

## Communication Skills/Logic Building

### Writing Clarifies Thinking - Lessons from McKinsey



Within my first few months as a strategy consultant at McKinsey, I was struck by how much of an emphasis was put on the creation of Powerpoint slides. “The deck” was the most important deliverable for our clients, and served as the basis of dialogue around our strategy analysis and recommendations.

I knew that the creation of slides was important from a communication standpoint. However, it was only after being there for some time that I realized the importance of writing (and the creation of slides) for the analysis and thinking process. Each week we were producing decks to share with clients — however, I noticed that some of the slides we were creating never made into the client presentation. When I asked one of the partners on our project whether these slides were wasted work, he responded with what I would later hear from time to time as a McKinsey maxim: “Writing clarifies thinking.”

Those words have definitely stuck with me, even after I moved on from McKinsey to become an entrepreneur and as a product manager at Twitter. I now regularly write—either in prose, or in slide form—as a way to clarify and structure my own thoughts about an important topic, an idea that I’m noodling on, or even lessons learned from a previous experience. Much of what we do in business—whether as an entrepreneur, product manager, or salesperson—is to sell our ideas.

Writing is a forcing function to enable to structure the ideas that you want to sell. There are three key reasons why writing enables you to structure your ideas: framing, prioritization, and synthesis.



Frame your ideas

### **Writing enables you to effectively frame your ideas and arguments**

When thinking through a complex or important idea, the first thing that you will want to do is to frame that idea for your audience. When you write about that idea, it forces you to start thinking about how you will frame it. Framing is important because it sets the context for your audience, and in some cases may help them become predisposed to your recommendation. Some important framing questions include:

- What is the problem we are trying to solve?
- Why is this an urgent problem for us to solve? Why now? What happens if we don't solve this problem?
- What are the important issues that you think deserve the most attention?
- What are the goals of our solution?
- What is in scope for the problem? What's explicitly NOT in scope?



Uncover and prioritize the most important things

**Writing can help you to disaggregate and prioritize the most important issues**

Complex decisions can often get your head spinning. There may be many issues at play, and it is sometimes difficult to figure out which ones to focus on. By taking the time to write down your ideas or arguments, you are able to tease out the various underlying issues. You will want to consider whether the issues that you uncover during the writing process are [MECE](#) — mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive.

Once you have disaggregated the issues, you can focus on the most important ones. Since writing forces you to editorialize (you only have limited attention from your readers), you will naturally begin to prioritize the different issues at play. Other great tools to use during this process are the [Pyramid Principle](#) and [The Rule of 3](#).



Synthesize findings and balance perspectives

Writing enables you to synthesize data and reconcile different viewpoints

The process of writing about your ideas and arguments will naturally cause you to synthesize. As you begin to frame your argument and disaggregate and prioritize the issues, you will also review the various data that you have collected on the topic. The data may be quantitative (e.g. metrics or statistics) or qualitative (e.g. quotes), and it may come from a variety of sources (product logs, customer interviews, sales input, competitor analysis). You may also have internal stakeholders that have expressed differing points of view on the topic.

As you rationalize the arguments behind your recommendation, you will inevitably synthesize the data you have collected. An important thing to remember is that synthesis does not equal summary. Synthesis is summary plus insight. Anyone can summarize data, but synthesizing requires you to interpret the data and understand what it is actually telling you. Writing down your ideas and arguments will hopefully get you thinking more about what the impact of the data is, rather than just summarizing it.

If done right, writing will also clarify and balance differing perspectives from within your org. You may be hearing one thing from engineering, another thing from sales, and yet something else from marketing. Writing for these different audiences will enable you to provide your own perspective that addresses the differing points of view.

## Added benefits of writing your ideas and arguments down

In addition to clarifying your thinking, there are a number of other benefits to getting into the habit of “putting things on paper” (which these days mean typing things into a Google doc or PPT/Keynote presentation).

- With limited words and space in your document, the act of writing forces you to make your argument more concise and persuasive.
- Writing will cause you to internalize your argument. The next time someone asks you about your idea, you will have your talking points ready and you will sound very structured when you communicate.
- You have potentially created a work product (Google doc, presentation) that can now be easily shared.

Although it takes time and effort, I encourage every one of you to make writing a regular habit. Just like physical exercise, we can improve our writing skills by doing it regularly. Get yourself into the habit of writing down one of your ideas or arguments each week. The writing that you do does not have to be in prose form—slides are also an effective way to “put things down” and structure your thinking.

As you get into the writing habit, the next step is to push yourself to sharpen your language. Edit down your language to make every word count. This will take your writing—and thinking—to the next level. You can even ask for feedback from your colleagues or friends who have good writing skills and an eye for editing.

Finally, be prepared to write stuff that doesn’t see the light of day with others. I firmly believe that even the process of writing will help you develop your thinking, and even if you don’t actually share the document with anyone else, you will be more confident in your own thinking.

Writing is certainly one of the most under-rated activities in business. As the pace of business and technology change continues to quicken, we are also under a lot of pressure to move faster. It becomes difficult to take the time out to devote to writing down our ideas and arguments. I urge you to give it a try — commit to spending no more than 20-30 minutes each week writing a structured argument, or synthesizing your point of view on a topic. As you get better and more regular about writing, you will see for yourself that **writing clarifies thinking**.