

CAUSE AND EFFECT IN THE ART OF WRITING

This paper was written in response to the following prompt: In your opinion, what is the most important cause for the full stop that ends Levi's book? What are some of the most important effects the carbon atom has throughout its life? What is the relationship between the cause and the effect? What has writing the first two paragraphs shown you about using cause and effect logic in writing?

In Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table*, the sudden stop in Levi's chapter about carbon can be attributed to his choice to tell the story as a record of events, forcing the story to end in the present moment, which is sudden by nature. The story of the carbon atom is, according to Levi, a "micro-history," tracing the atom's path over the course of a few millennia.* The atom journeys all the way from a piece of limestone to its eventual form as part of a molecule in a glass of milk. After ingesting the milk, the carbon is transported to Levi's brain, which then stimulates his idea for the story he is telling, as well as his ability to write it down. Levi has essentially traced the history of this ancient atom of carbon all the way to the time at which this story was written. Therefore, the ending of this atom's journey takes the shape of the present moment, a sudden and instantaneous experience. It would thus make sense for the end of the atom's journey to be just as sudden as the moment it ends the text. The abrupt stop of Levi's chapter is simply a result of the nature of the "micro-history" he is telling, with its culmination in the present requiring the abrupt type of ending that Levi concludes with.

In Levi's narrative, an atom of carbon has numerous important effects during its life, and it is the results of these interactions that allow an atom of carbon to succeed in causing the end of the book. During the chapter, Levi only mentions a few of the atom's innumerable engagements during its centuries of travels. The most notable of these actions are the crucial moments that decide whether or not this atom of carbon's journey will continue. One of these instances would include the moment the carbon is separated from its limestone prison by man, starting the atom on its path across the world:

But precisely for the good of the narrator, whose story could otherwise have come to an end, the

limestone... lies on the surface. It lies within reach of man and his pickaxe...a blow of the pickaxe detached it and sent it on its way to the lime kiln, plunging into the world of things that change.

Another would be its eventual consumption by man as fermented wine, ensuring it would not just sit in a cellar, forgotten. The moment the atom is eaten by the wood worm is also one of these important moments, freeing it from a cedar tree and the few centuries it might have been trapped there. All these instances are key points in the atom's story, allowing the book to finish how and when it did, due to how these situations are resolved. Had any of these turning points gone awry, the atom could have been lost, and the chapter would have been left without an ending due to the absence of the cause that results in the story's conclusion. Thus, the relationship between cause and effect is one of individual dependency. Causes have no need for an effect in order to happen; rather, they allow an effect to occur after they take place. Only after a cause transpires can the desired effect even have the possibility of resulting, for more than one effect can result from a single, original cause. The occurrences that transpire between cause and effect are key in determining which of these possible outcomes will ensue. In this case, the atom of carbon is the original cause that, after enduring an elaborate chain of events, eventually presents Levi with the final effect of the book's completion.

The logic of cause and effect can be utilized in writing in order to easily prove a point, thanks to its nature of supporting itself. By linking a possible occurrence to the desired final effect, writers may demonstrate their argument. After all, every effect requires some initial cause in order to occur, and all writers have to do is invent a believable circumstance that leads to the desired effect. Additionally, if the original cause cannot be directly linked to the final desired result, the original cause can be instead linked to "sub-causes" which allow the logic chain to eventually reach its required destination. This can be effectively utilized to prove almost any point for the writer, and it is even used in Levi's narrative of the carbon atom. In this instance, Levi desired to demonstrate the incredible value of carbon in the ecosystem and decided to achieve this through the story of the atom of carbon that gave him this idea. However, Levi had no idea where the atom that

had stimulated this idea had actually come from, nor how it had eventually reached his brain. But, through the use of cause and effect logic he was able to create a plausible scenario detailing this atom of carbon's journey. Levi decided on the original, fictitious cause of the atom being separated from limestone, from where it traveled through a chain of "sub-causes" listed in the chapter, and ending with the final effect of residing in his brain. Levi even acknowledges this use of cause and effect logic near the end of the chapter, discussing how he could have used hundreds of different scenarios to reach this final effect:

I could tell innumerable other stories, and they would all be true: all literally true, in the nature of the transitions, and in their order and data. The number of atoms is so great that one could always be found whose story coincides with any capriciously invented story.

Levi's narrative clearly demonstrates how the utilization of cause and effect allows a writer to logically prove an argument without having to endure painstaking research, making it an invaluable tool in the art of writing.

***NOTE:**

This and all subsequent references are to: Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. R. Rosenthal (London: David Campbell Publishers Limited, 1995). The excerpt used is from pages 232-241.