Alphonse the Camel
Formulating a causal explanation

Introduction

Detectives, historians, air-crash investigators, archeologist, psychologists and forensic pathologists, all want to know the truth. These professionals ask a lot of questions to present their version of the truth. Who killed the murder victim? When was America discovered? What caused the plane to crash? Where do we come from? Why do people lie? How did the patient die?

Yet what is the truth? Often the truth is nothing more than an explanation what caused an event. This is called a causal explanation. Different professions use different methods and different vocabulary to make a causal explanation convincing.

The historian explains abstract events. He or she will never pretend his explanation represents a reality. The historian always makes sure the readers understands his or her explanation is an interpretation of events. Nevertheless it is for the historian still important to make an explanation convincing. Hence the historian uses specific words to explain historical events. This lesson will introduce the following words to describe different causes:

1. Long term cause and short term cause
2. Direct cause and indirect cause
3. Intentional and unintentional
4. Immediate and precondition

Instructions

Here you find the story about the death of Alphonse the Camel. By reading the story and answering the questions, you learn the language historians use to formulate a causal explanation. First we will read the story together. Afterwards you will form groups of four, and study the text and answer the questions.

It will take you about 60 minutes to complete the task.
The story of Alphonse the Camel

Once upon a time there was a camel called Alphonse. For various reasons relating to an unfortunate accident during his birth the camel had severe back problems. This was not the end of his misfortune however, because he had an evil exploitative owner called Frank the Camel Killer. Frank had hated camels ever since a nasty incident in his childhood involving a camel's hoof and his rear end. He was very bitter and had never trusted camels since.

Frank regularly overloaded his camels prior to taking them on grueling and totally unnecessary round trips up and down mountains on his way to deliver goods to his customers. These customers, shockingly, were completely indifferent to these frequent and gross violations of the rights of camels and found Frank and his antics at least vaguely endearing. On top of it all, Alphonse was sometimes his own worst enemy. Camels are very proud creatures, and he would act tough to his camel friends, and on his rare breaks he would show off how much he could carry.

Plenty of camels had died doing similar work as Alphonse and his friends. After a particularly costly few weeks, when camels were keeling over left, right and centre, the camels decided to form a trade union to defend their rights and protect them from evil owners. However, when it comes down to it, camels are selfish creatures who don't trust each other. They were more worried about looking after themselves than about working together, and the trade union fizzled out.

Well, one Friday, Frank had just finished loading-up Alphonse and his poor exploited fellow creatures for yet another grueling and totally unnecessary round trip up and down the mountains. He had piled and piled and piled up the goods onto Alphonse's back and was taking a break and reflecting smugly on
his handiwork, chewing a straw. On a whim he decided to add the bedraggled straw he had been chewing to Alphonse's load. Alphonse groaned obligingly. He eyed his owner with disgust. He keeled over and died of radical and irreversible back collapse.

**Questions**

1. What or whom killed Alphonse? List all the causes that contributed to Alphonse death in your note book. Can your group find the most causes?

2. What is the most immediate or direct cause for Alphonse death?

3. Find a cause that can be described as an accident?

4. What would you call the most unfortunate cause for Alphonse demise.

5. Could you give two examples where Alphonse himself is responsible for his death?

6. The word precondition means a condition that must be met before events are set in motion. For example; the world economic crisis of the 1930s was a precondition for the rise of Hitler. Find an example in the text of a precondition.

7. What made Alphonse death inevitable?

8. Can you find a cause that does not stand on its own, but is actually also a consequence of another cause, something called an indirect cause? A historical example of an indirect cause is the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in 1914. This murder caused a war that would eventually escalate into World War I.

9. Finding out what caused something is often a question of guilt. People like to blame somebody. Could you give an example where Frank intended to hurt Alphonse, and an example where Frank contributed to Alphonse death unintentionally?

10. Reading the story of Alphonse, it becomes clear that some causes for his death were years removed from the camel actually breaking his back. Which cause would you consider a longterm cause?
11. Number the causes you found. Now rank the top 10 causes from most important to unimportant.

**Homework assignment**

Your homework assignment is to argue in 100 words what you think is the most important cause for Alphonse death. You will hand in your assignment before the start of next class.

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