

# Cause-and-Effect

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*“Narrative is basically a sequence of events. Something happens, then something else, then something else. Human instinct compels us to stick around to see what happens next.”*

—Ira Glass

This writing principle is simple enough but not easy to master. The novelist Dwight Vreeland Swain named this writing principle the Motivation-Reaction Units (MRUs). Think of MRUs as actions and reactions in a scene. Cause and effect. The action comes before the reaction.

This concept is a line level application. MRUs are about getting the story written in the proper sequence. This principle might seem nit-picky, but it makes a huge difference in the long run. This principle is about immersing the reader deep into the narrative.

In my notes, I refer to MRUs as cause-and-effect.

Cause-and-effect violations can sneak into your writing without you knowing it. The only way to identify them is to understand this concept.

## **A cause-and-effect violation occurs when:**

- The actions and reactions in a scene are out of sequence
- Thoughts or actions happen in reverse (wrong) order
- Implied action and reaction are happening at the same time
- Show that one thing is happening because of the other.

Cause-and-effect violations, or (if you prefer MRUs), will slow the story's pacing, cause wordiness, and will add distance. Often, these violations jar the reader out of the story's rhythm into a plot-stopper/speed bump moment.

Yes, in the real world, action and reaction sometimes happen simultaneously, but most of the time they do not. The goal of limited and Deep POV is to avoid cause-and-effect violations. Write in the proper sequence, as things happen from the character's point of view.

Write the action before the reaction. Another way of saying this is that the action must come before the reaction in a scene.

**A few cause-and-effect phrase examples:**

- after eating she went home
- after reading the book, he left
- as she walked down the street
- as the sun came up
- before eating, she washed up
- while eating lunch, he gazed

**Note:**

Not all cause-and-effect phrases begin with "as." Verbs or pronouns follow these common cause-and-effect clue words.

**Clue words that may lead to cause-and-effect issues:**

- |       |        |       |
|-------|--------|-------|
| after | at     | when  |
| as    | before | while |

**Common cause-and-effect phrases:**

- |       |          |           |         |          |
|-------|----------|-----------|---------|----------|
| as a  | after a  | before a  | when a  | while a  |
| as he | after he | before he | when he | while he |
| as I  | after I  | before I  | when I  | while I  |

as she	after she	before she	when she	while she
as the	after the	before the	when the	while the
as they	after they	before they	when they	while they
as we				
at				
at the				

**Issue: (when)**

Sue shrieked *when* Joe stepped on her bare toes.

- ▶ This sentence is technically and grammatically correct. But this sentence violates Deep POV principles. Why? These events are backwards. The effect is before the cause. Sue shrieks before Joe steps on her toes.

**Fix:**

Joe stepped on Sue's bare toes and she shrieked.

**Issue: (As the)**

*As the* sheriff approached the door, he reached for his gun.

- ▶ The words “as the” imply the action and reaction are happening at the same time. This also adds distance to the event.

**Fix:**

The sheriff drew his gun and approached the door.

Or.

The sheriff approached the door and drew his gun.

- ▶ Removing the “As he” phrase causes this sentence to have a proper sequence. The sentence also reads more to the point.

**Issue: (when she)**

The waitress blushed *when she* tripped and dropped the tray.

► The phrase “when she” implies the action and reaction are happening at the same time. The order is wrong as well. The waitress needs to drop the tray first before she blushes.

**Fix:**

The waitress tripped and dropped the tray. A rush of blood shot up into her cheeks.

► This sequence is correct. The waitress dropped the tray first, and then she blushed.

**Note:**

Sometimes, two things happen at the same time. You need to understand when to use these cause-and-effect phrases and when not to.

**Example: (As the)**

*As the* bank robber bolted toward the sheriff, swinging a knife, the sheriff crouched, lifted the gun, and fired.

► This works because it takes time for the bad guy to reach the sheriff. The sheriff has time to act while the bad guy heads for him.

Or.

The bank robber bolted toward the sheriff, swinging a knife.

The sheriff crouched, lifted the gun, and fired.

► Removing “As the” and separating the robber’s and the sheriff’s actions made this example read better. Each character has his own line/paragraph.

## Related: Avoid Gerunds

Gerunds are also called **-ing** verbs. The goal is to minimize the use of these **-ing** words.

Often, **-ing** verbs are paired with weaker “to be” or “to have” verbs, which often makes the sentence passive.

Joe was running.

Sue had been dancing.

The children were playing.

Gerunds or **-ing** words are another form of cause-and-effect issue.

Starting a sentence with a dangling participle. A dangling participle is a participle phrase that begins with an adjective ending in **-ing** (and sometimes **-ed**). These dangling participles often cause sequence issues and confusion.

Watch your writing for these **-ing** words.

### Issue: (Deciding to accept)

**Deciding to accept** the job offer, the human resource manager shook Joe’s hand.

► This sentence has two issues: a to-do phrase (to accept) and a dangling participle (deciding to). The sentence reads like the human resource manager accepted a job offer.

### Fix:

Joe accepted the job offer and shook the human resource manager’s hand.

### Issue: (setting)

**Setting** his backpack on his desk, Joe reached for his book.

► Grammatically this sentence is correct, but the sentence reads odd. Clarity is the goal. Why complicate the sentence?

**Fix:**

Joe sat his backpack on the desk and reached for his book.

**Issue: (marching)**

*Marching* into the cafeteria, Joe grabbed his backpack.

► The *-ing* construct can make a sentence read odd or confusing.

**Fix:**

Joe grabbed his backpack and marched into the cafeteria.

**Issue: (was walking)**

Joe *was walking* down the street.

► This sentence reads passive. The “was” verb weakens the sentence.

**Fix:**

Joe walked down the street.

**Issue: (were shopping)**

Sue and Joe *were shopping* for an engagement ring.

**Fix:**

Sue and Joe shopped for an engagement ring.

**In Summary:**

Both the “as” and “-ing” phrases are grammatically correct, but they weaken the pose and may add unnecessary words.

Avoid weak helping verbs and write tighter. Even if two things happen at the same time, avoid using any of the cause-and-effect phrases to connect the events. In Deep POV, these cause-and-effect phrases are speed bumps. Real life and storytelling are different. Write linearly. One experience at a time in the order that happens in the story. Write the action that ends first and connect the next action with a different conjunction.

### **Reference search:**

Universal Class: How to Polish Your Writing to be Sophisticated

Cause and Effect: Understanding Story Flow

Cause and Effect: Telling Your Story in the Right Order

Motivation-Reaction Units (MRUs According to Swain)

Avoid “ing” words in fiction