## Minto Pyramid Principle

##### By Marcus Birkenkrahe: <http://about.me/birkenkrahe> Lecture videos: <http://bit.ly/mintolecture> ~~Lesson with questions (Zaption):~~ [~~http://zapt.io/tjpqxxdz~~](http://zapt.io/tjpqxxdz)Slides only: <http://bit.ly/mintoslides> Audio only (Soundcloud): <http://bit.ly/mintoaudio> This file: <http://bit.ly/mintoscript> This version last edited on: November 17, 2016

#### Part 1 - Introductory Stories ([video](https://youtu.be/HrmBZQuCSzo?list=PL6SfZh1-kWXkHPr5Uz1L5mU3cVj-yV9B1))

This is a lecture in several parts about a very important approach to writing documents and giving presentations. It's called "Minto Pyramid Principle" after its creator, Barbara Minto. It is a structural approach that hides a couple of processes. If you follow these processes, you arrive at a pyramid structure for your document or your presentation.

Barbara Minto has an interesting life and career, too: in 1963, over half a century ago, she became the first female consultant to McKinsey & Co., the hugely successful strategy consulting firm. It was there that she realized that even the best can be improved: she developed her pyramid principle, which soon became famous and is now used by all the big, successful strategy consulting firms.

I met her when I was a young executive at Shell. As part of a promotion, a small group of us had the opportunity to participate in a workshop with Barbara Minto. Participants were supposed to submit a piece of their own business writing before the workshop.

I will never forget how she quickly reduced my boastful pride to healthy humility by identifying the logical flaws in my writing sample. It was painful but it was also highly instructive. It was an important lesson. I always use the Minto principle to structure my documents when applicable - most importantly when a lot is at stake, when I wish to convince my listeners or my readers.

Minto assumes, correctly, that confused writing is based on confused thinking. She recommends to nip this problem in the bud by taking the time to build a logical structure before putting down the first word. She teaches how to create such a structure. Her arguments are themselves clear and unassailably rooted in common sense. You don't have to be a great writer or a great speaker to use her recipes. You only have to want to make an impact and be as clear as possible in the shortest time available.

Impactful, time-conscious, clear communication is what the best strategy consultants are offering. By using the Minto principle you participate in their success story. And if you should, at some point in your career, find yourself on the other side of these consultants, you already know how they prepared their potion - you know how they think and how they work.

In the next few lectures, we'll look at the concept of the Minto Pyramid Principle, at the three simple rules underlying the method, and at using the method to write and structure any document, be it a thesis or a presentation.

The emphasis of this presentation is on presenting Minto's ideas as I understand them. There is a lot more to the method. If you want to understand it better, pick up her classic book. If you want to learn more about the method on the go, get the app. It also includes a massive quiz which will help you to make sure you got the ideas right. But if you want to really make best use of this tool, you need to apply it. Begin by structuring your next email, your next essay, your next presentation, your next meeting, according to the Minto rules.

#### Part 2: The concept - What audiences want ([video](https://youtu.be/k_FJXpYPbQY?list=PL6SfZh1-kWXkHPr5Uz1L5mU3cVj-yV9B1))

Let us take a look at the concepts behind Minto's principle. It is motivated somewhat by science but even more so by common sense, which is why it is so easy to accept its truth and consequences. Let us begin with a simple observation: The attention of an audience is easily distracted. Nothing distracts as much as not feeling seen or heard. Wandering attention begins with an unconscious feeling of disrespect on the part of the speaker or writer. There are of course many sources of possible disrespect but there is one that is equally destructive to all people: namely, when the arguments brought forth seem to not be grouped logically: for example, if something that must follow is left out. Or if something follows that cannot possibly follow. Whenever this happens, the attention of the listener or the reader must wander, with more or less irritation. Put differently: human audiences crave and require logical groupings.

Perhaps this sounds a little abstract. But in fact it's very simple, as Minto found out: first of all, major, more abstract ideas should be placed before minor, supporting ideas. If someone presents me with a bunch of trivial facts or ideas, I feel cheated or at least in limbo until he or she has presented a larger principle or idea that supports them. Notice that this is quite different from casual conversations or chitchat. When two friends meet in the street, each of them will flood the other with information seemingly in random order. But this is not the situation we are trying to optimize. When a consultant presents findings, or when I open a non-fiction book, or when you read a scientific paper, you expect order in the sense that the chapter headlines are generalizations of the subchapters and the subchapter headlines generalizations of the material contained in them. If at any point you would encounter a greater, a major idea in the middle of a bunch of minor ideas, you would be stumped and distracted. Now, as with all of Minto’s so-called rules, you are perfectly free to violate them at any time but you will pay the price in audience disengagement.

Another thing that audiences crave is that similar ideas should be grouped together. To continue our example of the chapter of the book: the book sections contain material that is related to one another. Half the work of any decent writer is to organise the material in such a way as to help the reader find his way through the thoughts, the sentences and pages. The same holds for a presenter: if one side of a pack of slides introduces a topic, the following slides had better be about that topic. Anything else will be punished by the audience with the withdrawal of attention or protest.

And lastly, if I want to improve even more on my presentation, I will help the reader or the listener by assembling the material in such a way as to show any possibly existing relationship between the different items.

For example: in a history book about the Crusades, the obvious ordering of chapters is to position the first before the second and the second before the third Crusade and so on. History is itself time ordered, hence historical arguments of facts can usually be time ordered as well. Any other order would cause confusion, it would distract the reader.

#### Part 3: Pyramid structure and MECE rule ([audio](https://soundcloud.com/hwr_berlin/minto-part-4-audio/s-JDAVp?in=hwr_berlin/sets/minto-pyramid-principle/s-3tdkb))

How does this lead to a pyramid? When you present more than one argument, in speaking or in writing, you are faced with the problem of how to arrange your arguments. You should endeavour to group them both vertically and horizontally: vertically in the sense that any argument at a higher level is the summary of all arguments grouped below it. Horizontally in the sense that the arguments on the same level are logically related.

There is a small additional condition placed upon the internal grouping of arguments on the same level, for which Minto has coined the acronym "M-E-C-E". It stands for "Mutually Exclusive & Collectively Exhaustive". This means that arguments need to be mutually exclusive of each other & collectively exhaustive in terms of all the arguments on that level.

This is best illustrated with a short example.

When the arguments on one level address organizational change concerning the entire company, you will need to address all business functions or departments. Such a grouping is automatically M-E-C-E: business functions are all functionally and structurally independent, that is "mutually exclusive". At the same time, in terms of the whole organization, your list is "collectively exhaustive in terms of the whole" if you do not forget any of the existing or affected functions or departments. It is also easy to see in this example how an audience of managers would punish you by a lack of attention or protest if you were to violate the M-E rule: managers in the audience would be confused about which function or department you are referring to. If you do not obey the C-E rule, you leave out functions that are expected and again the audience would be confused as to why.

These three rules about vertical, horizontal and internal grouping constitute what Barbara Minto calls a pyramid structure.

#### Part 4: Pyramid as question/answer dialogue ([audio](https://soundcloud.com/hwr_berlin/4-pyramid-as-questionanswer-dialogue/s-yYMBQ))

The top point of your pyramid of arguments should always raise a question. This has to be a s simple question like: How? or Why? But not as simple as “when”, “who” or “what”, because these questions do not lead to very interesting arguments. They only lead to information.

The trick of the pyramid is that, because of its vertical structure, ideas at the next level of the pyramid answer the question. They must answer the question in a summarizing or explaining fashion.

In other words, when you look at the whole pyramid it appears as a question/answer dialogue, which continues until there are no more questions in the reader’s or the listener's mind about why you say what you say. As a whole, the pyramid contains your answer, but it is communicated in the most effective and yet accessible form, namely as a dialogue.

For this to work, a few conditions must be fulfilled. Because, remember, this is not a free-form dialogue, but a highly structured, highly prepared, controlled dialogue which you established for the purpose of maximal rapport. For example because you are a highly paid strategy consultant, or because a lot rides on this presentation for the future of the company, or because this is your thesis!

The power of the pyramid comes from engaging listeners, and listeners are most engaged, according to Minto, when you ask a question that is already in the listener’s mind. For that to happen, the question must come from his past knowledge of the subject or from a known document, so that you only have to remind him in the introduction to your presentation document that he is in fact famliar with the question. For example, if you are writing a mission statement for a newly formed knowledge management department in a large corporation, the question might be how do we maximise knowledge transfer between departments without compromising necessary confidentiality. You then proceed by arranging your ideas in a pyramid form to communicate the answer in the best possible way.

#### Part 5: Example: preparing the how / why question ([audio](https://soundcloud.com/hwr_berlin/5-preparing-the-how-or-why-question-top-line/s-yrjp3?in=hwr_berlin/sets/minto-pyramid-principle/s-3tdkb))

Let us look at a few simple examples for this question/answer property of the pyramid structure. Let's assume I'm giving a talk about the impact of feedback on communication. This is a non-trivial question. There are many situations when communication breaks down because people are expecting one form of feedback but they are getting another. In my lectures, I usually use an application interview as an example: the interviewer asks what motivates the candidate to want to work for the company that is hiring. The question asks for subjective information, for subjective feedback. If, which often happens, the candidate proceeds to provide (possibly correct) information about why he is well-suited to work in the company, we have a mismatch. It doesn't matter if the information is correct or not: the interviewer did not ask for objective, but for subjective feedback - “why do YOU want to work in this company?” The same scenario could be played out differently: the interviewer might ask where the candidate sees himself in 5 or 10 years time. Instead of reflecting, giving reflective feedback, the candidate might again proceed to point out facts about himself, or say how he feels about the future etc. And again, we have a mismatch.

After a story like this, the audience will be ready to hear my answer to the question "how do I respond to the requested type of feedback". This will be my top line point.

#### Part 6: HOW question - key line = parts ([audio](https://soundcloud.com/hwr_berlin/6-how-question-key-line-contains-parts/s-E5reA))

One such grouping would use the **type** of feedback as the ordering attribute: before responding, one must determine if subjective, objective or reflective feedback is required. This list is MECE already - at least reasonably so. The feedback types are pretty well distinguished already by language: subjective statements rely on "I", objective statements rely on facts (usually not including subjective "facts" such as feelings), and reflective statements are statements that focus on the future or on interpretation and speculation - they use the subject and they use facts. The result, my second level grouping, is structural and it is MECE. Note that this example would have been easier (but also a little trivial) if I had used "positive" and "negative" as feedback types.

#### Part 7: HOW question - key line = process steps ([audio](https://soundcloud.com/hwr_berlin/7-how-question-key-line-contains-steps/s-lwCqB?in=hwr_berlin/sets/minto-pyramid-principle/s-3tdkb))

Now, what if I didn't want to talk to my audience or readers about the types of feedback but about the **process** of responding to feedback? Then I would still begin a "how?" dialogue, but my second level arguments would look like this: first, I determine what type of feedback was required. Next, I respond by giving the requested feedback (i.e. subjective, objective or reflective) and lastly I check that I understood correctly, e.g. that the answer was complete and well received.

Note that the second level arguments presented earlier with a type focus could become third level arguments below the first step (determine the type of feedback) - as an answer to the question "how?" asked at that level.

#### Part 8: WHY question - key line = process steps ([audio](https://soundcloud.com/hwr_berlin/8-why-question-key-line-contains-process-steps/s-tIIwY?in=hwr_berlin/sets/minto-pyramid-principle/s-3tdkb))

But, as I said, I could also ask "why?". This might be an interesting argument if an audience doubts that structure in conversations is important. Now, my second level arguments provide three reasons for responding to feedback that was requested: the other side will feel listened to (which makes them feel good); then they will listen to us (which is good for us); and lastly, such an exchange will lead to a better relationship. All quite obvious, I agree, but not fully trivial perhaps. So what kind of order is this? Clearly it is a temporal order, but there is also a process of relationship building implied that transcends pure time ordering. Again, it is reasonably MECE - though the CE part needs to be shown or it needs to be accepted otherwise by the audience. Such acceptance must, as I said, always be rooted in previous knowledge - either practical or theoretical or both.

For example, if one of the chapters of your thesis on "feedback" contains three chapters with headings clarifying listening, being listened to and relationship building as a result, you need to ground such a structure through your research - perhaps there is a theory about relationships that relies on the quality of listening and being listened to.

#### Part 9: WHY question - key line = structural parts (audio)

Another example: you all know the slogan "The customer should be king". I don't even know where it comes from. Perhaps you want to make the point, in a presentation to underperforming sales people, why it is important that the customer is treated like a king - as a lead up to the topic of how to put the customer in the center. One possible second level argument is "the customer will remember our service fondly" - this is about the customer's past. Also, he will buy more from us in the present. And lastly, he will remain our customer in the future. The ordering is not really temporal, it's structural in that all aspects of customer relationship - past, present and future - are touched and covered by the slogan. The second level arguments are also automatically MECE. There is nothing besides past, present and future and though they touch, they never overlap, according to the laws of physics. Likewise, you could build a second level answering the question "how?", but of course it would be completely different. Also, there is nothing magical, by the way, about the fact that all the examples have three arguments on the second level. It's only easier to present that way.

#### Part 10: Value of the pyramid for your writing process ([audio](https://soundcloud.com/hwr_berlin/10-value-of-the-pyramid-for-your-writing-process/s-Ru9nm?in=hwr_berlin/sets/minto-pyramid-principle/s-3tdkb))

Let us summarize what we know and appreciate about the pyramid structure so far: it should be obvious that it is much easier to write once you have structured your ideas in the form of a logical pyramid. Why? Because you've taken away all the fat and what is left are the bare bones of your argument - the keys only. This will not necessarily make for entertaining reading or viewing but remember that entertainment is not your goal - clarity and maximal rapport with readers or audience is your goal. The hard part is to work out the skeleton before you begin to write. Words can be very seductive and it may be hard both for the experienced and for the inexperienced writer, to let go of what you have already written. Therefore it is important to do as much work away from the page already as possible. Once you have a document that is organized around the headings of your pyramid you can move on to actual insight, imagination and even entertainment!

#### Part 11-15: The Pyramid Rules

#### Part 16-18: Example: Flawed or not?

#### Part 19-22: How to write an introduction

#### Part 23: How to structure any document

#### Part 24: Student Questions

(I think it would be cool to close each lecture video with a short summary of typical student questions on the subject.) See also my lecture “[10 Student Thesis Mistakes And How To Avoid Them.](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1LhmB7AaIg8BN65fp4iiGOlebER5fmaknqAShfrYLmtY/edit?usp=sharing)”

If you read this and you wish to contribute: leave YOUR question on Minto in the comments of this document! Or add them to the [FAQ forum in Moodle](http://moodle.hwr-berlin.de/mod/forum/view.php?id=262058).

#### Logo for Soundcloud and Moodle

