

## Avoid Cause-and-Effect Issues

This writing principle threw me off 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.

### **A cause-and-effect (as) issue is when:**

- The actions 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 one thing is happening because of the other.

Cause-and-effect phrases are speed bumps for the reader. Often, these cause-and-effect phrases jars the reader out of story's rhythm.

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 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.

**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.

Or.

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 actions made this example read better. Each character has his own line/paragraph.

## **Related:**

Another type of cause-and-effect issue is 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.

**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.

**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)