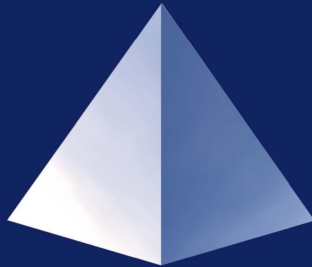


INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

THE
**PYRAMID
PRINCIPLE**

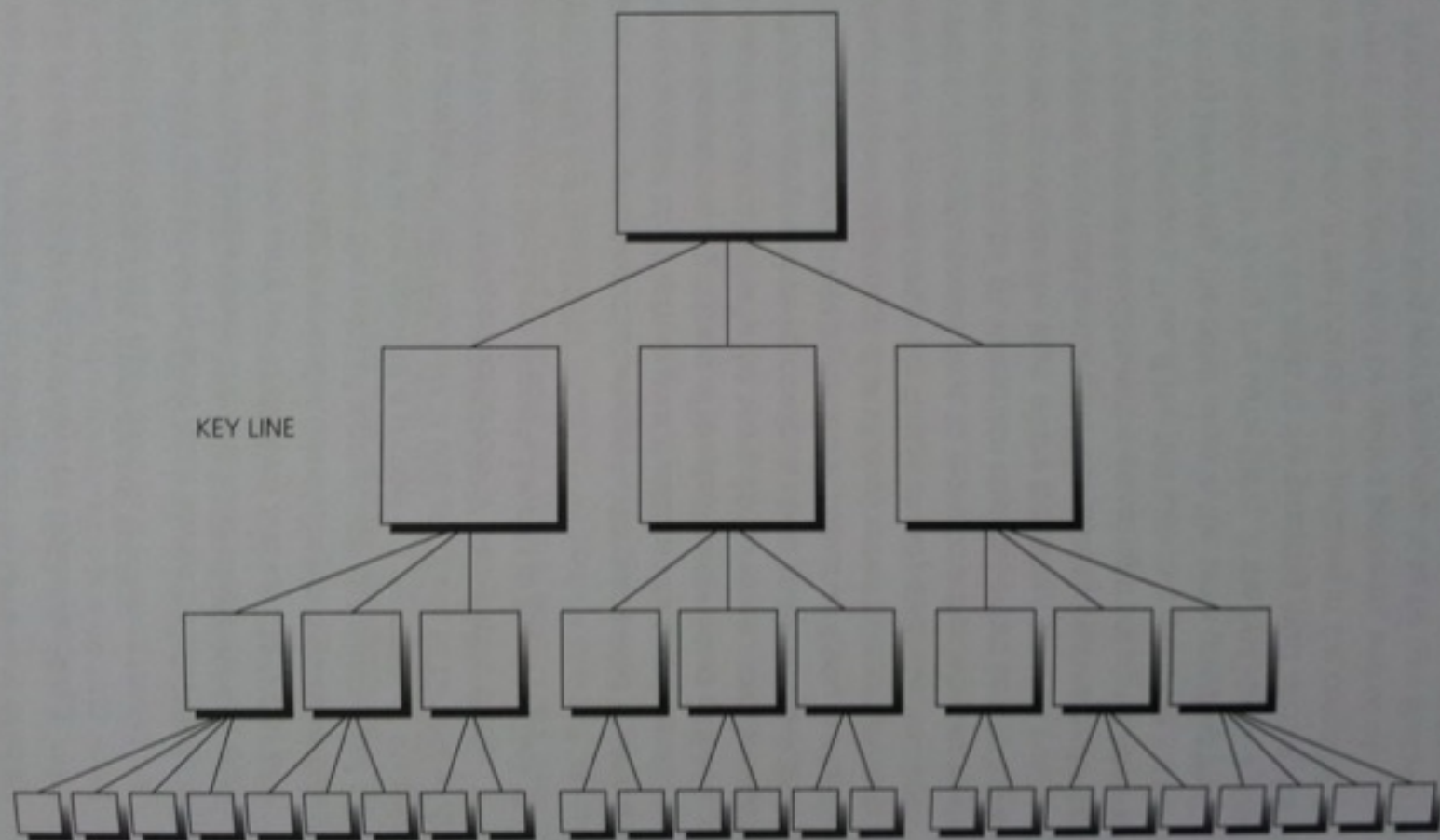
Logic in Writing and Thinking



BARBARA MINTO

FT PUBLISHING
FINANCIAL TIMES

Exhibit 1 Ideas in writing should always form a pyramid under a single thought



Barbara Minto

In 1961 she left Mr. Eaton to attend the Harvard Business School, returning to Cleveland in 1963 to join McKinsey & Company, the interna-

However, it became apparent to her very quickly that the writing difficulties in Düsseldorf and Paris were the same as those in New York and Cleveland. The problem was not so much to get the language right as to get the thinking clear. This insight led her to concentrate on discovering the structures of thinking that must underlie clear writing, and eventually to develop the ideas that make up this book.

The thing you need to remember today...

The **three rules** to build a pyramid

1. **Ideas at any level** in the pyramid must always be **summaries** of the ideas grouped below them.
2. Ideas in each grouping must always be the **same kind** of idea
3. Ideas in each grouping must always be **logically ordered**.

**HOW TO
BUILD A**

**PYRAMID
STRUCTURE**

CHAPTER 3 · THE PYRAMID PRINCIPLE

Chapter 3

YOU WILL THINK DIFFERENTLY AFTER THIS.

THE WRITING CHALLENGE

WHAT YOU FACE EVERY TIME YOU SIT DOWN TO WRITE

THE PROBLEM

You know roughly what to write about,
but not specifically what to say
or how to say it.

This sense of uncertainty is hardly enhanced by knowing that the ideas you eventually put down, whatever they be, **must end up forming a pyramid.**

WHAT YOU DO KNOW

- A top sentence: subject + predicate
- The subject of the document
- The question in the reader's mind
- The situation & complication that raised it
- Roughly some points you want to make

THAT'S QUITE A BIT TO KNOW. USE IT.

TWO WAYS TO BUILD YOUR PYRAMID

CHOOSE BASED ON HOW DEVELOPED YOUR THINKING IS

TOP-DOWN ↓

Start with your answer
and build supporting logic downward.

BEST WHEN:

- Your subject is clear
- You can visualize the reader
- You have an initial answer

PROCESS:

Subject → Q → A →
Situation → Complication → Key Line

OR

BOTTOM-UP ↑

Start with your points
and synthesize upward.

BEST WHEN:

- Subject is unclear
- Question isn't obvious
- Reader knowledge uncertain

3 STEPS:

1. List all points
2. Work out relationships
3. Draw conclusions

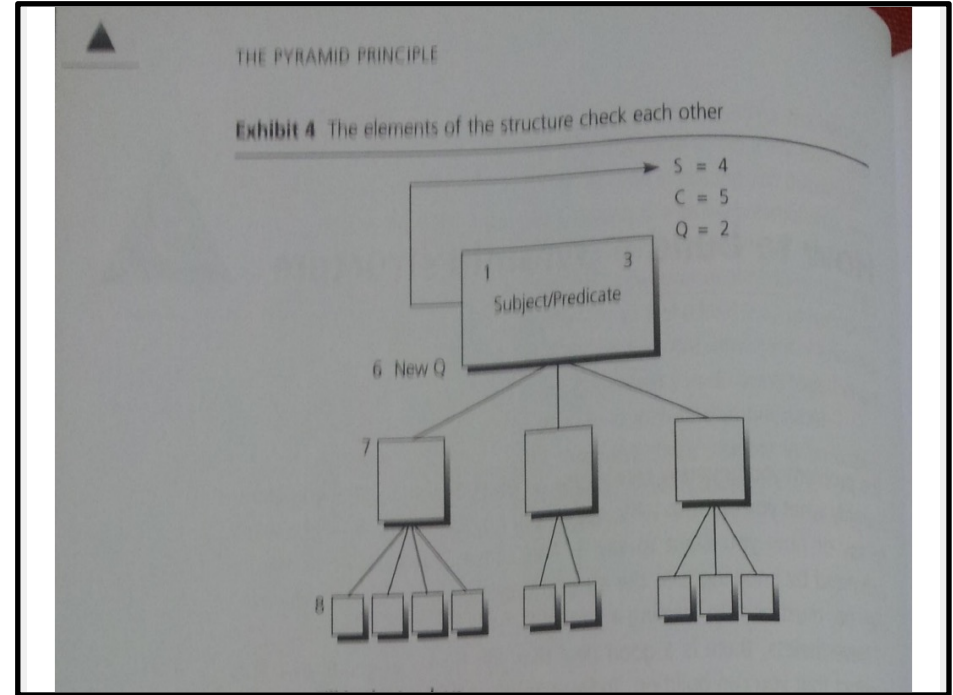
ALWAYS TRY TOP-DOWN FIRST — IT IS GENERALLY EASIER.

THE TOP-DOWN APPROACH: 8-STEP PROCESS

■ BLACK = FILL TOP BOX ■ RED = MATCH TO INTRO ■ GRAY = FIND & STRUCTURE

EXHIBIT 4 — THE ELEMENTS OF THE STRUCTURE CHECK EACH OTHER

- 1 Draw a box and write the Subject
- 2 Decide the Question in the reader's mind
- 3 Write down the Answer (if known)
- 4 Identify the Situation (noncontroversial)
- 5 Develop the Complication ("So what?")
- 6 Recheck: does Complication raise your Question?
- 7 Find the Key Line (deductive or inductive)
- 8 Structure the support points at each level



CASE STUDY: THE BIG CHIEF MEMORANDUM

APPLYING THE TOP-DOWN APPROACH TO A REAL DOCUMENT

Big Chief (a hamburger chain) requested a billing system change. The Accounting Dept was asked if it was feasible. The original memo described the new system without actually answering the question.

1 Draw a box and write the Subject

SUBJECT

billing procedure should change

Q = QUESTION

Should it change?

A = ANSWER

Yes, and here's why

2 Decide the Question in the reader's mind

3 Write down the Answer (if known)

4 Identify the Situation (noncontroversial)

S = SITUATION

C = COMPLICATION

5 Develop the Complication ('So what?')

6 Recheck: does Complication raise your Question?

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Yes, and here's why

2 Decide the Question in the reader's mind

3 Write down the Answer (if known)

4 Identify the Situation (noncontroversial)

S = SITUATION

They requested a change in the
billing procedure

C = COMPLICATION

You asked whether it makes
sense

5 Develop the Complication ('So what?')

6 Recheck: does Complication raise your Question?

CASE STUDY: THE BIG CHIEF MEMORANDUM

APPLYING THE TOP-DOWN APPROACH TO A REAL DOCUMENT

- 7 Find the **Key Line** (deductive or inductive). This is the main conclusion. It answers the reader's question.

Q = QUESTION

Should it change?

CASE STUDY: THE BIG CHIEF MEMORANDUM

APPLYING THE TOP-DOWN APPROACH TO A REAL DOCUMENT

7 Find the Key Line (deductive or inductive). This is the main conclusion. It answers the reader's question.

Q = QUESTION

Should it change?

KEY LINE

NQ = Why? → Will give us all the information we need | Will increase our cash flow | Will reduce our workload

EXHIBIT 6: BIG CHIEF — RESTRUCTURED PYRAMID

THE ANSWER IS 'YES' — SUPPORTED BY THREE CLEAR REASONS

BC REQUEST FOR CHANGE
IN BILLING SYSTEM IS A GOOD IDEA

NQ = WHY?

Will give us all
the information we need

Will increase
our cash flow

Will reduce
our workload

S = They requested a change

C = You asked if it makes sense

Q = Does it make sense?

A = Yes — it's a good idea

THE TECHNIQUE FORCES YOU TO PULL ONLY RELEVANT INFORMATION.

THE BOTTOM-UP APPROACH

WHEN YOUR THINKING ISN'T FULLY DEVELOPED YET

USE THIS WHEN YOU CAN'T PIN DOWN YOUR SUBJECT, QUESTION, OR THE READER'S KNOWLEDGE.

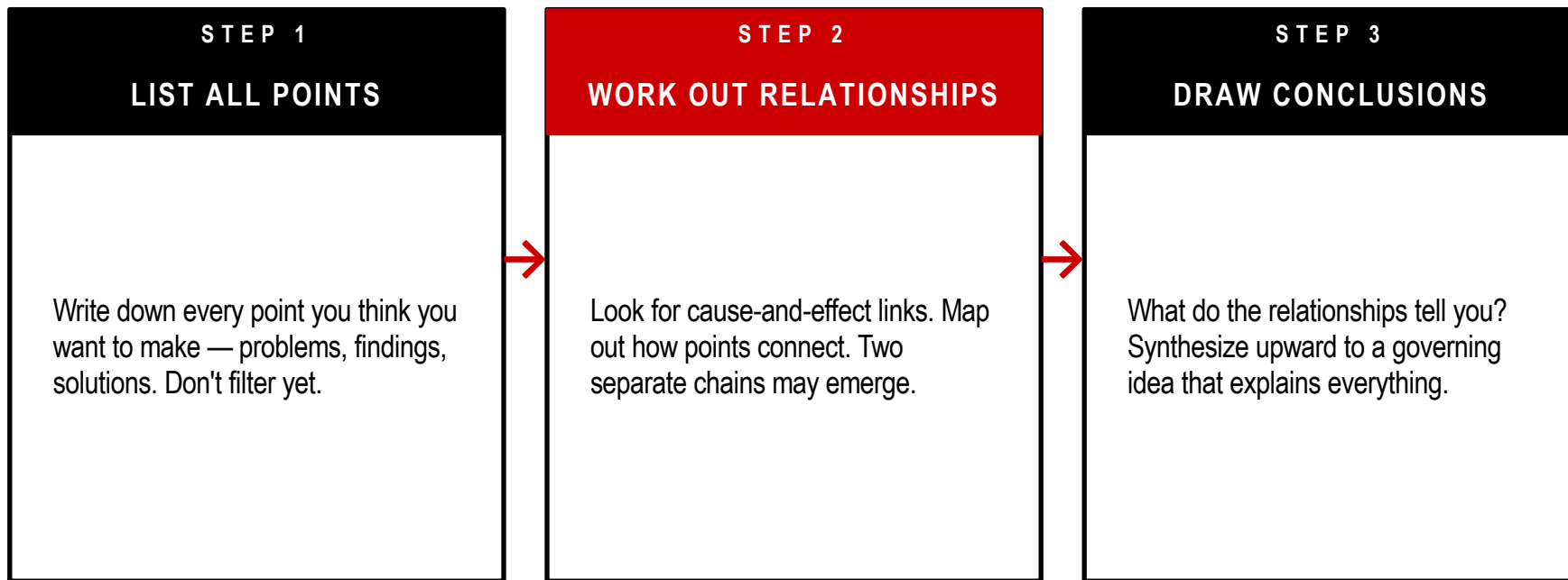


EXHIBIT 8 SHOWS THIS APPLIED TO THE TTW MEMORANDUM →

CASE STUDY: THE TTW MEMORANDUM (BOTTOM-UP)

STEP 1

LIST ALL POINTS

Write down every point you think you want to make: problems, findings, solutions. Don't filter yet.

TTW is a printing company. The composing room (the department that prepares text before printing) has **very high costs**. Managers notice several issues in the department.

CASE STUDY: THE TTW MEMORANDUM (BOTTOM-UP)

STEP 1

LIST ALL POINTS

Write down every point you think you want to make: problems, findings, solutions. Don't filter yet.

8 Points:

1. Low productivity in composing
2. Same steps used for every job
3. Uncompetitive prices for simple jobs
4. The department is often behind schedule
5. Workers are paid low wages
6. There is a shortage of staff
7. Employees work a lot of overtime
8. Workers are below PAR in setting and hand composition

CASE STUDY: THE TTW MEMORANDUM (BOTTOM-UP)

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"Are these problems connected, or are they separate?"

THE BOTTOM-UP APPROACH

WHEN YOUR THINKING ISN'T FULLY DEVELOPED YET

STEP 2

WORK OUT RELATIONSHIPS

Look for cause-and-effect links. Map out how points connect. Two separate chains may emerge.

8 Points:

1. Low productivity in composing
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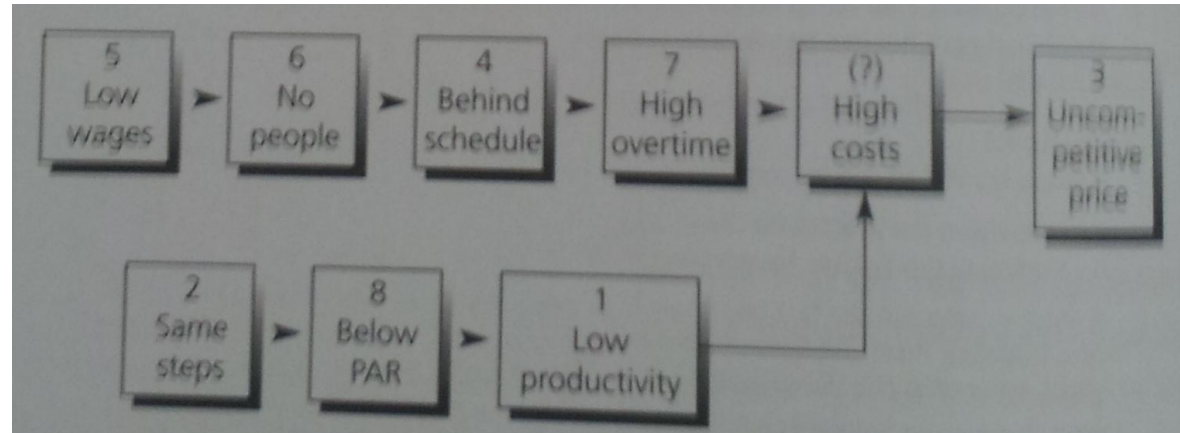


EXHIBIT 8 SHOWS THIS APPLIED TO THE TTW MEMORANDUM →

THE BOTTOM-UP APPROACH

WHEN YOUR THINKING ISN'T FULLY DEVELOPED YET

STEP 3

DRAW CONCLUSIONS

What do the relationships tell you?
Synthesize upward to a governing
idea that explains everything.

Based on the relationships,
what are the **main causes** of the high costs?

EXHIBIT 8 SHOWS THIS APPLIED TO THE TTW MEMORANDUM →

THE BOTTOM-UP APPROACH

WHEN YOUR THINKING ISN'T FULLY DEVELOPED YET

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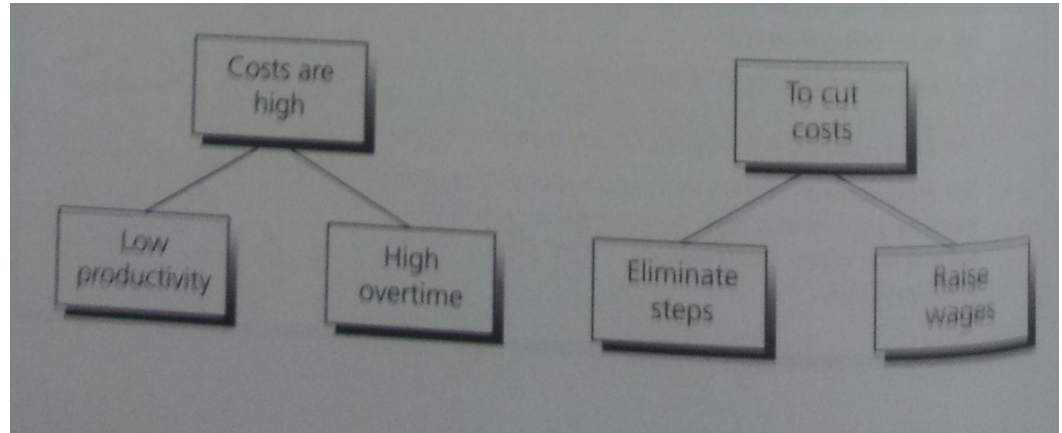


EXHIBIT 8 SHOWS THIS APPLIED TO THE TTW MEMORANDUM →

BEFORE VS. AFTER: THE TTW MEMO

CLARITY ACHIEVED THROUGH PYRAMID RESTRUCTURING

✗ BEFORE (ORIGINAL)

- Starts with a data dump on composing costs
- Compares TTW to PAR — buries the finding
- Lists facts about union, wages, overtime separately
- Conclusions appear at the END after 4 paragraphs
- Reader can't grasp the message in 30 seconds

RESULT: *Confusing. No clear answer upfront.*



✓ AFTER (REWRITTEN)

- Opens with context (Situation)
- States upfront: costs could be cut by two methods
- Section headings = KEY LINE IDEAS (not categories)
- Each section backs up one key reason
- Entire argument visible in first 30 seconds

RESULT: *Reader sees the answer immediately.*

IF YOUR THINKING IS NOT CLEAR IN THE READER'S FIRST 30 SECONDS, YOU SHOULD REWRITE.

TWO CAVEATS FOR BEGINNERS

COMMON PITFALLS WHEN LEARNING THE PYRAMID TECHNIQUE

1

ALWAYS TRY TOP-DOWN FIRST

Ideas written down take on permanence. Don't dictate the whole doc — you'll fall in love with disjointed thinking.

2

USE THE SITUATION AS YOUR STARTING POINT

Think intro in order: Situation → Complication → Question → Answer. This produces the best Complication.

ABSTRACT / INTRO for Tech Report

SITUATION: Problem X is very important because ...

COMPLICATION: In tackling problem X, related work failed in doing Y

PROPOSAL: To partly tackle Y, we make N contributions [list of contributions]

ABSTRACT / INTRO for Tech Report

X= state of the art LLM have foundational problems

Y= [to] address these problems

N1= discuss the foundational issue

N2= survey state of the art approaches

SITUATION: Problem X is very important because ...

COMPLICATION: In tackling problem X, related work failed in doing Y

PROPOSAL: To partly tackle Y, we make N contributions [list of contributions]

Before next lecture you should read:

The Pyramid Principle

Chapter 1: “Why a pyramid structure”

Chapter 3: “How to build a pyramid structure”

Take-home exercise: Build a pyramid for “Impact Assessment Card: Communicating Risks and Benefits of AI Uses”
ONLY section 5

<https://researchswinger.org/publications/impact25.pdf>