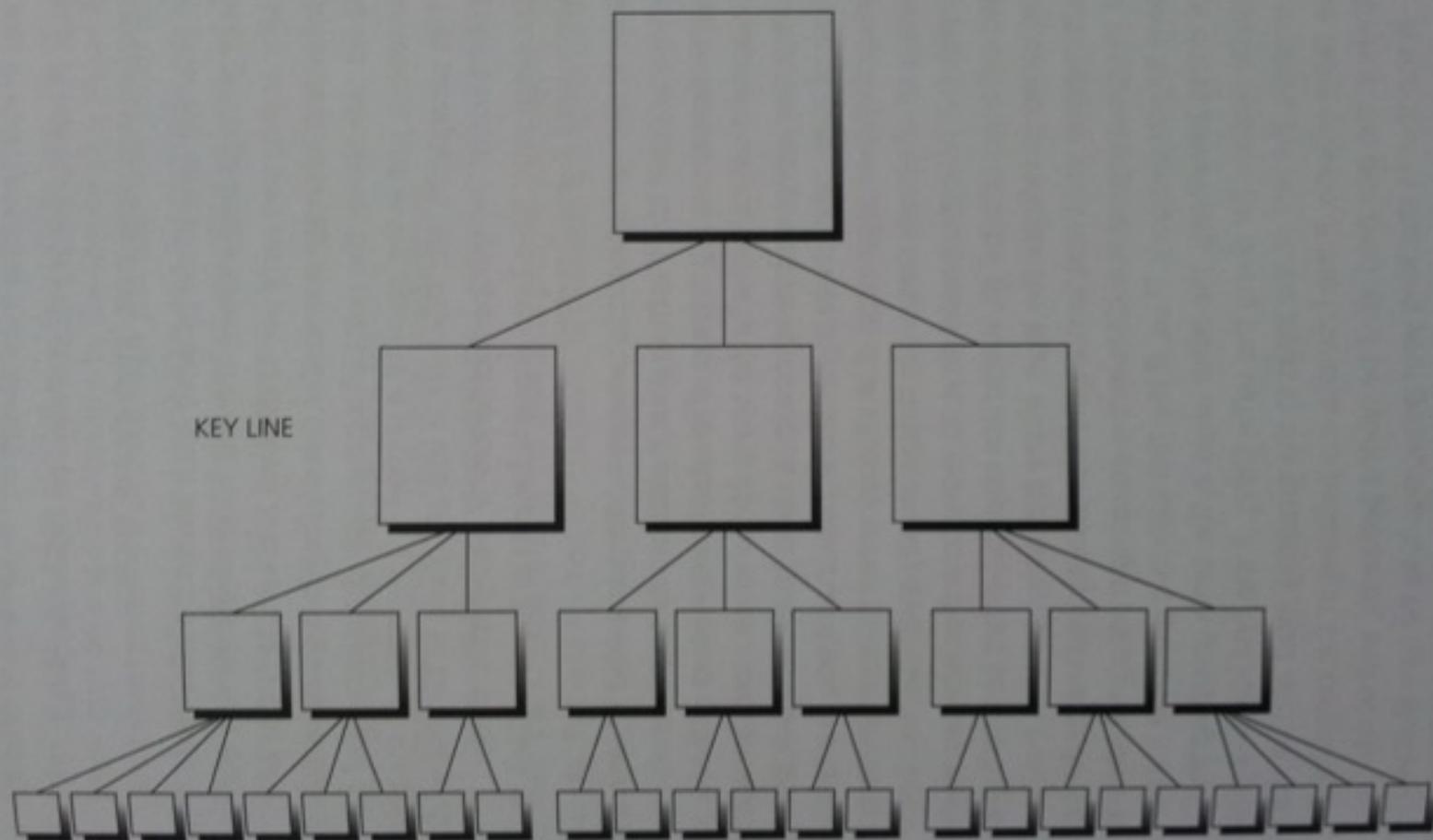# THE PYRAMID PRINCIPLE

Logic in Writing and Thinking

BARBARA MINTO

Exhibit 1 Ideas in writing should always form a pyramid under a single thought

KEY LINE

Barbara Minto

In 1961 she left Mr. Eaton to attend the Harvard Business School, returning to Cleveland in 1963 to join McKinsey & Company, the interna-

However, it became apparent to her very quickly that the writing difficulties in Düsseldorf and Paris were the same as those in New York and Cleveland. The problem was not so much to get the language right as to get the thinking clear. This insight led her to concentrate on discovering the structures of thinking that must underlie clear writing, and eventually to develop the ideas that make up this book.

The thing you need to remember today…
 The **three rules** to build a pyramid

1. **Ideas at any level** in the pyramid must always be **summaries** of the ideas grouped below them.

2. Ideas in each grouping must always be the **same kind** of idea

3. Ideas in each grouping must always be **logically ordered**.

HOW TO BUILD A

PYRAMID STRUCTURE

Chapter 3

THE WRITING CHALLENGE

THE PROBLEM

You know roughly what to write about,
but not specifically what to say
or how to say it.

This sense of uncertainty is hardly enhanced by
knowing that the ideas you eventually put down,
whatever they be, **must end up forming a pyramid.**

WHAT YOU DO KNOW

- A top sentence: subject + predicate

- The subject of the document

- The question in the reader's mind

- The situation & complication that raised it

- Roughly some points you want to make

THAT'S QUITE A BIT TO KNOW. USE IT.

TWO WAYS TO BUILD YOUR PYRAMID

TOP-DOWN ↓

Start with your answer
and build supporting logic downward.

BEST WHEN:
· Your subject is clear
· You can visualize the reader
· You have an initial answer

PROCESS:
Subject → Q → A →
Situation → Complication → Key Line

OR

BOTTOM-UP ↑

Start with your points
and synthesize upward.

BEST WHEN:
· Subject is unclear
· Question isn't obvious
· Reader knowledge uncertain

3 STEPS:
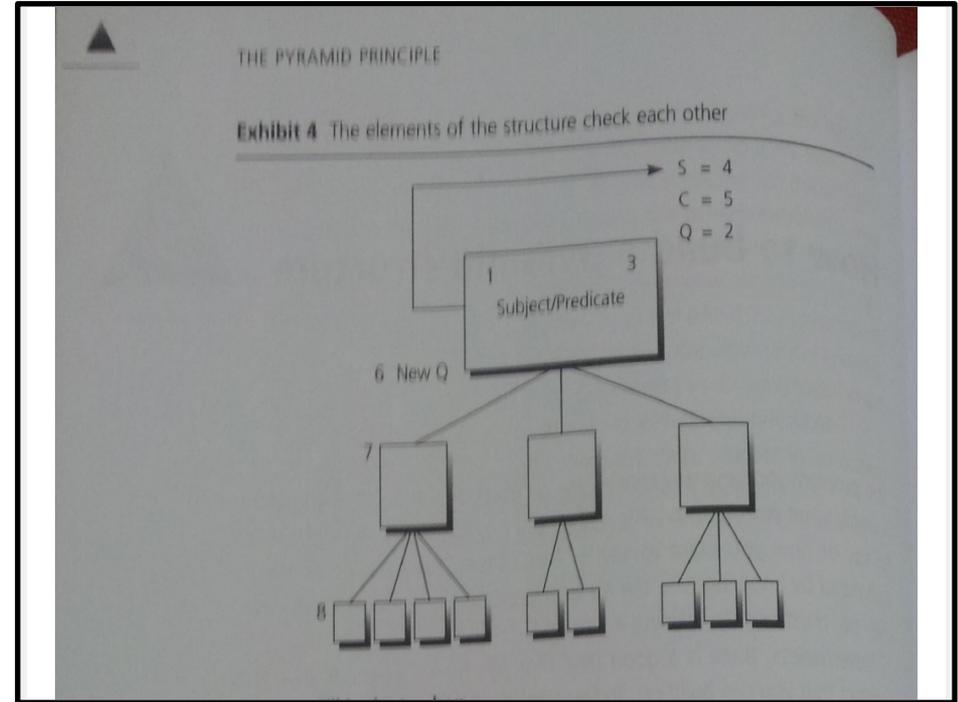1. List all points
2. Work out relationships
3. Draw conclusions

THE TOP-DOWN APPROACH: 8-STEP PROCESS

■ BLACK = FILL TOP BOX   ■ RED = MATCH TO INTRO   ■ GRAY = FIND & STRUCTURE

EXHIBIT 4 — THE ELEMENTS OF THE STRUCTURE CHECK EACH OTHER

1 Draw a box and write the Subject

2 Decide the Question in the reader's mind

3 Write down the Answer (if known)

4 Identify the Situation (noncontroversial)

5 Develop the Complication ('So what?')

6 Recheck: does Complication raise your Question?

7 Find the Key Line (deductive or inductive)

8 Structure the support points at each level

THE PYRAMID PRINCIPLE

Exhibit 4 The elements of the structure check each other

S = 4
C = 5
Q = 2

1   3
Subject/Predicate

6 New Q

7

8

CASE STUDY: THE BIG CHIEF MEMORANDUM

Big Chief (a hamburger chain) requested a billing system change. The Accounting Dept was asked if it was feasible. The original memo described the new system without actually answering the question.

1 Draw a box and write the Subject

2 Decide the Question in the reader's mind

3 Write down the Answer (if known)

4 Identify the Situation (noncontroversial)

5 Develop the Complication ('So what?')

6 Recheck: does Complication raise your Question?

SUBJECT	Q = QUESTION	A = ANSWER
billing procedure should change	Should it change?	Yes, and here's why

S = SITUATION	C = COMPLICATION

CASE STUDY: THE BIG CHIEF MEMORANDUM

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SUBJECT

billing procedure should change

Q = QUESTION

Should it change?

A = ANSWER

Yes, and here's why

S = SITUATION

They requested a change in the billing procedure

C = COMPLICATION

You asked whether it makes sense

7 Find the Key Line (deductive or inductive). This is the main conclusion. It answers the reader's question.

Q = QUESTION

Should it change?

7 Find the Key Line (deductive or inductive). This is the main conclusion. It answers the reader's question.

Q = QUESTION

Should it change?

KEY LINE | NQ = Why? → Will give us all the information we need | Will increase our cash flow | Will reduce our workload

EXHIBIT 6: BIG CHIEF — RESTRUCTURED PYRAMID

BC REQUEST FOR CHANGE IN BILLING SYSTEM IS A GOOD IDEA

NQ = WHY?

Will give us all the information we need	Will increase our cash flow	Will reduce our workload

S = They requested a change   **C =** You asked if it makes sense

Q = Does it make sense?   **A =** Yes — it's a good idea

THE TECHNIQUE FORCES YOU TO PULL ONLY RELEVANT INFORMATION.

THE BOTTOM-UP APPROACH

USE THIS WHEN YOU CAN'T PIN DOWN YOUR SUBJECT, QUESTION, OR THE READER'S KNOWLEDGE.

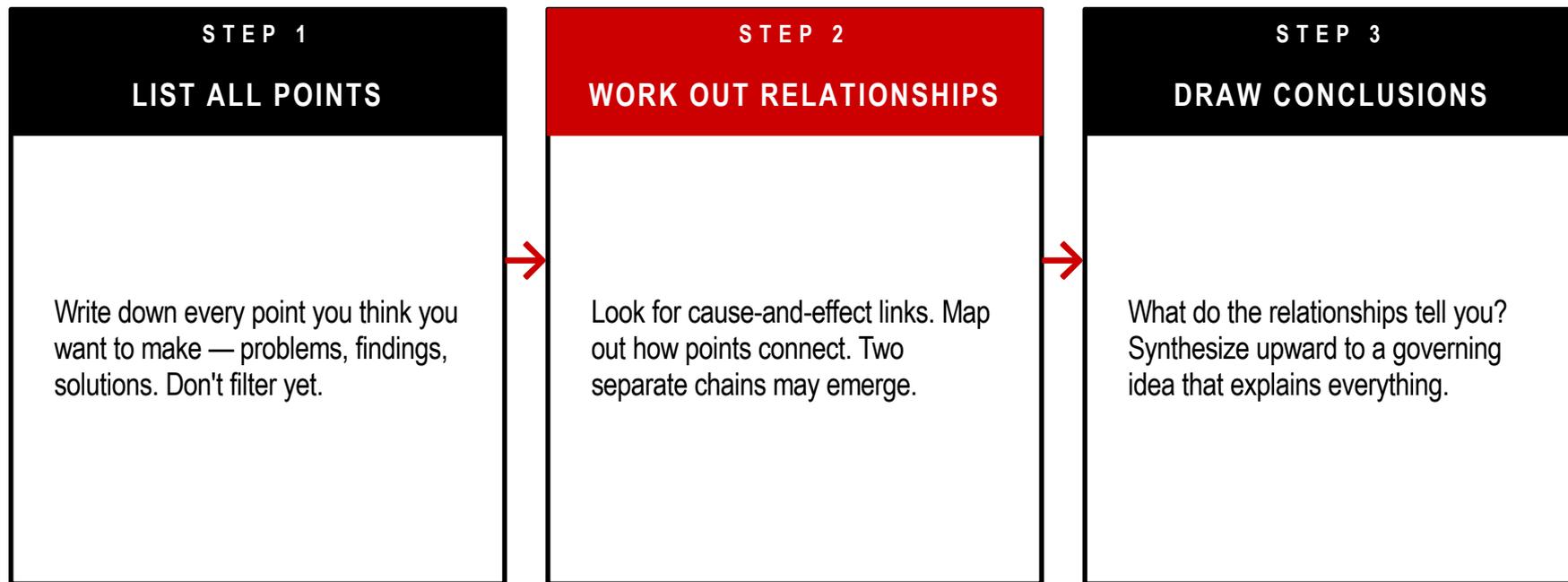| STEP 1	STEP 2	STEP 3
LIST ALL POINTS	**WORK OUT RELATIONSHIPS**	**DRAW CONCLUSIONS**
Write down every point you think you want to make — problems, findings, solutions. Don't filter yet.	Look for cause-and-effect links. Map out how points connect. Two separate chains may emerge.	What do the relationships tell you? Synthesize upward to a governing idea that explains everything.

EXHIBIT 8 SHOWS THIS APPLIED TO THE TTW MEMORANDUM →

CASE STUDY: THE TTW MEMORANDUM (BOTTOM-UP)

Write down every point you think you want to make: problems, findings, solutions. Don't filter yet.

TTW is a printing company. The composing room (the department that prepares text before printing) has very high costs. Managers notice several issues in the department.

ALWAYS GO TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS FIRST — THEY ARE EASIER TO VALIDATE.

STEP 1

LIST ALL POINTS

Write down every point you think you want to make: problems, findings, solutions. Don't filter yet.

8 Points:

1. Low productivity in composing
2. Same steps used for every job
3. Uncompetitive prices for simple jobs
4. The department is often behind schedule
5. Workers are paid low wages
6. There is a shortage of staff
7. Employees work a lot of overtime
8. Workers are below PAR in setting and hand composition

CASE STUDY: THE TTW MEMORANDUM (BOTTOM-UP)

Write down every point you think you want to make: problems, findings, solutions. Don't filter yet.

8 Points:

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"Are these problems connected, or are they separate?"

THE BOTTOM-UP APPROACH

STEP 2

WORK OUT RELATIONSHIPS

Look for cause-and-effect links. Map out how points connect. Two separate chains may emerge.

8 Points:

1. Low productivity in composing
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THE BOTTOM-UP APPROACH

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THE BOTTOM-UP APPROACH

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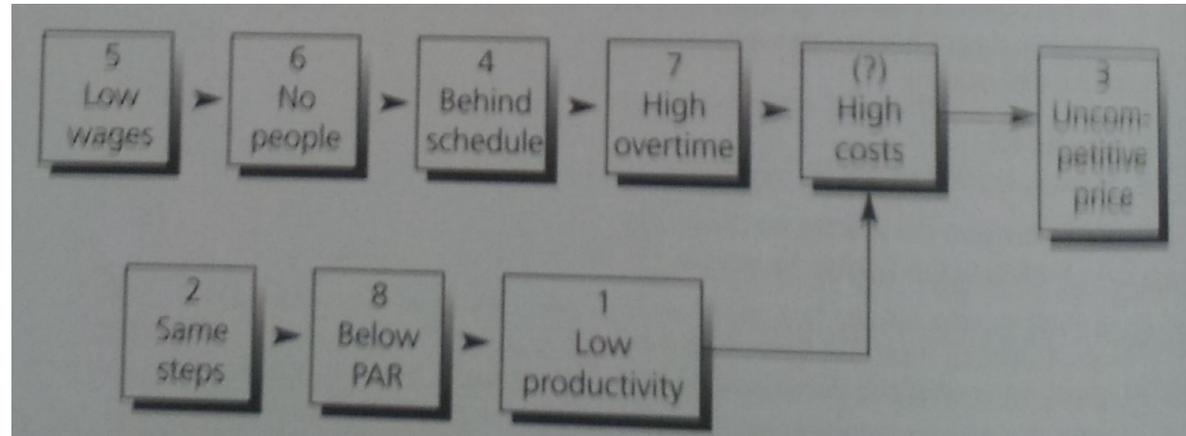EXHIBIT 8 SHOWS THIS APPLIED TO THE TTW MEMORANDUM →

THE BOTTOM-UP APPROACH

STEP 3

DRAW CONCLUSIONS

What do the relationships tell you? Synthesize upward to a governing idea that explains everything.

Based on the relationships,
what are the main causes of the high costs?

EXHIBIT 8 SHOWS THIS APPLIED TO THE TTW MEMORANDUM →

STEP 3

DRAW CONCLUSIONS

What do the relationships tell you? Synthesize upward to a governing idea that explains everything.

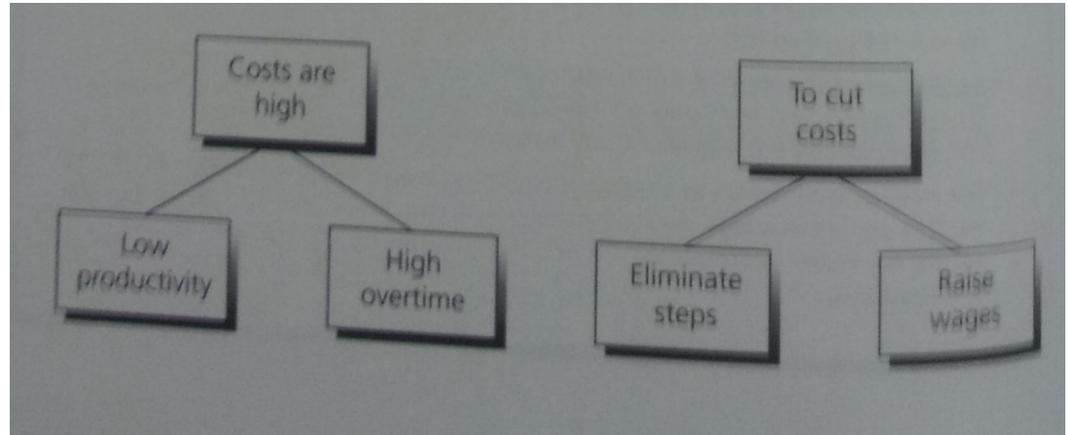EXHIBIT 8 SHOWS THIS APPLIED TO THE TTW MEMORANDUM →

BEFORE VS. AFTER: THE TTW MEMO

✕ BEFORE (ORIGINAL)

· Starts with a data dump on composing costs

· Compares TTW to PAR — buries the finding

· Lists facts about union, wages, overtime separately

· Conclusions appear at the END after 4 paragraphs

· Reader can't grasp the message in 30 seconds

RESULT: *Confusing. No clear answer upfront.*

→

✓ AFTER (REWRITTEN)

· Opens with context (Situation)

· States upfront: costs could be cut by two methods

· Section headings = KEY LINE IDEAS (not categories)

· Each section backs up one key reason

· Entire argument visible in first 30 seconds

RESULT: *Reader sees the answer immediately.*

IF YOUR THINKING IS NOT CLEAR IN THE READER'S FIRST 30 SECONDS, YOU SHOULD REWRITE.

SIX CAVEATS FOR BEGINNERS

1

ALWAYS TRY TOP-DOWN FIRST

Ideas written down take on permanence. Don't dictate the whole doc — you'll fall in love with disjointed thinking.

2

USE THE SITUATION AS YOUR STARTING POINT

Think intro in order: Situation → Complication → Question → Answer. This produces the best Complication.

Before next lecture you should read:

The Pyramid Principle
Chapter 1: "Why a pyramid structure"
Chapter 3: "How to build a pyramid structure"

Take-home exercise: redo your pyramid