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# Examining Cause and Effect in Historical Texts: An Integration of Language and Content

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The content area of history provides many opportunities for students to develop a number of different skills, including reading and writing (de Oliveira, 2008; Schleppegrell & de Oliveira, 2006). Teaching reading in history is seen as a key factor for students' understanding of content (Beck & McKeown, 2002; Massey & Heafner, 2004). In particular, focusing on students' understanding of history texts can help them become better readers (Schleppegrell & de Oliveira, 2006). Understanding how texts are organized is fundamental for student comprehension of content (Alvermann & Phelps, 1998). Reading textbooks can be difficult for students, due to the way textbooks are constructed and their lack of connection between ideas and events (Beck, McKeown, & Gromoll, 1989; Beck, McKeown, Sinatra, & Loxterman, 1991). This can be particularly challenging for ELLs, who may struggle to understand connections between ideas in textbooks.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010) have many expectations for literacy in the content areas, including history/social studies. The CCSS has increased literacy demands for teachers and students; these demands involve the ability to comprehend texts with high levels of complexity, to write in different text types that present information logically, and to develop oral skills to articulate ideas in a persuasive manner. The development of these literacy skills is a tall order for both teachers and students. Complex texts have long been present in history textbooks, and the ability to access them is key.

This chapter focuses specifically on one aspect of textbook language in the content area of history: cause and effect relationships. Causality in history has received special consideration

over the past several years (e.g., Achugar & Schleppegrell, 2005; Ciardello, 2002; Coffin, 1997, 2006; Unsworth, 1999; Veel & Coffin, 1996) and is seen as particularly important for students' understanding of historical events and literacy development. This chapter describes a pedagogical practice that teachers can use to identify cause-effect. Cause-effect is not just marked between clauses through conjunctions, but it occurs within clauses, making understanding the connections between events more difficult for students to comprehend. This challenge to student comprehension calls attention to how teachers can help students, particularly ELLs, to focus on language to understand content.

## **The Common Core State Standards and Specific Demands for ELLs**

Secondary teachers must understand the discipline-specific language demands of their content—or disciplinary language—and plan to address these demands in their classes. Within the CCSS, students are expected to engage with complex texts. In history, this complexity is often seen through the use of specific language features. When facts are organized, explained, and generalized, the discourse of history textbooks dissociates actors from actions with the construction of “things” through the use of nominalization. Nominalization is the expression as a noun or nominal group of what would in everyday language be presented as a verb, an adjective, or a conjunction. For instance, in the sentence “The violence was the people’s retaliation for years of exploitation” presents two nominalizations: “people’s retaliation” and “years of exploitation,” which would in more everyday language be used as “the people retaliated because they were exploited for years.” Nominalization is a resource used in many academic and scientific genres (de Oliveira, 2010; Schleppegrell, 2004; Unsworth, 1999) and is typical of academic discourse. Nominalizations add to the complexity of the disciplinary language of history.

Cause-effect relationships are another demand of the history content area. Causes and effects in history are constructed through a variety of language resources, not just conjunctions such as *because* and *so* (Achugar & Schleppegrell, 2005; Martin, 2002). These language resources include nouns such as *reason*, *factor*, and *result*; verbs such as *cause*, *make*, *affect*, and *lead to*; and prepositions such as *for* and *through* (Coffin, 2004; Veel & Coffin, 1996).

The CCSS have specific standards that require students to develop knowledge of cause-effect in history. The CCSS Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6–12 (NGA & CCSSO, 2010) state: “Describe how a text presents information (e.g., sequentially, comparatively, causally)” (RH.6–8.5; p. 61). This involves knowledge of cause-effect relationships in contrast to sequences and comparisons. For Grades 9–10, one of the expectations states, “Analyze how a text uses structure to emphasize key points or advance an explanation or analysis” (RH.9–10.5; p. 61). This involves an even higher linguistic demand to understand key points and information, often presented through causes and effects. For Grades 11–12, students are expected to “Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole” (RH.11–12.5; p. 61). As students move through the grades, the demands for understanding cause-effect increase.

## Rationale

Cause-effect relationships are an essential part of history learning (Achugar & Schleppegrell, 2005; Ciardello, 2002; Coffin, 2006). Asking students to find cause-effect in history passages and draw diagrams that show cause-effect relationships is a common task found in textbooks (e.g., Beck, Black, Krieger, Naylor, & Shabaka, 2003; Deverell & White, 2006; Stuckey & Salvucci, 2003). Students are not often provided with an approach to focus on language in order to find cause-effect relationships. The approach presented here draws on a functional linguistic framework, which supports the notion that content and language cannot be separated (de Oliveira, 2008, 2010; de Oliveira, Klassen, & Maune, 2015; Schleppegrell, 2004). Content knowledge cannot be separated from the language through which it is presented, so a focus on content *means* a focus on language.

Entire clauses can also function as causes and effects, making it particularly difficult for students to recognize them (de Oliveira, 2010). Students can more easily identify conjunctions that show cause-effect, but they are less able to identify other ways that express cause-effect (Achugar & Schleppegrell, 2005). This can be especially challenging for ELLs.

Next, the pedagogical practice shows how an examination of cause-effect relationships in historical texts provides a way for teachers to engage students in talking about historical events while focusing on reading comprehension and developing literacy skills. I use an 11th-grade sample text to show the different language resources used to construct cause-effect in history. In addition, I demonstrate that recognizing cause-effect relationships helps readers understand how events are related and the reasons why they occurred, and show how cause-effect charts can be used in history classrooms.

## Pedagogical Practice: An Integration of Language and Content in Examining Cause and Effect in Historical Texts

Before we go into the pedagogical practice itself, it is important to establish an application framework that teachers can use in order to do this in the classroom. Figure 1 describes how teachers can incorporate this close look at causes and effects into their teaching.

### 1. Set goals, based on key concepts

History/social studies teachers need to set goals for the unit based on key concepts that they need to address. Typically, states have their own social studies content standards that teachers can use to select the key concepts they need to address. Teachers also need to consider and incorporate the CCSS for literacy in history/social studies.

### 2. Select a text

Next, it will be important for teachers to select a text: one to two paragraphs that address their goals and key concepts based on the standards. This text will contain key historical information and, for the purposes of this pedagogical practice, also show cause-effect relationships.

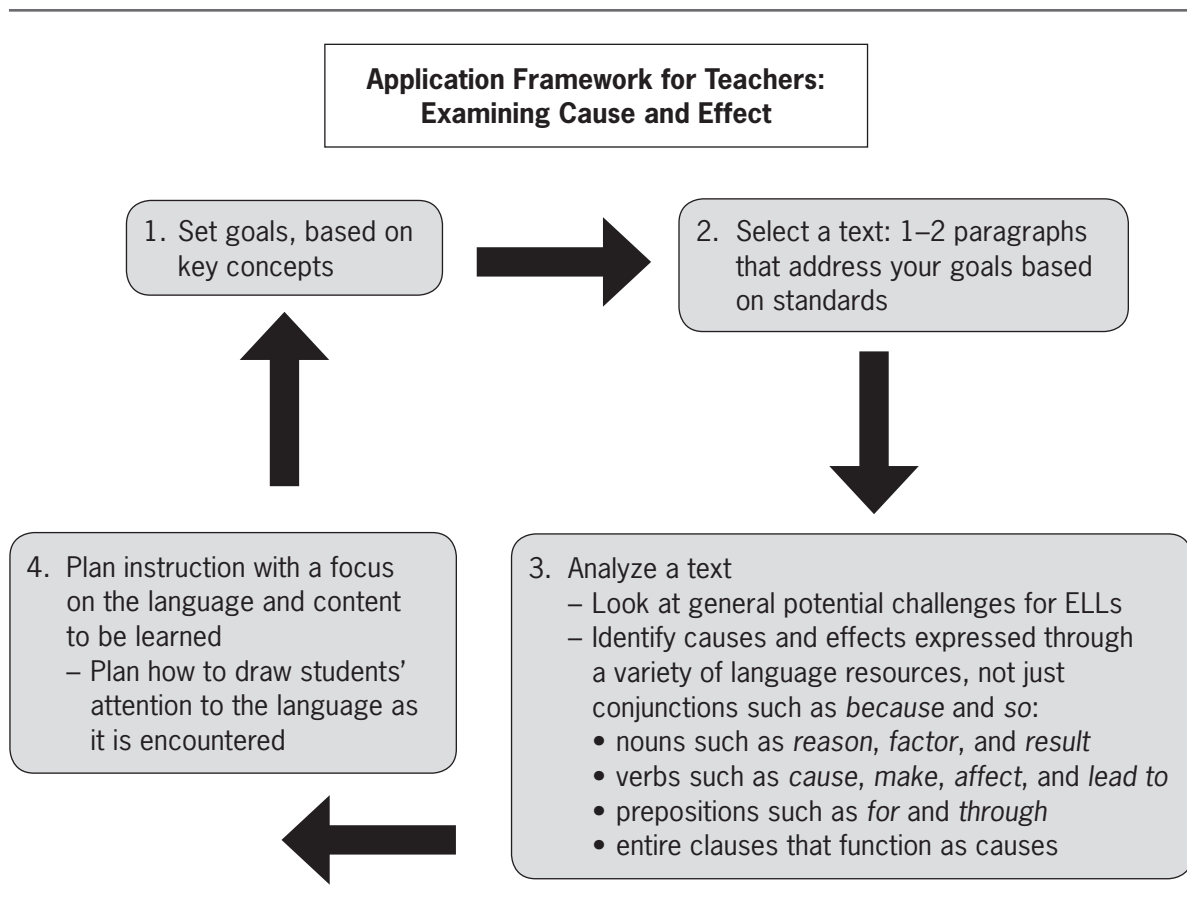


Figure 1. Application Framework for Teachers: Examining Cause and Effect

### 3. Analyze a text

Next, teachers can look closely at the text. First, they can look at potential challenges for ELLs, in general. Then, they can identify causes and effects expressed through a variety of language resources, not just conjunctions such as *because* and *so*:

- nouns such as *reason*, *factor*, and *result*;
- verbs such as *cause*, *make*, *affect*, and *lead to*;
- prepositions such as *for* and *through*; and
- entire clauses that function as causes.

Below, I show an example of what this analysis might look like, and an activity that can help students make sense of cause-effect relationships in the text.

### 4. Plan instruction with a focus on the language and content to be learned

Next is planning how teachers will draw students' attention to the language as it is encountered in the text. This close attention to language—and, in this case, cause-effect—enables students to more closely attend to how the text presents information and is structured, as the CCSS require.

## Example of Text Analysis

The text selected shows examples of a number of different resources that construe cause-effect relationships. Examining a text by looking at causes and effects means looking for relationships between events or actions and recognizing how one event or action brought about or led to other events or actions. This is done through a close look at language.

*Sample Text* (from Cayton, Perry, Reed, & Winkler, 2000, p. 217)

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### From Farms to Cities

Women and men alike took part in the migration from rural to urban America. As factories produced more of the goods that farm women had once made, the need for women's labor on farms declined. In addition, as new machines replaced manual labor on many farms, the need for male farmhands shrank. The result was a striking shift in the nation's population. Between 1880 and 1910, the percentage of the nation's population living on farms fell from 72 to 54 percent.

Many African Americans took part in this internal migration. In 1870 fewer than a half million of the nation's 5 million African Americans lived outside of the South. But after Reconstruction ended in 1877, segregation and acts of racial violence against African Americans increased. By 1890, partly as a result of these pressures, another 150,000 black southerners had left the South, and many rural African Americans had moved into nearby cities. Then, in the 1910s, the boll weevil destroyed cotton crops and floods ruined Alabama and Mississippi farmlands. These disasters drove several hundred thousand more African Americans out of the South, mostly to Northern cities.

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This text is an example of a *historical account* genre, where a chain of causes-effects is presented through a linear explanation of a sequence of events over time (Coffin, 2004). Several time markers are present in the text: "Between 1880 and 1910," "in 1870," "in 1877," "by 1890," "in the 1910s," and "between 1865 and 1900." Moving from clause to clause in this text can help us identify all of the cause-effect relationships presented.

The first sentence in this text ("Women and men alike took part in the migration from rural to urban America") represents what is commonly known as a topic sentence, presenting the main idea developed throughout the paragraph. The first cause appears in the second sentence: "As factories produced more of the goods that farm women had once made, the need for women's labor on farms declined." The first clause in this sentence, introduced by the connector *as*, presents the cause in the cause-effect relationship. The effect appears in the second clause, "the need for women's labor on farms declined." This cause-effect relationship focuses on *women*, introduced in the topic sentence. The second sentence ("In addition, as new machines replaced manual labor on many farms, the need for male farmhands shrank") presents further information and is constructed in the same cause-effect pattern, with connector *as* introducing the cause ("as new machines replaced manual labor on many farms") followed by the effect ("the need for male farmhands shrank"). Here the focus of the cause-effect relationship is *men*, also introduced in the topic sentence. The effect also has the same grammatical pattern: *the need for* + noun + verb. These two

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cause-effect sequences led to the effect, introduced by the noun *the result*, presented in the next sentence: “The result was a striking shift in the nation’s population.” The *striking shift* is further elaborated by the last sentence of the paragraph (“Between 1880 and 1910, the percentage of the nation’s population living on farms fell from 72 to 54 percent”), which is in itself an effect of the migration introduced in the topic sentence of the paragraph.

The second paragraph focuses on African Americans’ migration. The first two sentences (“Many African Americans took part in this internal migration. In 1870 fewer than a half million of the nation’s 5 million African Americans lived outside of the South”) provide detail about African Americans. The third sentence shows a cause-effect relationship (“But after Reconstruction ended in 1877, segregation and acts of racial violence against African Americans increased”). The first clause (“But after Reconstruction ended in 1877”) can be considered a cause for the second clause (“segregation and acts of racial violence against African Americans increased”). The fourth sentence is more complex and difficult to understand due to its grammatical construction. The phrase “partly as a result of these pressures” presents the cause for two effects: “By 1890 . . . another 150,000 black southerners had left the South, and many rural African Americans had moved into nearby cities.” The cause “partly as a result of these pressures” is difficult because it has the connector *as a result of* and the noun *these pressures*. The word *result* in “as a result of” may confuse students, who may think that this connector is describing an effect when in fact it is introducing a cause. The noun *these pressures* is also confusing because it refers back to “segregation” and “acts of racial violence against African Americans” presented in the previous sentence. Students may not make these connections when reading this passage.

The next sentence presents other complex cause-effect relationships. In “the boll weevil destroyed cotton crops and floods ruined Alabama and Mississippi farmlands,” we find two embedded cause-effect relationships. “The boll weevil” is the cause for the effect presented through the verb *destroyed*. In other words, the boll weevil was the cause for the destruction of cotton crops. Similarly, the noun *floods* was the cause for the effect presented through the verb *ruined*. It was the floods that caused the ruin of Alabama and Mississippi farmlands. Embedded cause-effect relationships are used here to refer to cause-effect sequences that occur within the same clause such as the two clauses presented above. See Figure 2 for a visual representation of embedded cause-effect relationships.

The last sentence of the paragraph (“These disasters drove several hundred thousand more African Americans out of the South, mostly to Northern cities”) marks the effect of the destruction of cotton crops and ruin of Alabama and Mississippi farmlands. The noun *these disasters*, with the

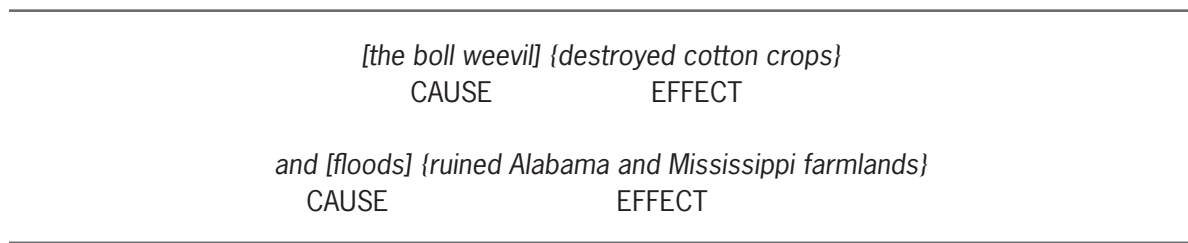


Figure 2. Visual Representation of Embedded Cause and Effect Relationships

same function as *these pressures* from the previous paragraph, refers back to what had just been presented. This last sentence also presents a cause-effect relationship: *these disasters* is the cause for the departure of several hundred thousand more African Americans from the south. The verb *drove* marks the effect: “drove several hundred thousand more African Americans out of the South, mostly to Northern cities.” Again, we see an embedded cause-effect relationship, one that occurs within the same clause.

It is important to point out that the connection between what happened to cotton crops and farmlands and the departure of more African Americans may not be clear for students when they read this text. Students may not understand why the destruction of cotton crops and the ruin of farmlands affected African Americans. Teachers would need to help students make the connection, as the text assumes that students will have the background knowledge to understand how these events are connected.

Examining cause-effect relationships helps to recognize connections between events or actions and realize how one event brought about or led to other events. As can be seen, this text shows examples of a number of different resources that construe cause-effect relationships. Cause-effect is not just shown between clauses but can also occur embedded within the same clause. This can be particularly difficult for students who are unfamiliar with the language of history, especially students in the process of learning English. Teachers can help students notice cause-effect relationships by looking closely at language before students are asked to complete a diagram or discuss the causes-effects presented in a textbook chapter.

### **A Focus on Language *and* History: Using Cause and Effect Charts**

A close focus on language can help teachers and students recognize relationships presented in history texts. One strategy that works well in the classroom is helping students deconstruct the text through the use of cause-effect charts. I have noticed through my observation of a number of history classes that students can more easily discuss cause-effect when they deconstruct a text by looking at causes-effects in different paragraphs and then completing cause-effect charts. This helps students see the connections between and within clauses and notice the events or actions that led to other events and actions. Students find it interesting to see that most of the time, not just one event led to another event but several events are interconnected. This helps students see that history is not a series of unrelated pieces of content, but an integrated network of related content.

The sample cause-effect chart shown in Figure 3 is an example of what teachers can develop to help students see the cause-effect patterns in history texts. The chart presents the textual information in such a way to make it easier for students to realize what the causes-effects are in the text. This type of chart can be a good bridge between the language analysis and the historical questions that teachers can ask about the text. Some sample historical questions are presented below:

#### **Sample Historical Questions**

1. What changes happened on farms that led to a decrease in the need for women’s and men’s labor?
2. Why were these changes significant?

**Directions:** Fill in the following chart to see how the authors show a cause-effect pattern in these paragraphs. Some boxes are done for you.

**Remember:**

- The arrow shows how an effect can also become a cause, so repeat the text between connected boxes.
- Sometimes whole sentences can be considered causes for a certain effect.
- If a sentence is just explaining an event or providing further information, it is placed in the chart as it appears in the text (no cause-effect relationship is shown).
- In completing the chart, underline the causal expressions in the sentences.

Event/Action as Cause	Effect
Women and men alike took part in the migration from rural to urban America.	
as new machines replaced manual labor on many farms,	the need for women’s labor on farms declined.
1. 2.	The result was a striking shift in the nation’s population.
The result was a striking shift in the nation’s population.	
Many African Americans took part in this internal migration. In 1870 fewer than a half million of the nation’s 5 million African Americans lived outside of the South.	
But after Reconstruction ended in 1877,	
	1. another 150,000 black southerners had left the South, and 2. many rural African Americans had moved into nearby cities.
Then, in the 1910s, the boll weevil	
and floods	
These disasters	

Figure 3. Sample Cause and Effect Chart

3. The text mentions that there was a “striking shift” in the nation’s population. What was this “shift”?
4. What were the causes for African Americans’ move out of the south?

As students complete the chart, teachers can have them focus on historical questions that will get at the main causes and effects presented in the text. The idea here is to provide both a focus on the language and the content, so providing specific historical questions that will accompany



the cause-effect charts is especially important. This text provides many opportunities for teachers and students to discuss cause-effect relationships and how they are constructed in history texts. The idea behind this close look at language is to help students understand the content presented in textbooks.

## Conclusion

Teachers and students are not always provided opportunities to consider the way language is used in their textbooks. Focusing specifically on one aspect of language in history, this chapter examined cause-effect relationships and how they are presented in a sample history text.

ELLs need to engage in causal reasoning and to recognize causal connections, fundamental aspects for history learning and understanding in the CCSS for literacy in history/social studies. Therefore, cause-effect patterns are important for student understanding of historical content. Textbooks often tell students to find markers of cause-effect, such as conjunctions, which are usually explicit in texts. Finding embedded causes and effects can help students get more meaning out of the texts they read.

As history texts are constructed in ways that may not make explicit the connection between ideas and events, it is important for teachers to be attentive to how they can deconstruct texts to help ELLs make sense of historical content. Teachers can engage ELLs in powerful conversations about the meanings presented in texts. An approach that focuses on both language and content can enable teachers and ELLs to focus on both reading *and* social studies to facilitate language development and content understanding, and address the demands presented by the CCSS.

## Reflection Questions and Action Plans

### Reflection Questions

1. How are causes-effects presented in your textbook or other materials you use?
2. How does working on causality in history help your ELLs learn both language and content?
3. What language and content demands do the CCSS for literacy in history/social studies present for ELLs?
4. What other strategies have you used to focus on cause-effect with your ELLs?

### Action Plans

- Select a text that presents challenges for ELLs. Plan instruction to address these challenges.
- Use the application framework presented in this chapter to examine a text that has causes-effects. Note that this same application framework can be used to identify other challenges for ELLs and other ways that a text uses other language resources.
- Consider different ways you can help ELLs see that history is not a series of unrelated pieces of content but an integrated network of related content.

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