

Steps in a Causal Argument

Step 1 Make a claim

Make a causal claim on a controversial trend, event, or phenomenon.

Formula

- SOMETHING does (or does not) cause SOMETHING ELSE.
- or—
- SOMETHING causes SOMETHING ELSE, which, in turn, causes SOMETHING ELSE.

Examples

- One-parent families (or television violence, bad diet, and so on) is (or is not) the cause of emotional and behavioral problems in children.
- Firearms control laws (or right-to-carry-handgun laws) reduce (or increase) violent crimes.
- The trend toward home schooling (or private schools) is (or is not) improving the quality of education.
- The length of U.S. presidential campaigns forces candidates to become too much influenced by big-dollar contributors (or prepares them for the constant media scrutiny that they will endure as president).
- Putting grade school children into competitive sports teaches them how to succeed in later life (or puts undue emphasis on winning and teaches many who are slower to mature to have a negative self-image).

Step 2 What's at stake in your claim?

- If the cause is obvious to everyone, then it probably isn't worth writing about.

Step 3 Think of possible causes

- Which are the immediate causes?
- Which are the background causes?
- Which are the hidden causes?
- Which are the causes that most people have not recognized?

*From: Good Reasons,
3rd ed.,
Lester Faigley & Jack Selzer*

Step 4 Analyze your potential readers

- Who are your readers?
- How familiar will they be with the trend, event, or phenomenon that you're writing about?
- What are they likely to know and not know?
- How likely are they to accept your causal explanation?
- What alternative explanation might they argue for?

Step 5 Write a draft

Introduction

- Describe the controversial trend, event, or phenomenon.
- Give the background that your intended readers will need.

Body

- For a trend, event, or phenomenon that is unfamiliar to your readers, you can explain the cause or chain of causation. Remember that providing facts is not the same thing as establishing causes, although facts can help to support your causal analysis.
- Another way of organizing the body is to set out the causes that have been offered and reject them one by one. Then you can present the cause that you think is most important.
- A third way is to treat a series of causes one by one, analyzing the importance of each.

Conclusion

- Do more than simply summarize. You might consider additional effects beyond those that have been previously noted.

Step 6 Revise, edit, proofread

- For detailed instructions, see Chapter 12.
- For a checklist to use to evaluate your draft, see pages 217–222.