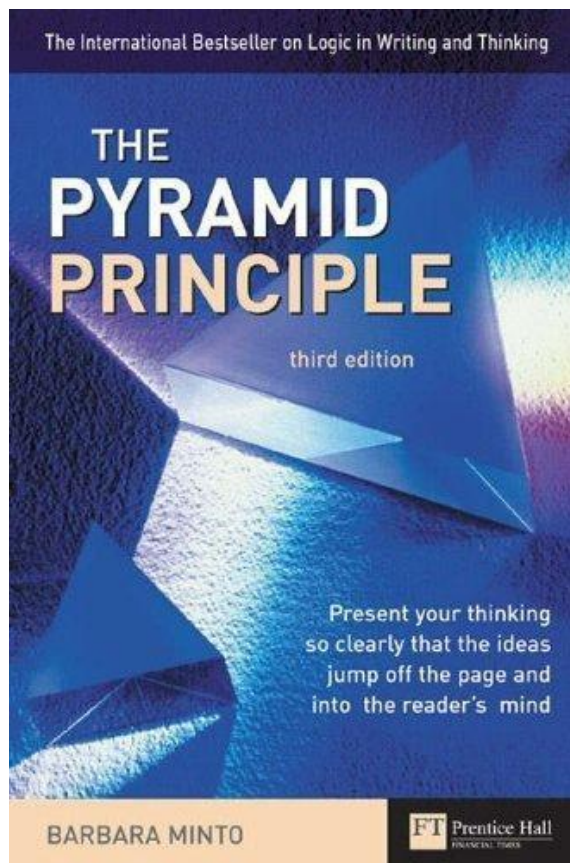# Communication Skills/Logic Building

The Pyramid Principle - Lessons from McKinsey

At McKinsey, one of the lessons I learned was the importance of structured thinking and communication. We often had to present a recommendation to busy executives crisply. We often only had a few minutes to communicate that recommendation — then, if the executive was interested in digging deeper, we could present more details.

One of the tools we used at McKinsey was the Pyramid Principle, a methodology for structured communication.

The International Bestseller on Logic in Writing and Thinking

THE PYRAMID PRINCIPLE

third edition

Present your thinking so clearly that the ideas jump off the page and into the reader's mind

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The key takeaways from the Pyramid Principle at McKinsey were:

1. Start with the answer first.
2. Group and summarize your supporting arguments.
3. Logically order your supporting ideas.

Start with the answer first.

To communicate in a structured way with a busy executive, you should first start with the answer to the executive's question and then list your supporting arguments. This "top-down" structure is counter-intuitive for many of us, especially those with a scientific or engineering background used to writing technical papers. For many people, it is natural to build up to a conclusion by first reciting all of the facts, recounting all of the analyses that have been done, or reviewing all of the supporting ideas. Then you get to the punch line.

At McKinsey, "start with the answer first" was drilled into us. When an executive asked a question — "What should we do?" — you were to respond with, "You should do X," very crisply and directly. After you have answered the question, only then should you present your supporting reasons. Why?

First, you want to maximize your time with your audience. Executives are busy people. They are perpetually short on time, are used to processing lots of information quickly, and get impatient when they feel like someone is not getting to the point. To get the most out of your short time with an executive, you want to make your recommendation first and foremost. In some cases, the executive may already mentally be at the conclusion you want them to reach, in which case she will accept your recommendation and move on (without you having to go into the detailed supporting arguments).

Second, many executives often think in a "top-down" manner. They want to focus on the big picture—in this case, the "answer"— and do not want to get bogged down by details. By delivering your recommendation in the "answer first" format, you fit into the executive's mental model and allow them to process your recommendation quickly.

Finally, you are more persuasive when you are direct. You sound more assertive and confident by answering the executive's question first. You are not searching for reasons or words; do not sound like you are wavering. You are plainly and directly answering the question that was posed to you.

Group and summarize your supporting arguments.

Your audience—listeners or readers—will naturally begin to group and summarize your arguments and ideas to remember them. So you may as well help them do it and make your overall recommendation more effective and memorable.

The Pyramid Principle advocates that "ideas in writing should always form a pyramid under a single thought." The single thought is the answer to the executive's question. Underneath the single thought, you are supposed to group and summarize the next level of supporting ideas and arguments. Then, for each supporting idea or argument, break that further into more ideas or arguments until you have formed a pyramid. The Pyramid Principle teaches that "Ideas at any level in the pyramid must always be summaries of the ideas grouped below them."
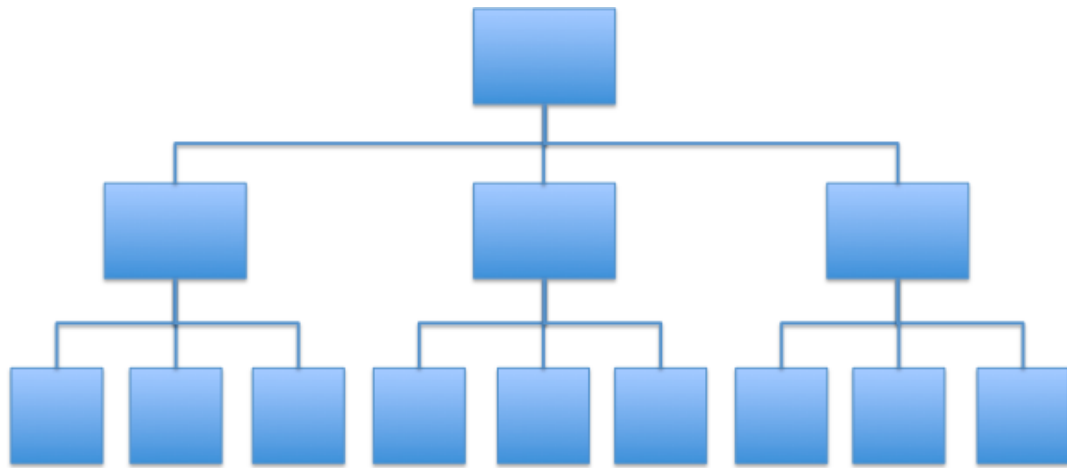
Decomposing an argument into a pyramid structure

It just so happens that the magic number of ideas in a group is three .

When you group and summarize your supporting arguments, it's easy to go from the single thought to the next level of ideas without getting too detailed immediately.

Logically order your supporting ideas.

Finally, you want to ensure that the ideas you bring together under each group belong together, are at the same level of importance, and follow some logical structure. There are a few different ways of logically ordering ideas that belong in the same group:

1. Time order: If a sequence of events forms a cause-effect relationship, you should present the ideas in time order.
2. Structural order: break a singular thought into its parts, ensuring you have covered all central supporting ideas.
3. Degree order: present supporting ideas in rank order of importance, most to least important.

Combined with the Rule of 3, the Pyramid Principle becomes an extremely powerful structured communication tool for recommending to busy executives. I saw many examples during my time at McKinsey when the Pyramid Principle was invoked in written and verbal communication to motivate action successfully.

The Pyramid Principle is valuable for communicating with executives, but really it's effective to communicate with anyone you wish to persuade with an argument. As an entrepreneur, the tool could be used to communicate with prospective investors or board members. As a leader in an organization, you can use the Pyramid Principle to communicate with peers or project stakeholders when you make an important proposal.

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