

The Pyramid Principle

Logic in writing and thinking.

How can you grasp the attention of your audience in a couple of minutes? How can you create a compelling story with a logical structure that is easy to understand and easy to remember. If you have to convince customers and have limited time for a presentation with busy executives this can be quite a challenge. But how can we do this?

The Pyramid Principle is the answer to this question. Developed by Barbara Minto from McKinsey to find a method for the consultants to structure their advice and consulting reports. Nowadays every McKinsey Consultant is trained to learn and apply this method and it is also used by many other consulting companies worldwide. Consulting Methodology made the Minto Pyramid Principle an essential part of the [Issue Based Consulting](#) training program. Together with some other techniques Issue Based Consulting is the ultimate consulting toolkit.

This white paper explains briefly what the Pyramid Principle is and how it works.

Some facts

Some facts about people (our customers included):

- People tend not to listen to things they already know.
- Only if it is of interest, people want to find out what they don't know.
- If people hear something they don't know, it raises questions.

Making a statement to your audience that tells them something they don't know, will automatically raise a question in their minds. Why? How? Is this true? Etc. The listener will be focussed to hear an answer to this question. A question-answer dialogue like that will ensure the listeners attention.

Keep in mind however the topic must be of interest of your listener. That requires some knowledge about your audience or your customer. What is on their mind? What kind of problems and challenges do they have? As a consultant or sales representative this is something you should know or find out if you don't know this yet.

After raising a question, the answers you give, might again be new to the listener and raise more questions. Just proceed the dialogue until you reach the stage where no logical questions are there anymore. The listener does not necessarily have to agree with your story.

Prepare your story in advance with a hierarchical structure. A structured story is much easier to understand and to remember for the listener.

The Pyramid Principle is a hierarchical structure based on vertical logic and horizontal logic. The vertical logic represents the storyline (question-answer dialogue), the horizontal logic is about the kind of reasoning. Let's explain both of them in more detail.

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Vertical logic

The question-answer dialogue is the vertical logic of the Pyramid. The same as we read a story top-down, we read one sentence after the other. We start with the main idea, than a question is raised, we answer the question and so on. *Exhibit 1* shows an example of a question-answer dialogue represented by a vertical or hierarchical structure.

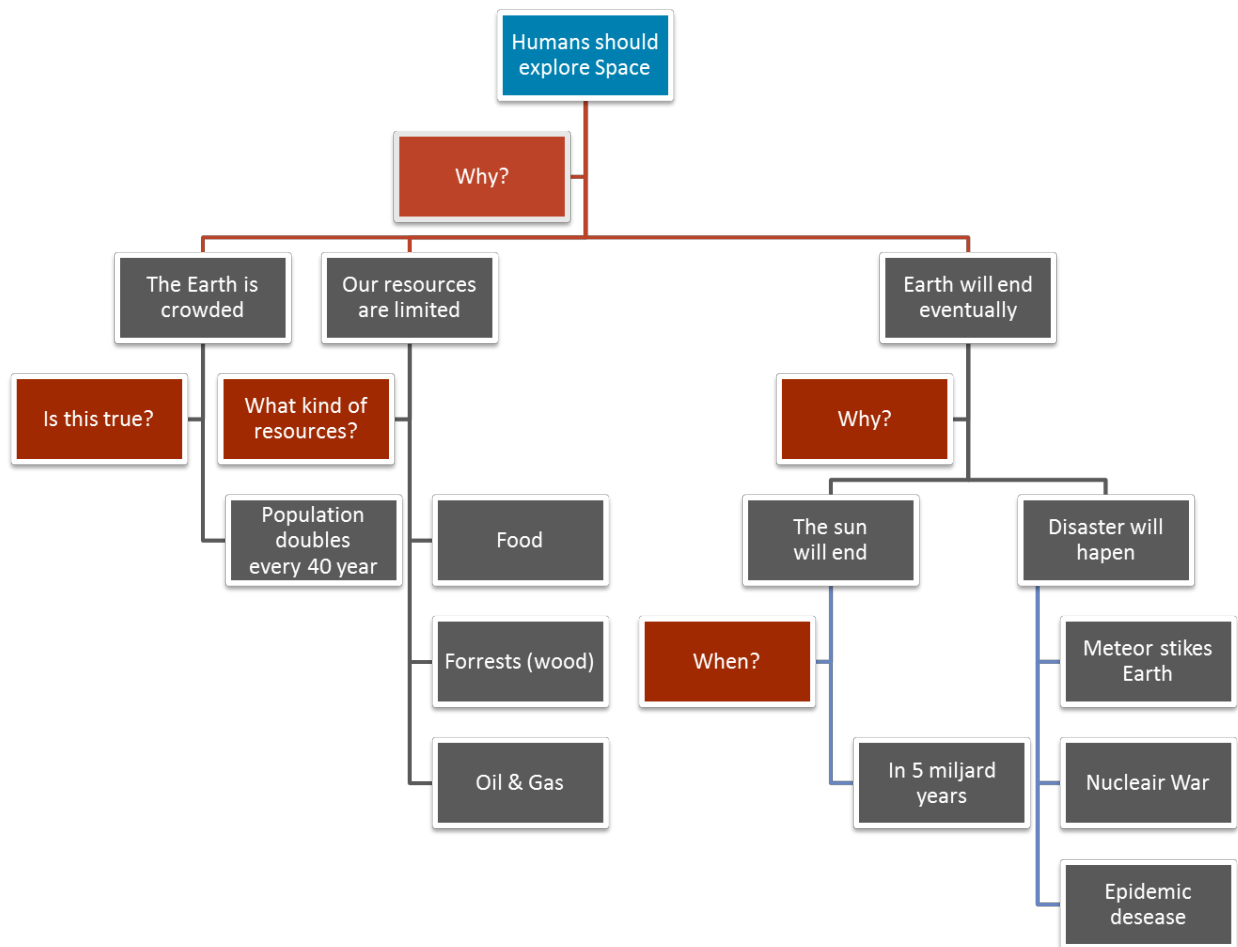


Exhibit 1. Question-answer dialogue.

Of course Exhibit 1 is just an example and remember - The listener does not necessarily have to agree with your story. Most important thing is that your reasoning is structured in a logical flow and only starts after a logical question about your initial statement. In a real dialogue, e.g. presenting for a group, you could interact with the audience and ask them about their questions. Of course you did prepare the possible questions in advance and even if you didn't prepare that question, you master the topic and can answer any question.

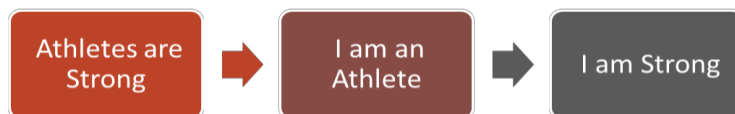
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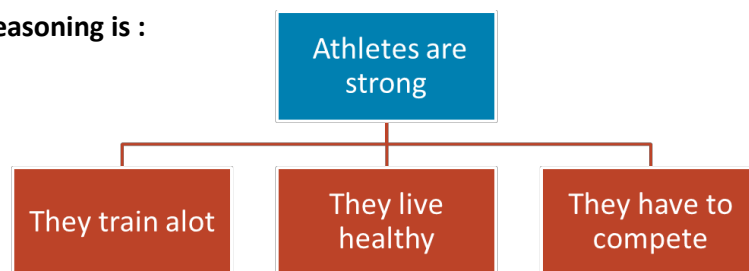
Horizontal logic

If we start a question-answer dialogue, our answer is often based on a number of statements. These statements are either deductive or inductive.

An example of deductive reasoning is:



An example of inductive reasoning is :



Both ways are ok, although each way has its pro's and con's. Most important is that you have a structure and there is some kind of logical order. There is a lot more to tell about this, but that is what we learn and practice during [our Consulting courses](#), because success is often in small things. Understanding the Pyramid principle is one thing, master it is another. Applying the theory from this document however will already bring you a lot of benefit to start with.

Introductory flow

Now the next thing we need is an introduction. It is difficult to start a question-answer dialogue from nothing. We need an introduction to make sure the listener is interested. Remember - "Only if it is of interest, people want to find out what they don't know." That is because a listener or reader only wants to find out what he doesn't know if it is relevant to him.

We will do this with story-telling. The structure of the introductory flow will be:

- **Situation**
- **Complication**
- **Question**
- **Answer**

Starting with an illustration of the **situation** will establish a certain time and place for the listener. Preferably a time and place the listener can relate to.

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The **complication** will illustrate a problem, thus creating a relevant issue. A certain sense of urgency or compelling reason to listen or even act.

Related to this complication a **question** is posed. The will also be the start of a question-answer dialogue. The question will be the main lead for your story and the **answer** your main topic.

An example:

- S** Many professionals worldwide use methodical approaches, often based on best-practices, to structure their work. To learn this profession you can get education and if you master it, you can even get a certification. We see this in Project Management (PMI), IT Management (ITIL), Logistics (APICS), etc.
- C** In Consulting however a common approach or method seems to be irrelevant, because most consultants don't use a specific method for their profession.
- Q** Would a common approach for consulting improve the quality of work and is a method as such available?
- A** Let's talk about Issue Based Consulting

In this example the topic for the story to be told or written will be "Issue Based Consulting". The question-answer dialogue will be based on all kind of questions that could be raised in the listeners mind like, What exactly is it?, How does it work?, Why is it good?, Can I also use it?, etc.

Structure Presentations as a Pyramid

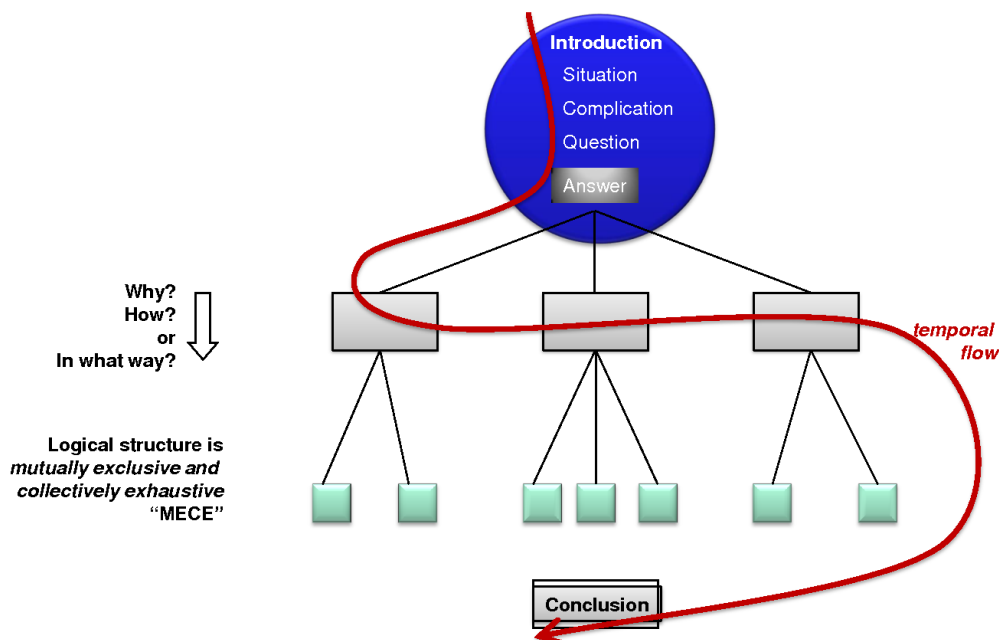


Exhibit 2. The storyline

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Every question must be answered and will raise a next level of questions. At the end, there will be a conclusion. Altogether all questions and answer should be mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive (MECE). The storyline will be from the introduction to question 1, answer 1, etc., as shown in Exhibit 2.

Conclusion

Writing or telling a good story to your audience isn't just about the topic. Relating to the way people think, the way the actually brain works, is a major success factor. People will lose attention if a story is unstructured and that is actually what happens a lot. By applying the Pyramid Principle your story will be structured and people will stay focused.

Remark

Watch out for a possible naming ambiguity between the Minto Pyramid Principle and the inverse pyramid structure of writing. In journalism, the inverse pyramid structure (IPS) of writing refers to reporting a news story from the most important material to the least important, separating the statement of what happened from the specific detail of how and why it happened.

This writing style contrast to the chronological style of fiction, in which a story is told in the sequential order in which events occurred. The main difference between the Minto Pyramid Principle and the IPS is that the former presents ideas and conclusions that rest on logical analysis and reasoning, whereas the latter is used to report facts in typical news

RELATED LITERATURE

The Pyramid Principle – Barbara Minto

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