DEV 110 Notes -- Causal Analysis (Cause and Effect) Essays

Every time you try to answer a question that asks “Why?” you engage in the process of causal analysis. You attempt to determine a cause for an effect. Showing causes, reasons, effects, and results or consequences is a natural way of thinking. We are using causal analysis whenever we dig behind an event or statement and ask, “Why did this take place?” or “What are the effects of such an act or statement?”

Let us suppose that you receive an A on an English 111 composition. You may wish to analyze your paper closely to determine why you received the A so that you will write a theme for the next assignment which will earn the same grade. In this case, you are starting with an effect or result, an A paper, and you are seeking to recognize the reasons or causes for it. Some of these causes might include the following:

- You knew the subject matter thoroughly before writing.
- You outlined the major points of the essay before writing.
- You had an effective introductory paragraph and excellent support for your main idea.
- You revised each paragraph, clarifying each main point and paying attention to style and vocabulary.
- You proofread the composition carefully.
- You included an intriguing title for the composition.

In analyzing the reasons for your excellent grade, you have engaged in the process of causal analysis to help you to continue to do well on future compositions.

It is important to remember that some causal analysis essays focus only on the cause(s) of something; others analyze only the effect(s); still others discuss both causes and effects. Whether you are writing an essay which focuses on either causes or effects or treats both equally, you should follow these rules:

1. **Present a reasonable thesis statement.**

   It is unreasonable to expect a reader to believe a thesis statement which is highly exaggerated, over-simplified, or prejudiced. For instance, “Fluoridation in our nation’s water supply is a communist plot” would not be a reasonable thesis statement; it might bring a smirk to your reader’s lips, but it will not bring credibility to your paper.

2. **Limit your discussion to major causes and/or effects.**

   Although you may acknowledge minor causes and/or effects, you should spend most of your essay discussing major issues. As an example, the Confederacy’s firing on Fort Sumter was a direct cause of the Civil War, but it was not as important an issue as secession or slavery.
3. **Include all steps in your cause and effect relationship.**

   Many times, one cause leads to another and so on in a chain reaction. Unless you clearly discuss each part of the sequence, your reader might get lost.

4. **Do not over-simplify causes and/or effects.**

   Many subjects contain more than one cause or effect. Do not assign one blanket cause or effect to an obviously more complex situation. For example, to say “I lost my job because the boss hates me” is to over-simplify the situation. If he does not like you, there are undoubtedly specific reasons for his feelings which led to your dismissal. It might prove helpful to outline several major causes and/or effects pertinent to your topic before you begin writing. However, do not manufacture causes or effects to pad your paper. Be sure you have treated the topic thoroughly and fairly.

**Causal Analysis Writing Topics**

The causes and/or effects of an important decision, such as choosing a job, a college, a place to live, a spouse, etc.

Analyzing a success or a failure -- What caused it to happen and what were the effects?

A family tradition.

A superstition or irrational fear.

The causes and/or effects of change: in appearance, in any habit, in living conditions or circumstances, in beliefs, etc.

Drug, alcohol, or nicotine abuse.

Children’s lack of respect for parents or teachers.

The causes and/or effects of a significant “first” experience: first romantic attachment, first attempt at a sport or a job task, etc.

Your like or dislike of a particular thing or person, such as a book, writer, painter, movie, television program, type of music or musician, place, actor or actress, neighbor, employer or employee, school (course, teacher), radio station, etc.

The rise or fall in popularity of a fad, sport, style of clothing, politician, athlete, television show, etc.