediate cause**
4) **Immediate cause**
5) **Remote cause**