

The Thought Process In McKinsey Reports And Presentations

SARA M. ROCHE

The Thought Process In McKinsey Reports And Presentations

With few exceptions, the difficulty in putting together a written report or oral presentation stems not from inability to use language but from problems in thinking through what has to be said.

The theme of this guide, then, is **thought**, for the effectiveness of a presentation results primarily from the unassailable logic of the thoughts it presents. The words, as vehicles for the thoughts, can be chosen only after the logic has been developed.

CONTENTS	Page
The Concept of Structure	1
Unity: Relating the Parts to a Whole	2
Emphasis: Surfacing the Key Ideas	5
Coherence: Grouping Related Ideas	12
The Anatomy of a Presentation	15
Introduction and Conclusions	15
Transitions	18
Paragraphs	20
Sentences	22
Pointers on Style	24
Clarity Through Grammar	24
Stylistic Techniques for Adding Emphasis	26
Suggestions on Usage	27
The Logic of Firm Format	30
Summary	35

The Concept of Structure

The concept of structure discussed here pertains to reports and presentations that explain or defend a point of view. Another way to think about them is as conclusion-oriented communications that are essentially prescriptive. They answer a question or solve a problem. Some of the techniques discussed – in particular, the approaches to grouping – are helpful for organizing reports that are descriptive, but in its fullest sense, this structure is intended only for reports that present conclusions or recommend a course of action.

A conclusion-oriented communication "has structure when its components are assembled, not at random, but with necessary relations to one another."^{*} Such a communication adheres to three universal principles of rhetoric:

1. **Unity:** Relation of all parts in a way that produces a harmonious whole with a single general effect
2. **Emphasis:** Stress laid on particular points so as to give them prominence
3. **Coherence:** Natural or logical flow of thoughts in an order that makes sense.

The sections that follow discuss how to build these principles into your reports or presentations.

^{*}*Fundamentals Of Good Writing*, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren.

UNITY: RELATING THE PARTS TO A WHOLE

The individual points made in the course of a report or presentation are like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Examined separately, the shape and markings of each piece convey very little, but when the pieces are fitted together properly, the picture becomes clear. Business reports and presentations are puzzles to the readers or hearers when all they perceive is a series of individual points. Without an idea of the whole, they will have trouble understanding the parts.

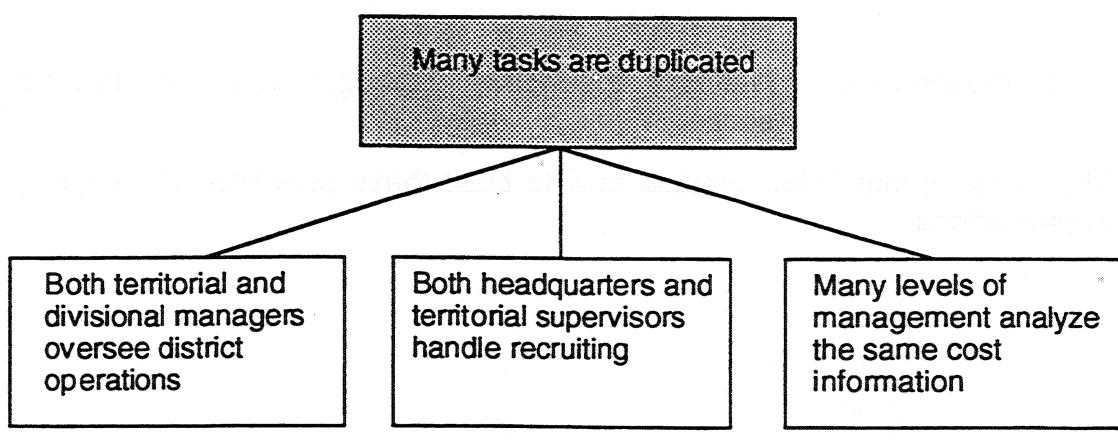
When confronted with puzzles, most people struggle to solve them. The trouble is, while they are struggling to fit the parts of your message into some "big picture" their attention is diverted from the details you are trying to convey. Even worse, the "big picture" they work out may be entirely different from the one you intend. You may be misunderstood.

That is why unity is an essential quality to build into reports and presentations and that is why you must concern yourself with structure before you start to write.

The structural approach to developing a presentation is founded on the theory that the ideas in any presentation form a thought hierarchy proceeding from the most detailed points to the most abstract idea or theme, or vice versa. This thought hierarchy exists because the writer saw a relationship between several ideas and derived a message from that relationship. That message is the "governing thought" for the section. Here's how it works.

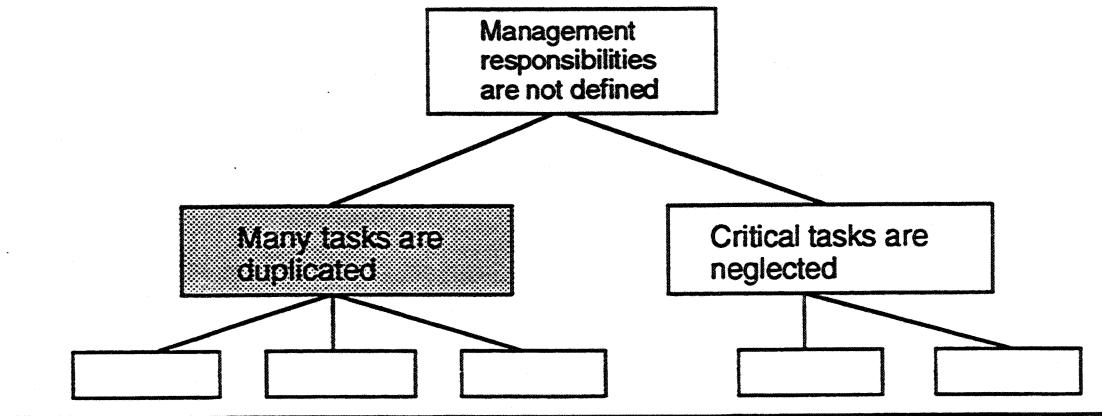
Exhibit 1A shows how you might group three detailed findings under a conclusion that serves as the governing thought for the section.

Exhibit 1A



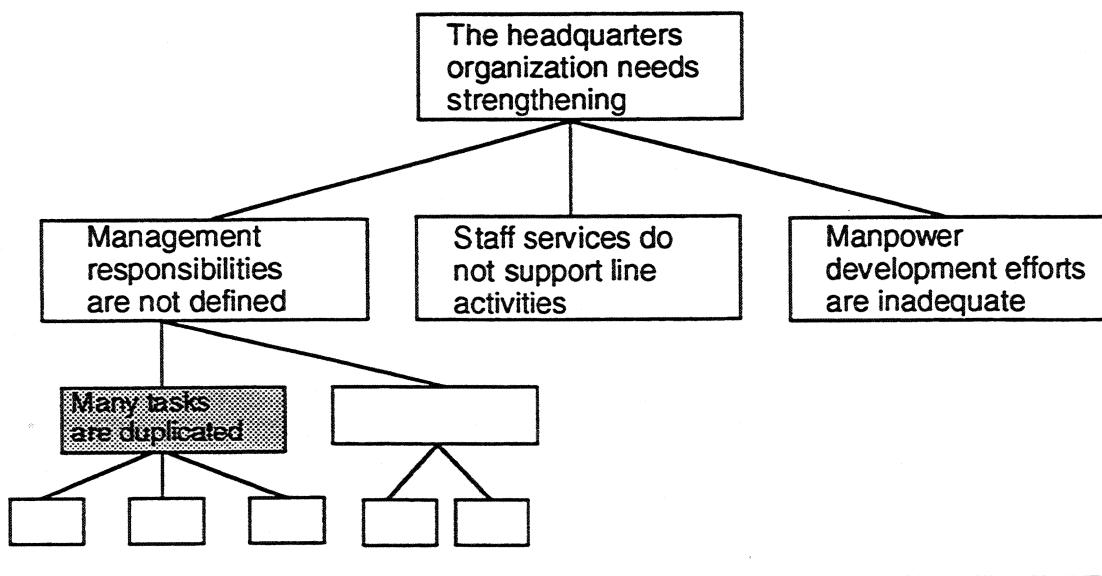
This governing thought can then be combined with other governing thoughts, similarly derived, to support a thought at a higher level of abstraction. Exhibit 1B shows how a thought hierarchy begins to emerge from this process.

Exhibit 1B



The process of abstracting (or grouping and summarizing) continues until the main thoughts can be summed up into a governing thought for the entire presentation. The end result, as Exhibit 1C illustrates, is a framework of the whole and its parts. Notice that the schematic has a pyramidal shape. Hence the famous McKinsey Pyramid

Exhibit 1C



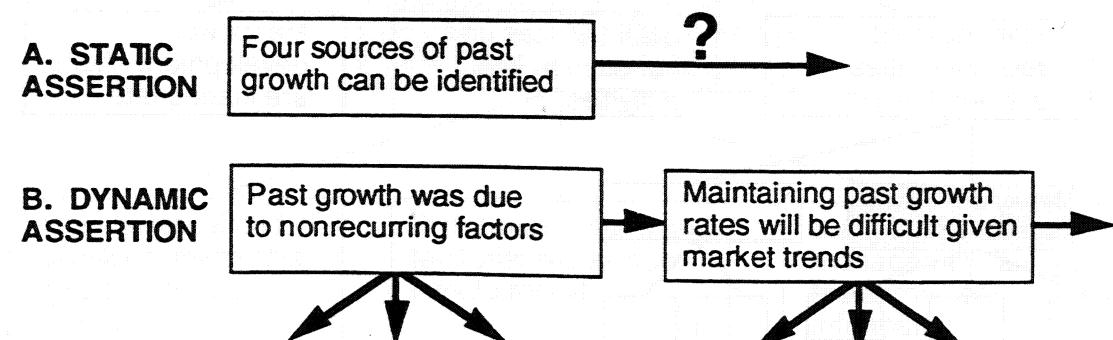
When you work with the single thought theory, the structure you develop is, in essence, a network of thought relationships. Each governing thought is related to the thoughts it summarizes, so you have a set of relationships from one level of abstraction to the next. And the thoughts at any one level of abstraction are related in the way they combine to support their governing thought.

Notice that the structures we have been talking about are built around ideas, not topics. A workable structure cannot be built around topic labels like "planning" or "organization" because labels like these give no indication of the message of the section. Take the word "planning" for example: it doesn't indicate whether the section is about steps in the planning process, reasons for planning, or pitfalls in first attempts at a new approach to planning – entirely different messages.

In English, and in most other western languages, a complete idea can only be expressed in sentence form, so you must work with complete sentences when developing a structure. Take another look at Exhibits 1A, B, and C. That structure was worked out in sentence form so that the ideas could be made explicit. Notice also that the sentences used are assertions – that is, they state that something is true about a given subject. Since what you do in this structuring process is identify the subject you propose to talk about and introduce the "truth" about that subject that you plan to explore, you need not just any kind of sentence but an assertion.

Every assertion must open up links to the other ideas in your structure. It must point the way to another assertion at the same level of abstraction and it must define a "universe of discourse" that tells you what information is relevant at subordinate levels. In Exhibit 2, the assertion under A establishes no such links. It provides no basis for evaluating the relevance of the points discussed at lower levels of abstraction or for moving to another idea at the same level of abstraction.

Exhibit 2



The assertions under B are dynamic. The first assertion defines a universe of discourse, "nonrecurring factors that contributed to past growth," that leaves no room for doubt as to what is and what is not relevant. It also paves the way for the second assertion so that the thought relationships are inescapable. In short, dynamic assertions are the secret of a tightly knit structure.

Once you have gone through the process of constructing a structure for your report or presentation, the writing job becomes much easier. You know exactly what thoughts have to be included in each section – and how they relate to one another. You also have an idea of the transitions you need by virtue of the thought relationships established. And once you have the framework sketched out, you can tackle the writing section by section, starting wherever you feel most comfortable or inspired. At the outset, all you have to establish is the relationship between the main points of the story line and their tie to the overall governing thought. From that point on, each main point is treated independently, which means that the only thought relationships you have to worry about are at the subordinate levels within that section.

Even though you concentrate on only one section at a time, the unity of the document is ensured as long as you adhere to the principles of the single thought theory:

1. Each governing thought is a summary of the thoughts immediately subordinate to it.
2. The thoughts at any level are logically related to one another.

EMPHASIS: SURFACING THE KEY IDEAS

The discipline of developing a pyramid should ensure not only that the presentation has unity but also that the most important points receive the emphasis. The process of grouping and summarizing just described forces your thinking beyond the stage of multiple low-level conclusions to the articulation of a few key thoughts. Those key thoughts become the elements of your story line and the point of departure for the main sections of the report or presentation. In

the vocabulary of the single thought theory, the governing thoughts that combine to support the overall governing thought of the presentation should be the key ideas you want to communicate. What that means, of course, is that the story line level of the pyramid deserves careful thought.

Practically speaking, there are only two ways to construct a story line for a business report or presentation:

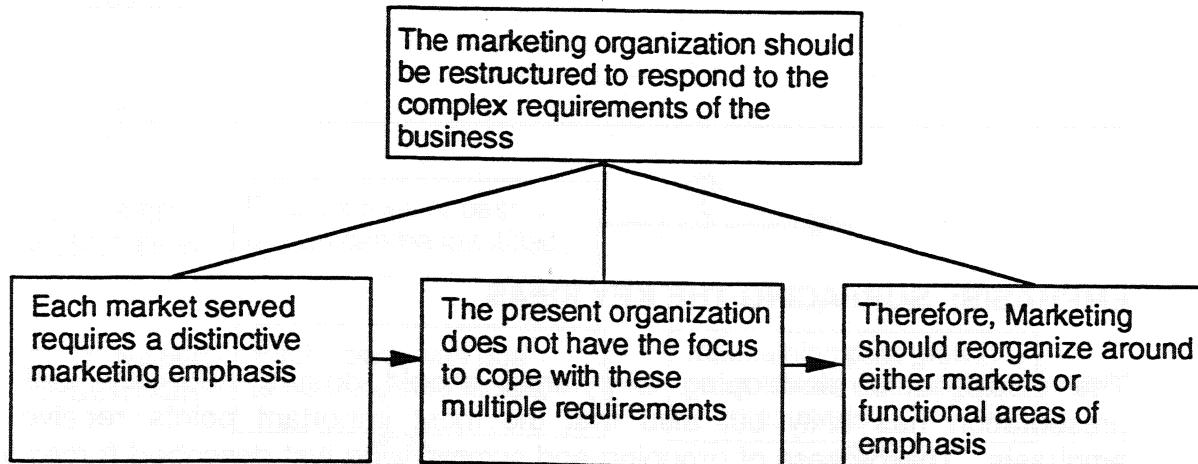
1. By means of a logical argument
2. By means of a logical grouping.

A logical argument is a progression of thoughts from premise to conclusion (Exhibit 3). It is a chain of reasoning in which each thought grows out of the thought or thoughts that preceded it. The possibilities for logical argumentation are infinite, but every logical argument has the following characteristics:

1. It starts with a statement about a situation (a dynamic assertion, as discussed earlier).
2. It continues with a comment about that situation that narrows the range of logical implications to the solution you have found.
3. It concludes with a statement of the implications of the comment (usually a statement beginning with "therefore").

Exhibit 3

LOGICAL ARGUMENT

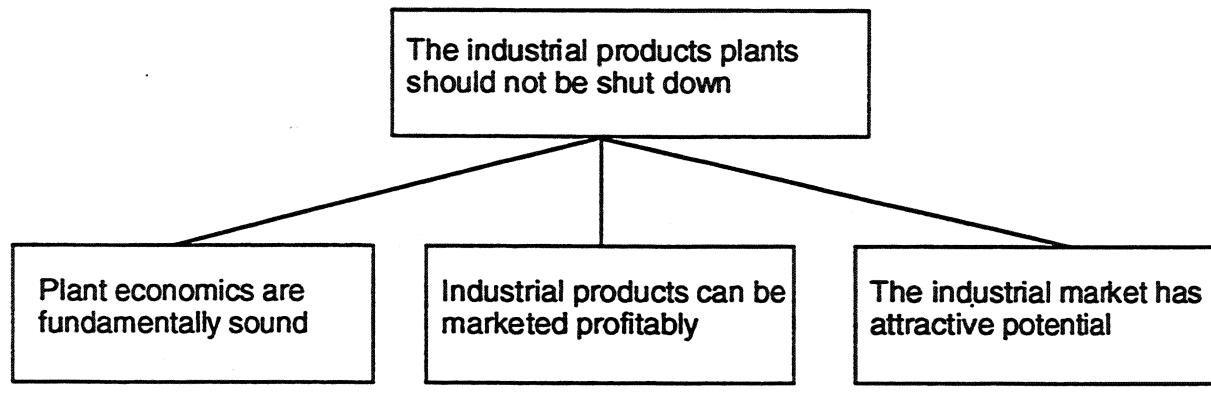


A logical grouping is, as the name implies, a group of thoughts of the same kind that combine to support a thought at a higher level of abstraction (Exhibit 4). The thoughts grouped might be:

- Problems in the way of reaching some goal
- Changes that are needed to solve a problem
- Reasons for taking or not taking a proposed step (as in Exhibit 4)
- Evidence that something is or is not so
- Steps toward a desired goal.

Exhibit 4

LOGICAL GROUPING



The two forms of story line can be used for very different purposes.

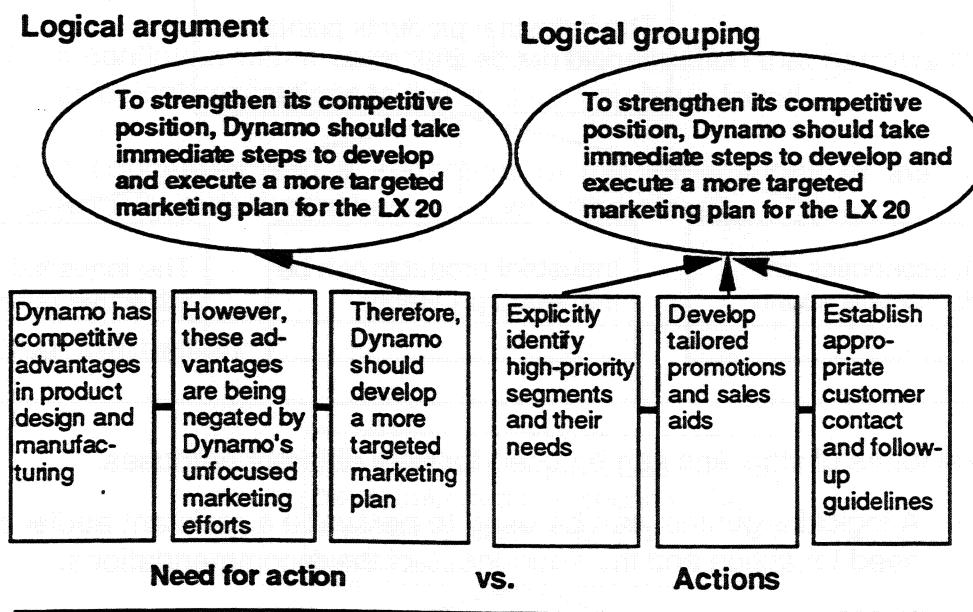
- A logical argument can be used to persuade a resistant audience of the need for action and the soundness of the recommendations.
 - It can be used to cushion an unpleasant message.
 - And it can be used to demonstrate that no avenue but the recommended one will work.
- A logical grouping facilitates detailed discussion of each of a number of conclusions or recommendations.
 - It is an effective way to emphasize the individual elements of a program or the reasons for a conclusion.
 - It is a direct, straightforward way to get your message across.

A logical argument properly framed, can be very persuasive, but it requires the audience to remember a lot of information before getting to the "so what" of the discussion. Also, a tight argument is difficult to construct, and if either the "situation" or "comment" point is contested, the argument will fail to persuade.

With a logical grouping, in contrast, if one point is rejected, the remaining points may still be sufficient to persuade. However, a story line based on a grouping may be too forceful for some audiences.

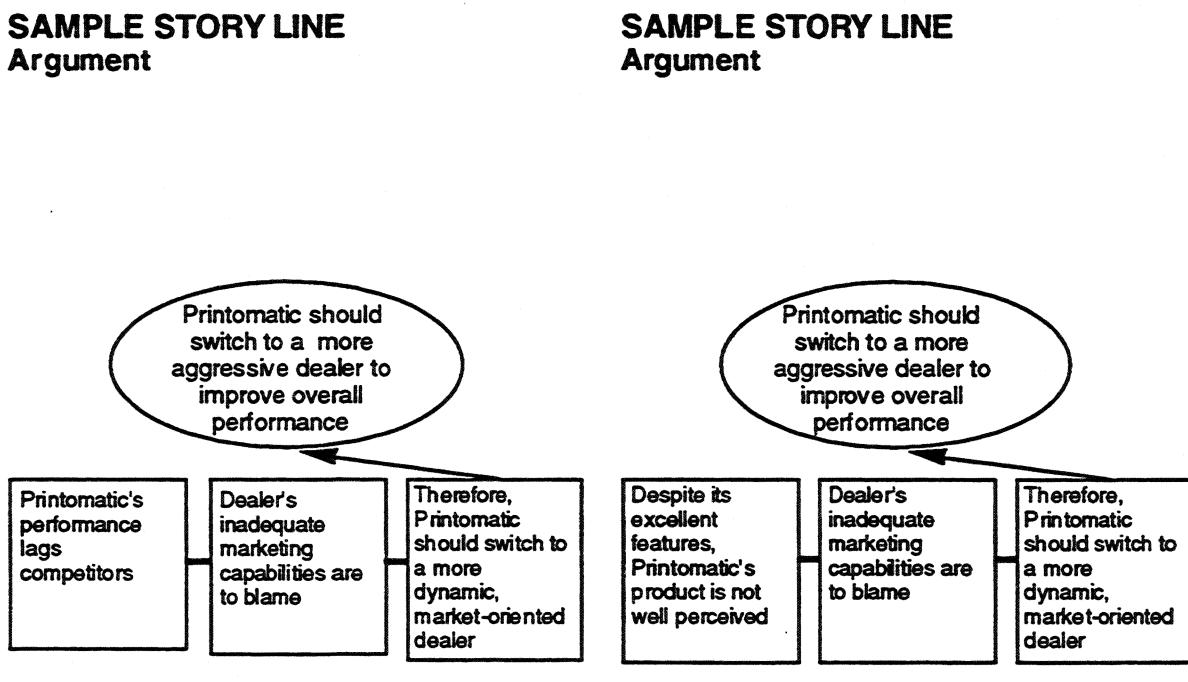
Exhibit 5 shows the two forms of story line used with the same governing thought. As you can see, the emphasis is quite different in the two approaches, so it's important to be clear about your objectives and your audience's needs when deciding between the logical grouping and the logical argument. If you study the example, you'll see that the actions recommended in the logical grouping story line could form the support for the "therefore" point in the logical argument.

Exhibit 5



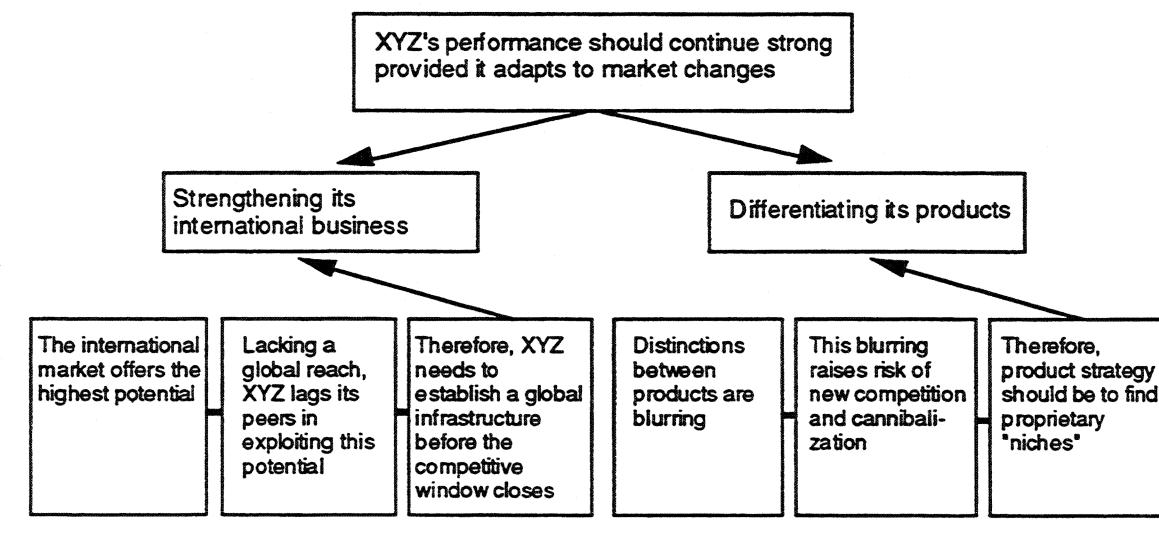
Beware of using a logical argument to cover what is essentially introductory material: context-setting material that the audience already knows. Each point in a logical argument should be essential to make the case for change and should therefore advance the audience's understanding. Exhibit 6 illustrates this point. The argument on the left starts with a point that is essentially contextual. As a result, there is a huge logic gap between the first and second points. The argument on the right makes a better distinction between the introduction and the logic, resulting in a tighter argument.

Exhibit 6



Both kinds of logical relationship can occur in the same presentation. In Exhibit 7, the thoughts at the first level of abstraction establish the logical groupings that support the governing thought. The thoughts at the next level are in the form of logical arguments.

Exhibit 7



When developing a pyramid you can start at any level of abstraction.

A. At the highest level of abstraction: Sometimes your assignment is to put some thoughts together on a subject – and that's all you know about it at the outset. The best way to develop a structure in that situation – and put your thoughts in order at the same time – is as follows:

1. Decide in what terms the main subject should be discussed – i.e., the kind of idea to be used to form a logical grouping or the points to be covered in the logical argument. A good way to think about the main subject is as the answer to a question – the question the audience actually asked, might have asked, or should have asked.
2. Express each point as a complete idea (a dynamic assertion).
3. Arrange the ideas in logical order.
4. Develop a statement that summarizes all the ideas expressed (the governing thought of the document).

B. At the lowest level of detail: Often when you set out to prepare a report or presentation, all you have definitely established is a list of recommendations with no clear idea of how they fit together. In this case, the best way to get a handle on a story line is to:

1. Organize the recommendations into groups according to some common characteristic.
2. Then summarize each group of recommendations by stating the effect of carrying them out (e.g., tighten purchasing controls to reduce the cost of materials).
3. Group these ideas and summarize them at the next level of abstraction, and so on until no further groupings appear to be possible.
4. Sketch out the reasoning behind each group of recommendations by using a work sheet like the one shown on Exhibit 8. The work sheet enables you to set out the support you need for each set of recommendations and, in the process, discover any gaps in information, weaknesses in reasoning, or irrelevant facts you are tempted to include.
5. With the work sheet in front of you, work out a pyramid developed from either the broad groups of recommendations or the logical argument suggested by the flow of ideas.

Exhibit 8

Findings	Conclusions	Recommendations
Preoccupied with hardware problems	Not using the computer to satisfy division needs	Set up special unit to devote full time to identifying division needs
Communication limited and ineffective		
Information generated not germane to needs		
No written procedures for new application development projects	Not planning and controlling activities on basis of costs/benefits	Develop planning and control tools as quickly as possible
No formal analysis of costs and benefits expected from major equipment changes		
Main thrust on data-gathering activities	Not using computer for profit-improving applications	Identify and exploit two or three high-payout opportunities on a pilot basis
Emphasis on efforts to reduce clerical costs, facilitate record keeping, or replace other computer equipment		

C. **At the story line level:** If you're fortunate enough to have had your work go exactly as you planned it, you'll probably have a good idea of the kind of story line you need and the main areas you want to cover. In this case, the structure virtually falls into place. All you have to do is:

1. List your main ideas (as dynamic assertions) and frame a governing thought to cover them all.
2. Frame an assertion for each subpoint.
3. Arrange these assertions in logical order.

But regardless of where you start in building a pyramid, when you write a report or deliver an oral presentation, you must start from the highest level of abstraction. That way, you give the readers or listeners the orientation they need to follow what you say because they can see the "big picture." And you make it easy for them to absorb each point you make because they can relate it to the whole.

COHERENCE: GROUPING RELATED IDEAS

As we said earlier, the quality of coherence results from a natural or logical flow of thought. If you use a logical argument to tell your story, the flow of thought is dictated, of course, by the reasoning you employ. And careful use of language can point up the logical relationships you have established. But structural problems of coherence often arise with groupings that are not carefully thought out.

Faulty idea groupings account for much of the lack of clarity in business reports and presentations, and the reason is that few people are aware of the pitfalls. In fact, most people aren't even aware of how much they rely on groupings to get their message across. Every time you list anything, you are working with a grouping of ideas.

Most people fall into the trap of drawing up groupings too loosely. They tend to characterize groupings in terms that are so broad that almost anything will fit. And they fail to notice that the points in the grouping are not logically parallel – that is, they don't all lead in the same direction or they are not all at the same level of abstraction.

If you list points without a clear idea of the message you want to convey by means of those points in combination, you're bound to run into trouble when you try to develop a discussion around each point.

When you try to write about the various points in the grouping, do you find you are repeating yourself because of overlaps between points? Or do you have trouble conveying the message the way you originally intended? Some attention to the techniques of grouping will produce marked improvement in the clarity and coherence of your reports and presentations.

Basically, there are only two ways of grouping ideas:

1. As members of a class – that is, grouping ideas as if they were objects – e.g., problems, reasons, factors, characteristics.
2. As steps in a process – that is, grouping ideas as events – e.g., changes, responsibilities, recommendations.

The secret of proper **class groupings** is ensuring that all necessary points are included. The way to succeed at that is to define the subject as precisely as possible.

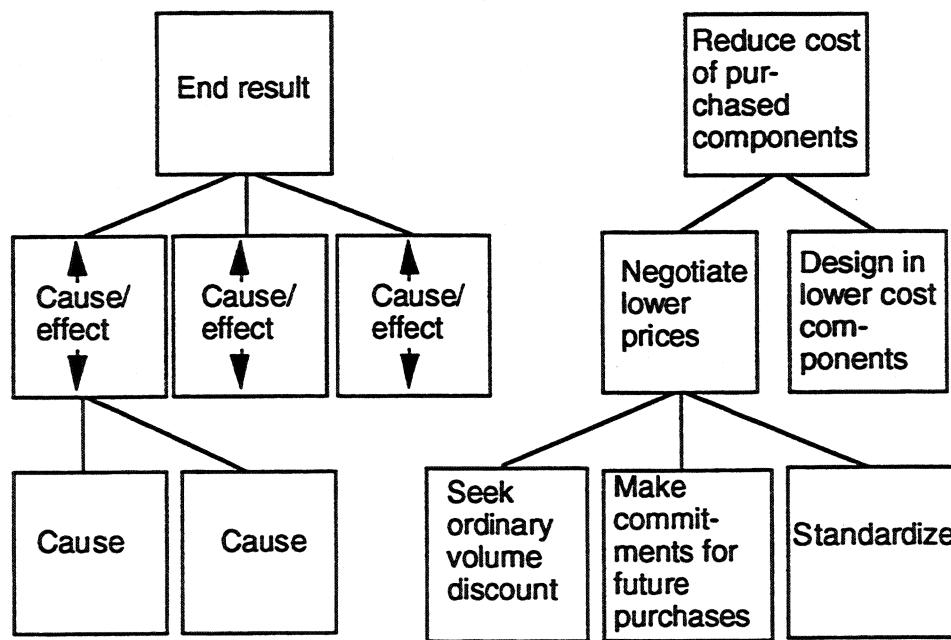
- First, define the class of ideas to be grouped: is it "reasons," "trends," "benefits"?
- Then draw an inference from the grouped relationship under discussion that differentiates this group from all others (in other words, frame a dynamic assertion as discussed earlier).

- Not just "market characteristics," but "characteristics that fit or do not fit a specific need"
- Not just "problems," but "problems that inhibit effective planning and control."
- Then, with your universe of discourse defined, you are in a position to determine what points are relevant and to judge when you have included everything you need.

This kind of thinking is helpful not only for conclusion-oriented communications but also for agendas.

Process groupings are another matter altogether. The steps in a process fit together in a structure of cause and effect relationships (see Exhibit 9).

Exhibit 9



Anything but the simplest process will consist of a hierarchy of causes and intermediate effects, all contributing to the end result. Thus, at intermediate levels of the structure, an action step will be both the effect brought about by the steps below it and a cause of the effect at the next level up. You can tell if the actions being grouped belong together by testing to see if they all contribute to the same end result.

Therefore, the secret of sound process groupings is to state each step in terms of the effect or result desired – another way of defining the universe of discourse. Don't say that Step 1 would be to "review trends"; an end result would be "identify changes that would weaken/strengthen our market position." The

second statement defines an end result that is finite; the first suggests an activity that could go on forever – no indication of how to judge when it has been completed and no indication of what is to be learned from the trends.

A process grouping should satisfy two requirements:

1. The same step may not appear at two levels of division. (Clearly, a step that is an end result at one level of abstraction cannot also be a contributing factor to that result at a lower level of abstraction.)
2. Substeps must contribute to achievement of the step at the next higher level. Any action that does not directly contribute to the end result stated cannot be discussed as part of the grouping under that end result.

With your universe of discourse defined precisely, you have a way of testing whether all the points you've included are relevant or valid, and whether you've included everything you should have. And if you also follow the two rules listed above, any process you describe should be easy to understand.

Thinking in terms of process groupings can bring a "how to" manual to life and make it easy for the reader to see the importance of each step being described. It can also make a discussion of improvement opportunities more meaningful since, as the example in Exhibit 9 shows, each improvement is related to a performance aspiration.

Once ideas have been grouped, they must be placed in some kind of order. In every grouping, one of the following kinds of order is likely to be appropriate:

- Chronological order – order in time
- Scalar order – order of magnitude, importance, degree, urgency
- Conventional order – order in which the points included are traditionally considered
- Strategic order – manipulation of any of the above to achieve a specific effect (for example, you can call attention to a point by discussing it out of its normal order). It takes some skill to distort an expected order without destroying the coherence of the discussion.

Careful attention to the grouping and ordering of thoughts will produce a coherent, purposeful document. All nonworking facts will be eliminated: if a fact does not support a thought at a higher level of abstraction in the structure, there will be no place to put it. Also, descriptive passages that lead nowhere will be eliminated: vital information will be grouped in support of a point that is an essential part of the logic, even if the communication does not lend itself to a single governing thought.

The Anatomy of a Presentation

Careful preparation of a structure is essential to logical presentation, but it is no guarantee that a report will be clear throughout and persuasive overall. Attaining these objectives depends on how well the reader is introduced to the subject to be discussed, how effectively words are combined into sentences and paragraphs, and how smoothly the transitions between sections are handled. The sections that follow suggest some techniques for developing each of these components of a presentation.

In this chapter, the focus is on written documents, but the principles discussed apply to oral presentations as well.

INTRODUCTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Two elements of a report or presentation that fall outside the logic structure are introductions and conclusions. Their content is drawn from the logic structure that has been established, but they should not be treated as part of the logic flow.

The introduction is an indispensable part of any report or presentation. It serves three main purposes:

1. To acquaint the readers with what they need to know to follow the line of thought in the report
2. To interest the readers in what's to come
3. To introduce the message of the report.

To accomplish these purposes, the introduction should state four things:

1. What you're writing about
2. Why you're writing about it
3. What your main point (governing thought) is
4. How you're going to develop the governing thought.

These points do not have to be stated in the order given above, nor does each point have to be made in a separate sentence. Indeed, you should bring your own personality and style to bear to breathe life into your report while conveying the essential information.

You may end up with a smoother, more readable introduction if you think of it as a narrative or mini-story setting forth the situation, complication, and solution followed by an indication of how you plan to develop your point of view. Notice how the examples in Exhibit 10 achieve different effects by changing the order of the situation, complication, and solution.

- Starting with the situation produces a relaxed effect.
- Starting with the solution is a no-nonsense approach.
- Starting with the complication creates a sense of urgency.

Whatever the order of the other elements, the section outlining the development of the governing thought should come last to ease the transition into the body of the report.

Because it sets the tone for the entire document, the introduction is the hardest part of any writing job. Going through the exercise of framing the governing thought and supporting assertions makes it easier, because once that is done, you have an overview of the presentation. And writing the introduction last makes it easier still, for by that time the tone of the document is well established.

Three Approaches to Introductions

Situation – complication – solution

Music Hall was originally built as a home for the city's resident performing arts groups. Recently, however, the Hall has undertaken the role of impresario for the city and has sponsored a number of visiting productions, most of which did not cover their costs. In view of the mounting financial pressures on the Hall and the risks involved in such productions, the wisdom of this impresario role must be questioned.

This memorandum suggests a program for bringing visiting performing arts groups to the city without risk to the Hall.

Solution – situation – complication

Music Hall must give serious consideration to discontinuing its role as impresario for the city. Originally built as the home of the city's resident performing arts groups, it has recently presented a number of visiting groups under its sponsorship. However, most of these sponsored productions did not cover their costs, a situation that aggravated the Hall's growing financial problems.

This memorandum suggests . . .

Complication – situation – solution

During the last year, Music Hall has lost money on 7 of the 20 productions it sponsored. Sponsorship of these productions represents a departure from the Hall's original role as the home of the city's resident performing arts groups. Since the Hall now faces a growing deficit from the performances of its constituent groups, the time has clearly come to resolve the question of whether it can afford to act as impresario for the city.

This memorandum suggests . . .

Conclusions should give a feeling of completion to sections, chapters, and entire documents. A well-prepared conclusion makes the difference between finishing a report or presentation – leaving the reader or hearer with the mindset you want to establish – or simply stopping.

Conclusions can be developed by:

- Restating the governing thought
- Summarizing the key points
- Providing some additional perspective
 - Requirements for successful implementation
 - Specific responsibilities
 - Benefits
 - Need for prompt action.

The examples in Exhibit 11 illustrate the many forms a conclusion can take.

Exhibit 11

Conclusions

These changes represent a significantly different approach to managing the Agency Department. If properly implemented, they should overcome a number of the organizational problems identified earlier. Therefore, it makes sense to embark on a major implementation program as soon as possible to put these changes into effect.

Summing up, management realizes that effective utilization of the EDP resource is a worthwhile goal. Potentially beneficial applications exist in straight cost reduction – accounting, store inventory control – and in decision-making areas – shelf space allocation, store labor scheduling, price break buying. Having recognized the potential, top management must take the necessary steps to put in place the proper organization and management processes.

The goal of the program is to establish a continuing, permanently organized effort. Our role is to help build the program and train the people. We look forward to working with you to achieve this important objective.

Many of the above opportunities reflect a need for improvements at the top management level. The development of a new top management team with clearly defined authorities and responsibilities will accomplish a great deal. The remaining need is for a sound plan for utilizing the company's resources to realize the profit opportunities.

TRANSITIONS

A transition is a link between what has gone before and what is about to come. Its function is to help the readers remember what they have just read while introducing the next idea. Transitions are a stylistic tool for ensuring coherence.

A smooth transition from one set of thoughts to another can be achieved in a number of ways. Words like "therefore," "however," "furthermore" are obvious transitions. More effective than overuse of words like these is the technique of echoing a key term or a thought from an earlier paragraph – in effect, weaving the transition into the fabric of the text. (The third and fourth paragraphs of Exhibit 12 open with this kind of transition.)

Transitions

Although boards of trustees normally have the legal power to determine the future course of the university as well as to supervise its day-to-day activities, practical considerations prevent them from exercising anything like this kind of leadership and direction. **First and foremost**, boards of trustees are almost always lay organizations – their members are not educators, nor do they have a technical understanding in depth of the important educational problems affecting the university's future. **Moreover**, since theirs is a part-time role, trustees cannot devote the time and attention required to direct the university's operations closely. In addition, attempts by the board to exercise direct leadership normally generate friction and resentment on the part of both faculty and administration.

As a result, boards of trustees necessarily rely on the president and his key officers to provide leadership for the total enterprise. Only the president is in a position to bring into focus and reconcile the viewpoints of the various power groups – faculty, students, trustees, and administration – in defining the role of the institution and charting its future course. The president, with the advice of other administrators and the faculty, should decide the kinds of facilities the university will need in light of its educational goals and the priorities to be attached to them. And it is the president and his chief subordinates who set the tone of campus intellectual life and establish its quality standards.

Although the initiative and leadership normally come from the president, the trustees have a fundamental responsibility to decide on the basic mission of the university and approve its policy framework. In doing so, they can generally draw on their experience to provide sound advice and counsel to the administration in the areas of finance, physical development, and public relations. In educational matters, too, boards can contribute positively. "Without infringing upon the proper discretion of the faculty, board members accomplish a great deal by asking intelligent lay questions. Thus, they ensure thorough thinking out of the proposals that are presented for approval and their effective interrelation with financial, personnel, and public relations and other considerations."

While focusing their attention primarily on matters of mission and policy, boards still must get involved in some administrative matters – especially those regarding finance. Trustees can provide a valuable service by keeping an eye on the financial health of the institution. And individual board members often spend long hours seeking financial support for their institution from state and Federal governments as well as from private donors and foundations.

Sometimes an entire paragraph is needed to make the transition from a rather complex discussion to the next section of the report or presentation. Such a paragraph would start with a summary and then bridge to the next subject.

Transitions can make the difference between a smooth narrative and a choppy one, so be sure to include them. Transitions are needed:

- Between chapters
- Between major sections of a chapter
- Between paragraphs.

Remember that the purpose of a transition is to point out or make clear the connection between one point and another, not to create a relationship.

PARAGRAPHS

The function of a paragraph is to develop one thought or idea. It is the smallest unit that contains a thought hierarchy.

A well-constructed paragraph contains a topic sentence that clearly states the central thought. This topic sentence is the equivalent of the governing idea of a document or section. All other sentences in the paragraph must relate to the topic sentence.

The topic sentence usually comes first unless a sentence is used as a transition from the previous paragraph. This placement positions the reader and prepares him for what is to come. It also serves as a reminder to the writer and guards against irrelevancies.

As we have said, the function of a paragraph is to develop one thought. Therefore, the cardinal rule in paragraph building is to confine it to one subject. More than one paragraph may be needed to develop the thought completely, but if so, the subdivisions should be clear. Don't let the central thought of one paragraph spill over into the next one.

Exhibits 13A and B show how the clarity and effectiveness of a series of paragraphs is increased by organizing each paragraph around a topic sentence. Note how, in the edited version (Exhibit 13B), the reader is introduced to the overall message and to its component parts.

Exhibit 13A

Paragraphs

Draft Version

The University had to expand its physical plant, faculty, and staff to keep pace with the expected rapid growth of the student body. It had to invest more in physical plant in 3 years than 3 other major universities in the state had spent in the preceding 17 years. It had to acquire 140 acres of land through urban renewal. This is more than had been purchased by the Urban Renewal and Housing Agency for five previous major projects combined. The University had to double its faculty in 3 years. This had to be accomplished in an increasingly competitive academic labor market, and without the benefit of a competitive compensation structure or a prestigious faculty to enhance its reputation.

The University had to transform from a small liberal arts college into a broadly based University. This involved much more than simply reproducing its predecessor many times over. For the quality of the facilities, faculty, and curriculum did not compare well to first-rate universities. It had to develop a graduate program while operating, improving, and expanding the undergraduate curriculum. And, it needed to add to the present faculty by recruiting high-caliber personnel in many fields.

Paragraphs

Edited Version

The University faced a major job of transformation – going from a small liberal arts college to a large, broadly based University in just 3 years. This changeover involved much more than simply reproducing its predecessor many times over, for the quality of the facilities, faculty, and curriculum was not good enough for a first-rate university.

Clearly the task was twofold, requiring both physical expansion and quality improvement. The physical expansion alone represented a staggering undertaking. The investment in physical plant over the 3-year period would be more than 3 other major universities in the state had spent in the preceding 17 years. The 140 acres of land to be acquired through urban renewal would be more than had been purchased by the Urban Renewal and Housing Agency for 5 previous major projects combined.

And to raise itself to true university stature, the University had to develop a graduate program as well as improve and expand the undergraduate curriculum. It also needed to double the present faculty by recruiting high-caliber personnel in many fields. This staffing had to be accomplished in an increasingly competitive academic labor market, and without the benefit of a competitive compensation structure or a prestigious faculty to enhance its reputation.

There are four broad ways to develop a paragraph:

- By illustration – use of example or analogy
- By comparison or contrast
- By discussion of cause and effect
- By classification – description of a class or process grouping.

Usually, the nature of the subject under discussion will dictate the way the paragraph should be developed, but it is well to be aware of the variety of techniques that are available to you and to know which one you are using so that you can exploit all its possibilities.

Here are some illustrations of these techniques:

Analogy

"Control begins by focusing on the factors that affect profit results, so those factors are what the information system should report. An analogy might be drawn with the instrument panel of an airplane. Information on airspeed, manifold vacuum, and oil pressure is given in detail. The position of the landing gear is reported by a warning light. The cleanliness of the carpeting in the cabin is not reported at all. The pilot gets the information he needs to make the flight

successful. Too many managers are worrying about the condition of the cabin carpeting because they have not determined what they need to know to fly the plane."

Contrast

"In times past – when the business was small – people worked as a team because they knew and respected each other; informal job definitions and centralized authority were not important obstacles because the management job was a more direct and personal one. Today, however, National's size makes face-to-face management an impossibility. Thus, teamwork must be achieved through efficient organization and a systematized management process – through the way jobs are defined, authority is delegated, planning is done, and decisions are made."

Cause and Effect

"In applying the provision that the bonus pool should vary according to improvements in worldwide profits, M-F has neglected the key phrase "in terms of return on investment." Straight dollar profits have been used as the financial indicator, overlooking the fact that the company's investment base has steadily increased. This procedure has led to increases in the size of the bonus pool at times when pretax return on investment has decreased."

Classification

"The program is an excellent means of developing managers. First of all, the skills in factual analysis and persuasive presentation developed on the teams are vital to successful operating decision making and administration. In addition, team members gain insight into a wide range of company operations as well as the techniques for achieving action and managing change. And last, team members develop a heightened sensitivity to the balance between cost and service – an attribute that is indispensable for profitable administration of operating areas."

SENTENCES

The sentence is the smallest grammatical unit that expresses a complete thought. Sentences come in three varieties: simple, compound, and complex.

A **simple sentence** expresses a single thought with one subject and one verb (usually expanded by an assortment of objects and modifying phrases).

Example: "Sales have soared in recent years, moving from \$50 million in 1964 to \$165 million in 1967."

A compound sentence expresses two or more independent thoughts of equal weight joined by "and," "but," or "or."

Example: "Sales have doubled in the last 5 years, and profits have grown at an equal rate."

A complex sentence expresses one independent thought and one or more subordinate or dependent thoughts. Because of the built-in thought relationship, complex sentences are particularly useful in reports and presentations that make a case for a point of view.

Example: "If the tax rate in 1965 had been the same as it was in 1969, after-tax profit would have risen only 118 percent instead of the 202 percent realized."

Be sure the sentence type you use reflects the proper thought relationship. The following sentence was written as a compound sentence, but the thoughts are not really parallel and independent.

"The medical school is a major point of strength within the University and its standards serve as a benchmark for Case."

The edited version of the sentence demonstrates that the first clause is subordinate to the second. Note how much more impact the sentence has when the proper thought relationship is established.

"So highly regarded is the medical school that its standards serve as a benchmark for the entire University."

In using complex sentences, make certain that the main thought is in the independent clause; otherwise the sentence loses its impact. For example, in the following sentence, the main thought is in the subordinate clause (the "although" clause):

"Although the chief reason for this attitude was the need for economy in shipping space, a saving in tin containers was also a consideration."

With the clauses reversed, the main thought gets the emphasis it deserves:

"Although a saving in tin containers was an important consideration, the chief reason for this attitude was the need for economy in shipping space."

Make use of the flexibility these three sentence types permit. Vary the length and type of the sentences you use:

- Simple sentences, used exclusively, omit thought relationships.
- Too many short sentences carry the reader along too fast.
- Too many compound sentences get monotonous.
- Too many long, involved sentences are hard to follow.

Pointers on Style

We have given considerable attention to how to develop the various components of a presentation so that they reflect and reinforce the logical framework of the presentation as a whole. This section presents some pointers on style to enhance the effectiveness of your formal communications – how to make sure your sentences say what you mean, how to hammer home your really key points, how to keep your language vital, and how to use Firm format.

The suggestions made in this chapter are as pertinent to the spoken word as to the written word.

CLARITY THROUGH GRAMMAR

After all the time and effort you put into preparing a report or presentation, it would be a shame if your message was not understood because of language problems. To be sure your message gets across as you intend it, pay careful attention to how you construct your sentences.

State the subject clearly to avoid confusion in the parts of the sentence that follow.

- Avoid "it is" and "there is." In the sentences below, note how much clearer the thought becomes when the subject is stated right away.
 - **Poor:** "There is so little comprehension of how a computer might help the management process among managers and executives throughout the company that they are unable to contribute to the identification or planning of new computer applications."
 - **Preferred:** "Because managers and executives throughout the company do not comprehend how a computer might help the management process, they cannot help to identify or plan new computer applications."

- Express an agent for every action. The subject of the main verb governs every verb in the sentence unless another subject is stated. Since this is so, unintentional humor can result if the wrong subject is stated, as in the first example below. The second example shows how starting out with a clear statement of the subject protects against this unfortunate result.
 - **Poor:** "Although formally adopted, we found little evidence that this policy had been carried out."
 - **Preferred:** "Although **this policy** was formally adopted, it has apparently not been carried out."
- Don't confuse subject with object. Since the subject of the main verb governs all other verbs, the first sentence below is clearly untenable. The second sentence clears up the confusion.
 - **Poor:** "In making a decision between the various alternatives, this vulnerability should be taken into consideration."
 - **Preferred:** "In making a decision between the various alternatives, the Board should take this vulnerability into consideration."

Make the verb active and descriptive to state the thought with precision.

- Limit use of the passive voice. (We often use the passive to keep the emphasis off us, but we should stay away from it as much as possible.)
 - It obscures the subject (as the previous set of examples demonstrates).
 - It lacks impact.
- Search for verbs with a message – e.g.,
 - "Strengthens" rather than "provides"
 - "Demands" rather than "involves."
- Keep verb and subject as close together as possible; otherwise the thought is hard to follow. The following sentence for example, in addition to being long-winded, is confusing. Rearranging it to bring subject and verb together helps.
 - **Poor:** "**The exercise of judgment** in giving advice on policy and in reconciling desirable but often divergent interests and objectives **is** an immensely difficult task . . ."
 - **Preferred:** "In giving advice on policy and reconciling desirable but often divergent interests and objectives, **the exercise of judgment** is an immensely difficult task."

Use modifiers with discretion to guard against diluting the thought.

- Don't rely on adjectives and adverbs for impact; build value into the verb. The first sentence below, for example, has little impact because of its weak verb and pretentious modifiers. The second sentence makes the point much more forcefully.
 - **Poor:** "Minor organization changes represent relatively ineffective solutions."
 - **Preferred:** "Minor organization changes achieve little."

STYLISTIC TECHNIQUES FOR ADDING EMPHASIS

The principle of emphasis is served primarily by making certain that the structure gives prominence to the most important ideas. However, judicious use of some stylistic techniques can help ensure that nothing really important slides past the reader or hearer. The techniques most appropriate for business writing are:

Emphasis through Placement

- At end of sentence

"The notion common to all treatments of productivity is the **relation of human input to output.**"
- At end of paragraph

"The program is an excellent means of developing managers. First of all, the skills in factual analysis and persuasive presentation developed on the teams are vital to successful operating decision making and administration. Second, team members gain insight into a wide range of company operations as well as the techniques for achieving action and managing change. And last, team members develop a heightened sensitivity to the balance between cost and service – **an attribute that is indispensable for profitable administration of operating areas.**"

Emphasis through Repetition

- "Information affluence is insidious because **it springs in part from** the most noble of men's motives – the quest to know the unknown and the unselfish desire of those around the manager to help him know. **It springs from courtesy** – the disinclination to say I consider what you

are doing irrelevant. **It springs from tradition:** "Your predecessor received this information and no doubt you will wish to receive it also." **And it springs from quiz trauma:** Just suppose somebody up there asked a question about this."

Emphasis through Change in Sentence Length or Structure

- "In the light of these changes, Massey now faces a great opportunity – and a great challenge. Instead of using incentive payments merely as a supplement to salary to bring total compensation to competitive levels, the company can now gain much more mileage from them. For incentives can be used to reinforce the development of realistic plans for the attainment of demanding corporate goals. And they can be used as a control mechanism to ensure that these plans are carried out and that goals are met. **In short, they can be an integral part of the total management process.**"

The above examples are intended to demonstrate that emphasis can be added to your writing through the placement of key phrases, through repetition of a grammatical form, or through dramatic change in sentence length or structure. I have used bold type in this section to identify the portions of the example that illustrate the point being made. The emphasis would be perceived without the bolding. In fact, in good writing, bolding is seldom if ever needed.

SUGGESTIONS ON USAGE

This section discusses the use of language for effects over and above the force of logic. If you pay attention to the pointers in this section, your writing is likely to be clear and easy to read.

1. Be consistent in your use of language – particularly with regard to:
 - a. Tense – unless the narrative moves from one point in time to another, stay with the same tense.
 - **Poor:** "Although incentive plans **can be applied** in any industry, they have functioned most successfully in situations where . . . "
 - **Preferred:** "Although incentive plans **can be applied** in any industry, they **function** most successfully in situations where . . . "
 - b. Person – don't flit from "we" to "one" or "the company" to "you." Remain constant about who is talking and who is being talked about.

c. Construction – use parallel forms to express parallel thoughts. Care with constructions like these is a good discipline for logic. Even more important, however, it gives each point the weight it needs, as the following examples demonstrate.

- **Poor:** "The implementation plan specifies the steps to be taken, timing, and who should be responsible for each step."
- **Preferred:** "The implementation plan specifies **what** steps are to be taken, **what** their timing will be, and **who** should be responsible for each step."

2. Strive for precise words when using modifiers. Avoid vague terms like "significant," "substantial," "major," "largely," "virtually." All these words do is show the uncertainty of the writer.

3. Place modifiers like "both," "only," "either," and "neither" right next to the word or phrase they modify.

"Plans for new facilities **only** exist in the minds of senior managers."

"This phase ensures **both** that there is clear understanding of how the new structure is to operate and a commitment to make it succeed."

4. Build in variety through the words you choose. The cliché is the fast and easy way to write. It is stultifying, though, to reader and writer alike. Even more to the point, the cliché is liable to be a loose fit for the thought. So take the time to find the precise word; what you lose in expediency you more than make up in effectiveness. Listed below are some of the most popular clichés I find in the writing I see. Alongside this list is a sample of the many words that might be used in their place.

Cliché	Possibilities
approach	method, practice, course (of action) route, means
concept	idea, principle, theory
area	sphere, scope, field
gear	adjust, tailor, fit, suit, adapt
aspect	element, feature, factor, view, characteristic, facet

5. Guard against unnecessary, overly elegant or fad words. A document larded with expressions like those listed below is ponderous reading. Even more serious, it pontificates. And since few people are receptive to lectures, it fails in its purpose – which is to communicate and persuade.

- Superfluous words

Replace	With
as to whether	
whether or not	
in order to	
in connection with	
in relation to	
in regard to	
with respect to	
	with, about, for, on

- Affectation

Replace	With
dialogue	talks, discussions
utilize	use
maximize	increase, make the most of
represent	are
prior to	before
optimum	best

- Jargon and fad words – i.e., assigning special meanings to words or forming word combinations that have a meaning not readily apparent

Decision variables
responsibility accounting
management by exception
critical path
synergy
entrepreneurial
leverage
caveat

On occasion, finding the right way to say something may result in more words than the cliché or jargon would have used. This may seem to violate the axiom that good writing is concise, but it doesn't really. To leave a thought obscure in the name of brevity violates common sense. The key to the effective use of the written word is not economy, but productivity. Good writing gets the greatest possible impact from the words employed. The following two sentences have the same number of words. Compare them for impact.

- "A period of unfavorable weather set in."
 - "It rained every day for a week."

THE LOGIC OF FIRM FORMATION

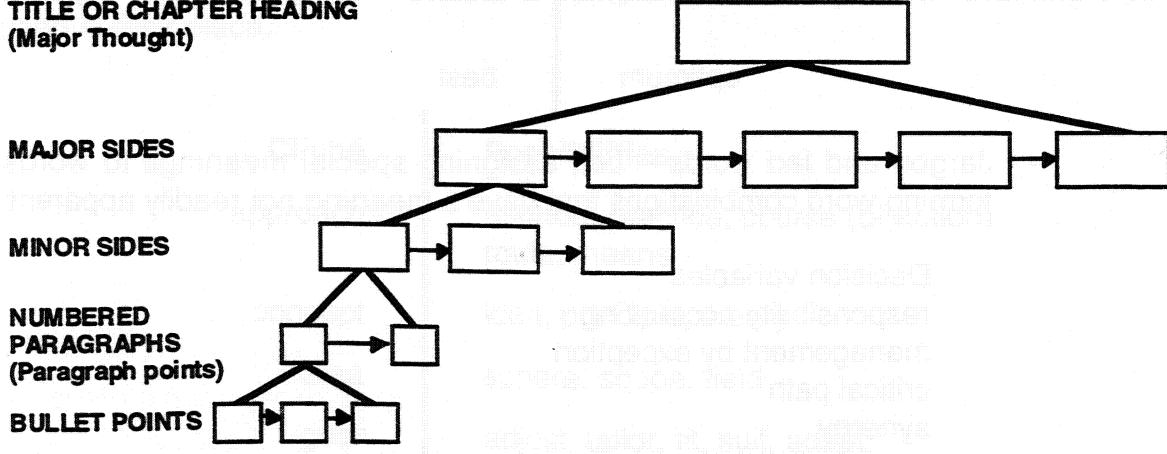
The inventor of Firm Format was well aware of the single thought principle. He set things up so that we can, if we wish, employ a visual signal of each level of the pyramid (Exhibit 14).

- Chapter titles – state the governing thought of the chapter
 - Major sides – announce the main blocks of thought to be discussed
 - Minor sides – subdivide the major sides
 - Paragraph points and bullets (or numbers and letters) – provide further subdivisions if desired.

Exhibit 14

FIRM FORMAT INDICATES DIVISIONS OF THOUGHT

TITLE OR CHAPTER HEADING (Major Thought)



Proper use of Firm Format reinforces the pyramid approach to structure. Exhibit 15 shows what the elements of format look like and explains the function of each element.

1 This is an example of a chapter heading

Chapter headings are numbered and should be worded to reflect the major thought to be developed. The paragraphs immediately following begin at the left margin. They should express the major idea clearly, supply whatever other information the reader requires to understand what you are about to tell him, and indicate how you plan to develop the story line. Subsequent chapter headings should be written in parallel style.

The major divisions of thought you plan to have may be described in sentence form or set out with paragraph points at the first indent:

- ¶ Topic of first major to come
- ¶ Topic of second major to come.

MAJOR HEADING

Major headings are normally the first division used. Their wording should reflect the idea to be developed in the section to follow, and the wording of the first should parallel that of the others. A major heading can be further divided either into minor headings or, if the points are short, into numbered paragraphs. If you use minor headings they must be introduced:

- ¶ Topic of first minor to come
- ¶ Topic of second minor to come.

Minor heading

Like all headings, minors should be worded to reflect the governing thought and expressed in parallel style. If you wish to further divide in a minor section, use numbered paragraphs.

1. **Numbered paragraph.** A numbered paragraph is blocked at the left margin and the first sentence or opening phrase is bold to highlight the similarity of the points being numbered.

If the point to be made requires more than one paragraph, the first word of the succeeding paragraph(s) should be blocked at the left margin; try to limit the development of the point to three paragraphs.

Besides these devices for dividing thoughts, we have four other indents marked with preceding symbols: paragraph point (¶), bullet (•), dash (–), and dot (.).

- ¶ The paragraph point is used to set out lists or brief points. The symbol is typed at the first indent and the text at the second indent in blocked form.
- The 10 point bullet is used for subdivisions of paragraph points. The text for bullets is typed at the third indent in blocked form and should be kept as short as possible.
 - The en dash is used for subdivisions of bullets also in blocked form.

You seldom break an idea down as far as this, but when you do, the 6 point dot and text look like this.

- ¶ Numbers and letters are used when the order of the paragraphs is relevant.

The symbols are effective devices for giving visual emphasis to important points. They must be used sparingly, however, or the effect is lost. Furthermore, overdependence on listing measures like these often causes the writer to miss thought relationships that should be made explicit. To aid you in using Firm Format, this section provides tips on how to get the most from headings and outline form.

HEADINGS

Headings serve as signposts for the reader and the writer. They tell the readers what they are going to be reading about and thus make their reading job easier. They make the writing job easier, too, if the writer uses them to map out a route and then follows that route.

Headings add impact to a discussion if they are written to provide a skeletal outline of the report. To get the greatest value from headings:

1. Suggest a complete thought to aid comprehension.
2. Stay with the same grammatical form for all headings at the same level of abstraction (e.g., all major sides) to provide a check on the logic flow.
3. Prepare the readers for headings to help them follow the line of discussion (Exhibit 16).

Exhibit 16

To put subsequent comments into perspective, therefore, it is appropriate to review briefly both sides of the coin. Thus, this chapter assesses the company's data processing activities in terms of:

- ¶ Benefits realized
- ¶ Opportunities missed.

BENEFITS REALIZED

Headings are visual guides only; they do not advance the narrative. Their message must be repeated – in different words if possible – at the beginning of the section.

OUTLINE FORM

McKinsey format includes an expanded outline form that has multiple uses. Obviously, it comes in handy for organizing a report. It is also good for discussion outlines, which are used frequently for progress review meetings with clients.

McKinsey outline form is an excellent forcing device for developing a logical flow of thought. Since the format provides a vehicle for various degrees of subordination in detail, it aids in focusing on main ideas. Exhibit 17 demonstrates outline form while explaining its elements.

Using McKinsey Outline Form as an Aid to Logical Presentation

Properly used, Firm outline form serves as a test of the logic of your argument:

- ¶ It forces you to limit each statement to the idea that is key to that portion of the story line
- ¶ Its visual aspect provides an easy check on the structure of your presentation.

Each element performs a specific function in the development of an idea:

- ¶ The block point expresses the central idea or governing thought
- ¶ The paragraph point develops the thought
- ¶ The bullet point contains supporting information – e.g., quotes, examples.

Thus, the three degrees of indentation are an excellent mechanism for charting thought relationships:

- ¶ You should be able to read from block point to block point and get a clear idea of the argument.
 - If the block points do not proceed directly from your assumption to your conclusion, your logic is faulty.
 - Gaps or irrelevancies are signals of faulty structure.
- ¶ You should be able to track each thought in a grouping directly back to the thought governing the grouping.
 - Each paragraph point should relate to its block point.
 - Each bullet point should relate to its paragraph point.
- ¶ You should be able to use the same grammatical construction for each subpoint.
 - Any subpoint that defies parallel construction is probably in the wrong place.
 - Rethinking the logic is a better use of time than playing games with grammar.

Summary

The structural approach to preparing a report or presentation boils down to the following points:

1. Think about the "big picture" before starting to write.
 - a. Decide the main message you want your readers to carry away with them (governing thought).
 - b. Determine the key points (no more than three or four) that you need to make to drive home the message. (These will be conclusions at a relatively high level of abstraction.)
 - c. Formulate your story line around these key points, using the form most appropriate to the situation (logical argument or logical grouping).
2. State a governing thought (an assertion) for each section (all the way down to the paragraph level) and use that thought as the point of departure for everything in the section.
 - a. That governing thought should define your "universe of discourse" so that the reader has a feeling for the whole and can relate the parts you discuss to that whole.
 - b. The assertion should be dynamic, pointing the way to another thought at the same level of abstraction.
3. When deciding where a given fact or set of facts should go, think about where you can use it to lead to a conclusion at some higher level of abstraction.
 - a. Avoid description for its own sake – even if information is vital, make it work.
 - b. If information is irrelevant to the message, put it in an appendix.
4. Always give the readers a clear idea of where you're leading them – that is, whenever possible, start with your governing thought rather than leading up to it.

Those interested in reading in greater depth about the principles and techniques outlined in this guide are directed to the following sources, from which much of the material was derived.

Fundamentals Of Good Writing, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Harcourt, Brace & Co.

The Logic And Rhetoric Of Exposition, Harold C. Martin and Richard M. Ohmann, Holt, Rinehart & Winston

The Pyramid Principle, Barbara Minto, 19 Cadogan Place, London SWIX 95A

The Elements Of Style, William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White, MacMillan Publishing Co.

Design For Thinking, Albert Upton, Stanford University Press