

Sample Essay— Causes

Acting on Words refers to this essay in various places, including pages 119, 151, and 153. For an essay that is organized according to an interest in effects, see “Beginning Rider: The Untold Story” (“Examples of Cause-Effect Writing,” Chapter 10, website).

Causes of Procrastination

Willard Dudley

A gentle breeze rustles the cord of my laptop. My textbook sits open, propped to the “Checklist of Steps to a Successful Essay.” A page of up-to-date quotations and paraphrases lies waiting. They come from internet sources, two current books on my topic, a journal article, and even a first-hand interview. Two days of brainstorming and diagramming stare up from pages on another corner of the table. For once I have done the pre-writing activities, as recommended, completed my research, and even remembered to copy down the page numbers and bibliographic details along with my citations. There’s nowhere I’d rather be for creative atmosphere than right here at my kitchen table. I should be ready to boogie. But in fact I am simply staring at the blank screen, my mind and fingers locked. I begin to realize that my procrastination is caused by distractions, mounting hopelessness, and despair.

A whistle sounds: the game is about to start. I go into the living room to turn off the TV, but the kickoff returner makes it all the way to the fifty-yard line. I may as well watch the first series of plays. The team gets into the end zone, so it only follows that I watch to see how their opponents fare on the next series. I check my watch: 8:10. There’s no sense starting to write till 8:30, a nice even entry point. I can have the revised draft done before midnight and still get enough sleep for early class next morning. The phone rings. It’s Jill, wanting to drop in to exchange CDs. What the heck, a few minutes of visiting will do me good. Jill doesn’t leave till after ten. I wait till 10:30 for a clean entry point, but when I sit back down to the blank screen, I keep thinking about Jill and wandering through

memories of old girl-friends and places we went together. A car in need of a muffler growls by. I find myself wondering what I could have done to remove the stuck oil pan in Gina's old K-Car when I look at my watch again: 10:45.

Now it feels virtually hopeless. If I had started by 8 or even 8:30, I could have had the first draft just about finished and used the rest of my energy to fix those usage errors our instructor seems so fixated on. This must be what is meant by a vicious circle: the longer I stall the harder it is to begin. My essay is like a canoe in irons in the middle of a lake. The hardest thing about canoeing is to get started from a standstill. I've gone from floating on haphazard thoughts and diversions to brooding on the fact that it is now too late.

Then I realize something kind of interesting. It's a little like remembering a dream halfway through the day. I realize that even when the instructor had handed us the essay assignment two weeks ago, I thought that two weeks would never be enough time. Even then I told myself it was too late. When Jill asked why I was so worried, I said it was because it would take so long doing all the pre-writing stuff, not to mention the research. It sounded like too many false starts and too much indecision for me. But using a collage and doing some diagramming were actually fun, and I found really good citations and did an interview all in two days. So why was I thinking there wasn't enough time? Why am I still thinking that when almost half the work has been done and the essay has to be only two and a half pages?

I realize the real problem, reflected in mounting hopelessness and enshrined in despair, is that I actually believe I can't write this essay—that is, I can't write the perfect essay I imagine I should write. That's the root cause underlying the vicious circle of mounting despair: the longer I procrastinate about putting a word on the computer screen, the more I reinforce this belief. So I write whatever words come into my head to begin my first paragraph. Suddenly time expands. I am not only writing the first paragraphs of my essay, I am also reflecting on how to stop this problem from happening again.

I decide that next time I tell myself to start writing by 8:00 p.m. I will stick to that, regardless of the TV or the telephone. That way I will show myself that my despair is

wrong. If Jill calls to drop by, I will tell her to wait 90 minutes, till I'm done the first draft. Once I complete that draft, the rest is coasting. As I think this, I'm onto my concluding paragraph. It's past midnight, there still remain 40 minutes of proofing and revising, but I'm feeling great. I'll get up 40 minutes earlier and revise in the morning when I can take a fresh second look at what I have written. Maybe the next time I have my pre-writing and research worked out so well in advance I should show my stuff to the instructor, like some of the others have done. They seemed to be motivated by that, knowing they were on the right track. They also got a few tips on how to open their particular essays. Now I'm writing my clinching words, using an appropriate aphorism. I may not yet believe that I can write the very best essays I would like to, but I no longer feel the victim of procrastination.

Commentary

Using deductive organization (placing one's thesis at the beginning—Chapter 6, “Outlining: Thesis Statements and Topic Sentences”), Dudley ends his first paragraph with his explicit thesis statement: “[M]y procrastination is caused by distractions, mounting hopelessness, and despair.” If this were to be converted to a more impersonal third-person style, it might be rephrased something like this: “Procrastination persists as a serious problem because of distractions, mounting hopelessness, and despair.” The topic is clearly procrastination and, more specifically, its causes. The words “serious problem” convey the controlling idea (which the personal style essay conveys by tone and narrative anecdotes); this idea or attitude portrays the topic as a matter of major concern. Finally, the thesis assertion lists the reasons for this concern; in this case, there are three related reasons. In this one sentence, the writer conveys topic, controlling idea and reasons, in other words, the core and basic structure of the essay.

By listing reasons in his thesis statement, Dudley establishes conceptual links between his thesis sentence and each of his body paragraphs. He expands upon the first reason as the topic of his first body paragraph (paragraph 2). He then enlarges on the second reason in the subsequent body paragraph (3); he discusses the third reason in the paragraphs after that, (4) and (5). His final paragraph (6) states appropriate resolutions stemming from his

insight. The paragraphs and the thesis are conceptually bound together throughout the essay.

Although this is a personal-style essay, it nevertheless represents an approach to thesis statement and body structure that most successful academic essays also use. The vast majority of effective essays achieve this same conceptual integration by proceeding from pre-writing activities toward a thesis statement and a matching outline. An outline for Dudley's essay might resemble the following:

Outline for the Essay "Causes of Procrastination"

Thesis Statement: My procrastination is caused by (1) distractions, (2) mounting hopelessness, (3) despair.

Essay Body:

1. **Distractions:** TV, Jill, memories/associations, street noise
2. **Mounting hopelessness:** vicious circle, delay worsens the inertia
3. **Despair:** The extreme of hopelessness—why?
 - underlying lack of belief in self
 - acting, getting started, overcomes the harmful belief

Conclusion: Stick to schedule, get reward & encouragement for prep work

Apply this Sort of Outline to Your Own Essay Writing

We highly recommended that you prepare a direct-list thesis statement and matching outline *before* attempting to write a final draft of your essay, or any draft you regard as close to finished. This step-by-step procedure ensures your essay will have a clear position, sufficient reasons, purposeful organization, and links between thesis statement and topic sentences of body paragraphs.

For Further Thinking

1. Is there any point at which Dudley discusses effects as well as causes? If so, discuss the meaning and significance of that transition.
2. Do you ever have problems with procrastination, or do you know anyone who has? Do you believe Dudley offers satisfactory solutions? What other solutions would you suggest?

Practice

Read Gina Loverso's "Beginning Rider: The Untold Story" ("Examples of Cause-Effect Writing," Chapter 10, website) and consider how it may be similar to and/or different from "The Causes of Procrastination." See Chapter 12 "Comparison-Contrast" for ideas on how to develop a discussion that closely compares two essays. In particular, note the sample comparison of "The Lure of the Body Image" and "Canadians: What Do They Want?" and the differences and similarities test (p. 185). Outline your own essay comparing Loverso's essay and Dudley's.