Avoid Cause-and-Effect Issues

This writing principle initially threw me because cause-and-effect issues are not technically or grammatically wrong. The novelist, Dwight Vreeland Swain, named this writing principle the Motivation-Reaction Units (MRUs). In my notes, I refer to MRUs as cause-and-effect issues.

Cause-and-effect issues, or (if you like MRUs), will slow the story's pacing, cause wordiness, and distance the reader into a plot-stopper/speed bump moment. These speed bumps can confuse the reader. You do not want the reader to stop reading to think, reread, or lose the story's rhythm.

A cause-and-effect issue is when:

- The actions in a scene are out of sequence
- Thoughts or action happens in reverse (wrong) order
- Implied action and reaction are happening at the same time.

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

Write the action before the reaction, and inner thought before an action. 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

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

after	at	when
as	before	while

Note:

Verbs or pronouns followed these common cause-and-effect clue words.

More common cause-and-effect phrases:

as a	after a	before a	while a
as he	after he	before he	while he
as I	after I	before I	while I
as she	after she	before she	while she
as the	after the	before the	while the
as they	after they	before they	while they
as we			
at			
at the			

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.

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.

However.

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

The sheriff crouched, lifted the gun, and fired.

Removing "As" and separating the robber's and the sheriff's action makes this example read better. Each character has his own line/paragraph.

In Summary:

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:

Cause and Effect: Understanding Story Flow

Cause and Effect: Telling Your Story in the Right Order

Motivation-reaction Units (MRUs According to Swain)