The Causal Analysis Essay

“Why did it happen? What caused it? What does it cause? What are the effects? How is it related to something else?”

Purpose of Causal Analysis Essay

This mode of academic writing attempts to answer the “why” in our lives. It helps to clarify the world in which we live. The Causal Analysis academic essay allows us to begin to understand the complex series of events that shape our lives.

In essence, a Causal Analysis academic essay probes the why of specific actions, events, attitudes, and/or conditions and then examines the effect of specific consequences.

In the simplest terms, a Causal Analysis academic essay may be reduced to the equation:

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\text{Cause(s)} + \text{Effect(s)} = \text{Specific Consequence(s)}
\]

The focus is on the connections made between the cause and effect which produce specific consequences.

The three main purposes for an Causal Analysis academic essay are:

- To prove a point
- To argue against a widely accepted belief
- To speculate on a theory

Often this mode of writing will include the rhetorical forms of narrative/descriptive, example and compare/contrast to develop the essay.

There are many variations on the organizational patterns used in this mode. For example, to answer the “Why did it happen?” question, the writer must decide if one cause has one effect OR several effects. For example, the “Poor Listening Skills” may result in the consequence a student taking inadequate notes; Or “Poor Listening Skills” may result in many consequences, such as inadequate notes, memory lapses on written tests, and lost points in class due to failure to follow directions.)

Or the writer may decide the most appropriate organizational pattern is the causal chain. This pattern focuses the logical sequence of causes (sometimes called a “line of reasoning”). For example, “internal motivation to attend college class” may cause “absence in class” which may cause “failure on exams.” The effect may be “failing class” and/or “losing financial aid.”

The focus, however, of this pattern is on the connections between these events/actions. That is, a writer must explain that the “tie” or relationships are, in fact, legitimate and backed up by fact and sufficient specific details/examples.

Guidelines/Check List for an Effective Causal Analysis Essay
Fulfill one of the three purposes for causal analysis:
   a. To prove a point
   b. To argue against a widely accepted belief
   c. To speculate on a theory

Write a thesis sentence that tells whether the essay focuses on cause, effect, or both.

Use a variety of rhetorical forms to develop the essay - description, narration, example, classification, or comparison/contrast.

Decide on a logical organizational pattern.
   a. Single cause - multiple effects
   b. Multiple causes - single effect
   c. Causal chain

Develop the general assertions with sufficient specific details.

Coherently link ideas with effective transitions between major ideas and issues of cause/effect.

Avoid logical fallacies in cause/effect relationships.
   - Post hoc, ergo propter hoc (after this, therefore because of this)
   - Oversimplification of a situation
   - Insufficient evidence and specific details
   - Omitting important connections
   - Lack of honesty

Effective causal analysis requires that the writer seek more than just the immediate causes or effects. It demands that the writer use more complex thinking and delve into the more basic or ultimate causes of effects.

Causal analysis provides a benefit to both the reader and the writer.
   a. It attempts to answer the “why” in our lives.
   b. It provides ways for us to clarify our view of the world we live in.
   c. It allows us to begin to understand the often complex series of events that shape our lives.
Samples Thesis Statements for Cause/Effect Essay:

1. *Because of society’s gaudy cravings for magical myths, it has developed a cult-like obsession over Elvis.*

2. *Americans have wholeheartedly bought into the label game because of their desire to express upscale social and financial status—it is their way of making a statement to the world through their elegant and glamorous apparel.*

In addition, the writer wants to avoid mistaking mere chronology for causation. For example, “In the spring, my car breaks down.” This assumes there is a direct relationship between “spring” and the “car breaking down” when it may simply be a coincidence.