

SAMPLE CAUSE AND EFFECT ESSAYS PLUS EXERCISES TO ANSWER

WHAT WERE THE CAUSES OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR? the causes of World War I? the causes of the American Great Depression? What caused the AIDS epidemic? the bubonic plague? What are the causes of unrest in Ireland? the Middle East?

What effects can be attributed to phenomena such as El Niño? the hippies of the 1950s and 60s? the Civil Rights movement of the 50s and 60s? Affirmative Action? Apartheid? the uses of DDT? holes in the ozone layer?

Cause and effect papers are among the most common (and among the most fun to write) papers in a Composition course. It is intriguing to explore the causes of some event that you always took for granted or to chronicle the effects of some phenomenon in society or nature. The two strategic points you have to consider are (1) whether you're exploring causes or effects or both and (2) what is the order of the causes or effects you're going to pursue — from least to most important or vice versa.

In the following two paragraphs, Bob Kutter analyzes the effects on American workers of an economy that relies increasingly on technology. In a sense, the paragraphs provide an outline for exploring the various causes and effects which are the substance of the article. (Full text, *Atlantic*, July 1983.) In these paragraphs, what sentences could be listed as major points and what sentences play a supporting role? What is the role of the first sentence in each paragraph?

The erosion of the middle of the labor market is easy to misinterpret, because its roots are multiple. During the 1970s, the entry into the work force of an unprecedented number of women and of young adults born during the baby boom resulted in too many workers for the jobs available, and depressed wages. The decline of the middle also has something to do with the explosive growth in world trade since 1960. As manufacturing technologies have become more mobile, and multinational firms more footloose, production jobs have migrated from the U.S. to countries where wages are low. In addition, technology itself has helped to provoke the shifts in the job market. For example, fewer American workers would have been needed to make steel in 1980 than in 1960 even if the pressures of global competition had not been a factor, because new machines have made many of their tasks redundant. Finally, the high rate of unemployment caused by these trends has tended to drive wages down further, especially at the low end, since it forces unskilled workers to compete for their jobs with unemployed people who are willing to do the work for less.

Although demographic shifts, stepped-up world trade, unemployment, and especially the advance of technology all have had an effect on the shape of the job market, middle-level jobs have been disappearing ultimately as a result of the ways in which technological gains are being distributed. When a machine replaces a production worker, both the firm and consumers as a group benefit. The loss falls mainly on the worker who is displaced. If that loss is generalized to millions of high-paid workers, they suffer as a group, and the economy as a whole suffers a loss of worker purchasing power. Thus the lack of a mechanism to distribute some of the financial gains from technology to the work force comes back to haunt the entire economy.

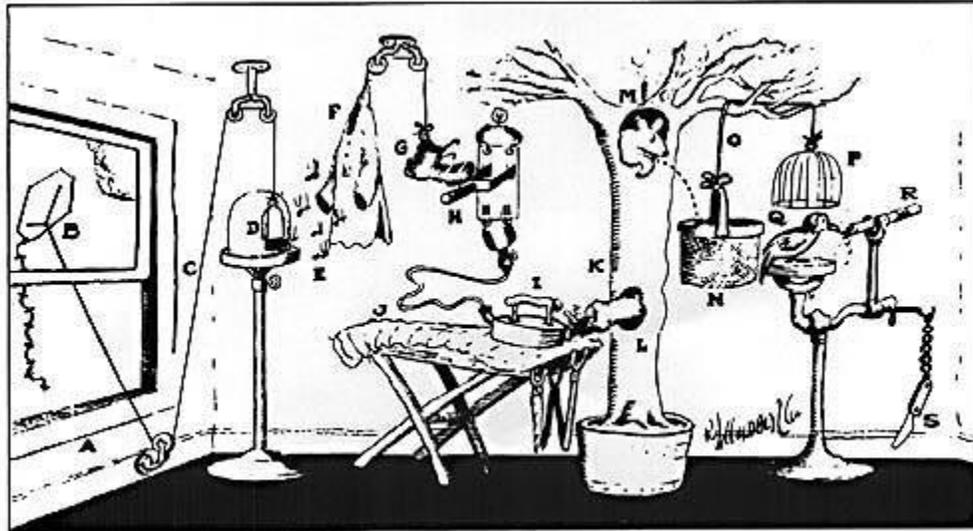
You will have to determine which causes or effects you're going to write about. For instance, if there are too many causes for you to deal with in the scope of your essay, you'll have to decide what are the main causes, the ones you have to treat, and then suggest to your reader that there are other, relatively minor, causes outside the scope of your essay. Even in an essay as extensive as Kutter's, there are surely things he could have said but chose not to. In an essay on the effects of El Niño, the price you pay for orange juice might not belong in an essay alongside the devastating effects of tornadoes and ice-storms and mudslides and people's fear of uncontrollable weather patterns.

The cause and effect essay can end in a number of ways. It might be enough for your paper to point out causes or effects that people might not have thought of before, or to sort out those causes or effects so that people can grasp them with fresh insight or in a newly organized fashion. On the other hand, your essay might lead to a call for action based on patterns of cause and effect that you have perceived. An essay from *Mother Jones* magazine, for instance, ends with a plea for Americans to change the way they use antibiotics in situations where the antibiotics won't do any good. The alternative to this over-use of antibiotics — the consequence if this trend is not reversed — is well spelled out in the essay.

The one caution you have to keep in mind is not to become logically simplistic when considering causes. It is nearly cliché to say that the Civil War was fought to free the slaves of the American South, but it is also far from the whole truth. There were monumental economic and political causes behind that war; without those "other" causes there might not have been a war at all. There is an important logical fallacy (see **Logic**, P. 1299-1300) called *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc* ("After this, therefore because of this"). We can't assume that just because something follows something else chronologically that the earlier event caused the later event. Other causes — intervening causes or causes we might not be aware of — might be at work.

The Linking of Events

Pulitzer prize-winning cartoonist Rube Goldberg was most famous for his ability to link one event to another — in outrageous fashion. This series of causes leads to the effect of a sharpened pencil.



Pencil Sharpener RUBE GOLDBERG (tm) RGI 038

Open window (A) and fly kite (B). String (C) lifts small door (D) allowing moths (E) to escape and eat red flannel shirt (F). As weight of shirt becomes less, shoe (G) steps on switch (H) which heats electric iron (I) and burns hole in pants (J). Smoke (K) enters hole in tree (L), smoking out opossum (M) which jumps into basket (N), pulling rope (O) and lifting cage (P), allowing woodpecker (Q) to chew wood from pencil (R), exposing lead. Emergency knife (S) is always handy in case opossum or the woodpecker gets sick and can't work.

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Study **Clustering and Outlining** (Junior text, P. 1254, 1278-1280, 1282, 1289) to see how one student writer began to gather thoughts about a paper on the effects of the weather phenomenon known as El Niño. How far can that paper go? How far into the spring and summer of 1998 could citizens of North America and elsewhere blame weird weather events on El Niño? Are the extraordinarily high prices for lettuce and tomatoes in May and June entirely the fault of California storms spawned by El Niño in February and March? The writer has to determine a cutoff point for pursuing causes back to the Adam and Eve of all causes. A paper that included the causes of this weather phenomenon would be an altogether different matter, also.

A cause and effect paper often appears to be structured along the lines of a **Process Essay**, and the structure can, in fact, be similar. The difference, of course, is that a process essay explains *how* something works or how something came to be as it is, whereas a cause and effect essay explains *why* something works as it does or why it came to be what it is.

Sample Cause Effect Essay

Here a sample cause-and-effect essay that briefly explores the reasons (causes) that soccer will not "make it big" in the United States by a community college student, Dewey Cheatham.

Soccer: Why It Can't Make the Big Time in the U.S.A.

Soccer — or football (or foosball or futbol), as it is called by the rest of the world outside the United States — is surely the most popular sport in the world. Every four years, the world championship of soccer, the World Cup, is watched by literally billions all over the world, beating out the United States professional football's Superbowl by far. It is estimated that 1.7 billion television viewers watched the World Cup final between France and Brazil in July of 1998. And it is also a genuine *world* championship, involving teams from 32 countries in the final rounds, unlike the much more parochial and misnamed World Series in American baseball (that doesn't even involve Japan or Cuba, two baseball hotbeds). But although soccer has become an important sport in the American sports scene, it will never make inroads into the hearts and markets of American sports the way that football, basketball, hockey, baseball, and even tennis and golf have done. There are many reasons for this.

Recently the New England Revolution beat the Tampa Bay Mutiny in a game played during a horrid rainstorm. Nearly 5000 fans showed up, which shows that soccer is, indeed, popular in the United States. However, the story of the game was buried near the back of the newspaper's sports section, and there was certainly no television coverage. In fact, the biggest reason for soccer's failure as a mass appeal sport in the United States is that it doesn't conform easily to the demands of television. Basketball succeeds enormously in America because it regularly schedules what it calls "television time-outs" as well as the time-outs that the teams themselves call to re-group, not to mention half-times and, on the professional level, quarter breaks. Those time-outs in the action are ideally made for television commercials. And television coverage is the lifeblood of American sports. College basketball lives for a game scheduled on CBS or ESPN (highly recruited high school players are more likely to go to a team that regularly gets national television exposure), and we could even say that television coverage has dictated the pace and feel of American football. Anyone who has attended a live football game knows how commercial time-outs slow the game and sometimes, at its most exciting moments, disrupt the flow of events. There is no serious objection, however, because without television, football knows that it simply wouldn't remain in the homes and hearts of Americans. Also, without those advertising dollars, the teams couldn't afford the sky-high salaries of their high-priced superstars.

Soccer, on the other hand, except for its half-time break, has no time-outs; except for half-time, it is constant run, run, run, run, back and forth, back and forth, relentlessly, with only a few seconds of relaxation when a goal is scored, and that can happen seldom, sometimes never. The best that commercial television coverage can hope for is an injury time-out, and in soccer that happens only with decapitation or disembowelment.

Second, Americans love their violence, and soccer doesn't deliver on this score the way that American football and hockey do. There are brief moments, spurts of violence, yes, but fans can't expect the full-time menu of bone-crushing carnage that American football and hockey can deliver minute after minute, game after game. In soccer, players are actually singled out and warned — shamed, with embarrassingly silly "yellow cards," for acts of violence and duplicity that would be smiled at in most American sports other than tennis and golf.

Third, it is just too difficult to score in soccer. America loves its football games with scores like 49 to 35 and a professional basketball game with scores below 100 is regarded as a defensive bore. In soccer, on the other hand, scores like 2 to 1, even 1 to 0, are commonplace and apparently desirable; games scoreless at the end of regulation time happen all the time. (In the 515 games played in the final phase in the history of the World Cup games through 1994, only 1584 goals have been scored. That's three a game!) And if there is no resolution at the end of overtime, the teams resort to a shoot-out that has more to do with luck than with real soccer skills. Worse yet, it is possible for a team to dominate in terms of sheer talent and "shots-on-goal" and still lose the game by virtue of a momentary lapse in defensive attention, a stroke of bad luck, and the opponent's break-away goal. Things like that can happen, too, in baseball, but the problem somehow evens out over baseball's very long season of daily games. In soccer, it just isn't fair. Soccer authorities should consider making the goal smaller and doing away with the goalie to make scoring easier. And the business of starting over after each goal, in the middle of the field, has to be reconsidered. It's too much like the center-jump after each goal in the basketball game of yesteryear.

It seems unlikely that Americans will ever fully comprehend or appreciate a sport in which players are not allowed to use their arms and hands. Although the footwork of soccer players is a magnificent skill to behold, most American fans are perplexed by straitjacketed soccer players' inability and unwillingness to "pick up the darn ball and run with it!" The inability to use substitutes (unless the player to be substituted for is lying dead or maimed on the field of play) is also bewildering to Americans, who glorify the "sixth man" in basketball and a baseball game in which virtually the entire roster (including an otherwise unemployable old man called "the designated hitter") is deployed on the field at one time or another.

Finally, the field in soccer is enormous. Considerably larger than the American football field, the soccer field could contain at least a dozen basketball courts. Americans like their action condensed, in a small field of vision — ten enormous sweaty people bouncing off one another and moving rapidly through a space the size of a medium-sized bedroom, twenty-two even larger people in bulky uniforms converging on a small, oddly shaped ball. In soccer, on the other hand, there is a premium on "spreading out," not infringing upon the force field occupied by a teammate, so that fancy foot-passing is possible. This spreading out across the vast meadow of the soccer playing field does not lend itself, again, to close get-down-and-dirty television scrutiny.

Soccer is a great sport and it certainly deserves the increased attention and popularity it is getting on all levels. But — primarily, again, because it does not lend itself to television — it will never make it big in the United States the way these other sports have, not until it changes some of its fundamental strategies.

Points to Ponder:

- In what ways is this cause-and-effect paper similar to an essay that is developed by means of **Analysis**? Is it also like a **Process Essay**?
- Are you convinced by the arguments presented in the essay? Why or why not? Should the writer have spent more time considering opposing points of view?
- There are some interesting efforts at humor in this essay. Are they effective?
- Can you point to this essay's **Thesis Statement**?