The structure of cause/effect texts

It is important to understand that a ‘cause’ creates an ‘effect’. In academic writing, it is not always easy to recognise which item is the cause and which is the effect, so we need to think about this carefully.

**Example 1**: We can argue that *unemployment leads to poverty*. If people are unemployed, they will not receive wages or salaries and so they will be poor. In this example, ‘unemployment’ is the **cause**, and ‘poverty’ is the **effect**.

**Example 2**: However, we might also argue that *poverty leads to unemployment*. This is a much more complex argument which includes a number of factors. If people are poor, they are less likely to be educated, they will probably have less knowledge about how to find a job, and they might live among populations where there are fewer jobs available. In this example, ultimately ‘poverty’ is the **cause**, and ‘unemployment’ is the **effect**. But in this example ‘lack of education’, ‘knowledge about how to find a job’ and the places where poor people live are also **effects** of poverty and **causes** of unemployment.

Before you write about cause and effect, you need to understand clearly which actions or situations you are going to describe as the causes, and which actions or events you are going to describe as the effects.

You can organise your text in different ways. For example, you might choose the chain model of organising your text. In this model, you discuss a cause followed by its effect, then a second cause and its effect, and so on. This is used if the topic is narrow, or the cause and effect are very closely related, as in Example 1 above. The chain organisation is presented in diagram form below.

```
First cause and effect(s)  
↓                     
Second cause and effect(s)  
↓                     
Third cause and effect(s)  
```

Another type of organisation is the block model. In this model you discuss all the causes first and then all the effects. You may decide to choose this model if you have a broad topic, or if the link between cause and effect are indirect. The block organisation is presented in diagram form below.

```
Causes  
↓       
Transition statement  
↓       
Effects  
```

```
Cause 1  Cause 2  Cause 3  
↓       
This lets the reader know that the discussion will now move on to the effects  
↓       
Effect 1  Effect 2  Effect 3  
```

These are only simple diagrammatic representations. In a complex piece of writing you may have ‘effects’ which become ‘causes’ of something which you discuss later in the text. However, these models are useful if you are unsure how to write about cause and effect.

**Activity:** Now imagine you would like to write a text about the reasons why some students obtain low marks for their assignments. Think about all your points, and decide which of them are ‘causes’ and which are ‘effects’. Then decide how you would organise your ideas in a written text.