The Pyramid Principle

Barbara Minto developed the Pyramid Principle while working at the consulting firm McKinsey & Company, and she later explained it in her book of the same name. Her idea is simple: busy readers understand a message faster when it starts with the main point, followed by the reasons that support it. The ideas are arranged like a pyramid, with one key message at the top and the supporting ideas below it. The method has four parts: start with the answer, group the supporting ideas, order each group logically, and introduce the message with situation, complication and question. Consultants, managers and analysts use it for emails, reports and presentations.

1. Start with the Answer

Many of us write in the order in which we did the work: background first, analysis next, and the conclusion at the very end. The Pyramid Principle turns this around and puts the main point at the top. A busy reader then knows in the first lines what we recommend or conclude. Everything that follows only explains or proves that point. If the reader stops early, the most important message has still arrived.

Example: A friend asks how the job interview went. Following the rule to start with the answer, we say: I got the job, and I start next month. The details about the questions and the interviewers can come afterwards.

At work: Karim, a logistics analyst, must tell his director whether the company should change its courier. He starts with the answer in the first line of his email: we should switch to the new courier from next month. The director understands the decision at once and reads on for the reasons.

2. Group the Supporting Ideas

Below the main point, we place the key ideas that support it, usually between two and five. Each idea at a higher level must summarise the ideas grouped below it. The ideas in one group must be of the same kind, such as all reasons, all steps or all problems. They should not overlap, and together they should cover everything important. Grouping helps because readers find it hard to remember a long list of separate points.

Example: Before a trip, a list of twenty things to pack is hard to remember. When we group the supporting ideas into clothes, documents and electronics, the list becomes easy to check. Nothing is forgotten at the airport.

At work: Karim has eleven separate facts about the two couriers. He groups the supporting ideas under three reasons: the new courier is cheaper, faster and more reliable. Each reason now summarises the facts below it, and the director remembers all three.

This document is a property of Asaseeyat Academy - © Copy Right Protected.

3. Order Each Group Logically

The ideas inside each group also need a clear order, so that the reader can follow them easily. Minto described three main kinds of logical order. Time order follows steps or events from first to last. Structure order follows the parts of something, such as regions or departments. Degree order puts the most important idea first, then the next one, and so on.

Example: A recipe that mixes up its steps is hard to follow. When the cook orders the group logically by time, from preparing to cooking to serving, anyone can follow it. The meal turns out well the first time.

At work: Karim orders his three reasons logically, by degree of importance for the director. Cost comes first, then speed, then reliability. The director sees the strongest argument first, and he is ready to read the full comparison.

4. Introduce with SCQ

Before the answer, a short introduction reminds the reader why the message matters. Minto suggested a simple story in three steps: situation, complication and question, often shortened to SCQ. The situation is what the reader already knows and accepts. The complication is what has changed or gone wrong. The question is the one that the reader now naturally asks, and our answer at the top of the pyramid replies to it.

Example: A neighbour introduces a request with SCQ: we all park in the same street, but since last month there are not enough places, so how can we share them fairly? The answer, a simple parking plan, is accepted quickly.

At work: Karim opens his email with SCQ: our deliveries have always gone through one courier company. Since the summer, many deliveries have arrived late. So should we change our courier? The answer follows at once: yes, we should switch to the new courier from next month.

Conclusion

In summary, the Pyramid Principle has four parts: start with the answer, group the supporting ideas, order each group logically, and introduce with situation, complication and question. Together they turn a long list of facts into a clear message that busy people can understand in seconds. The method works for emails, reports, presentations and even short conversations. Before we write, it helps to ask what our main point is and which ideas support it. A clear pyramid of thinking leads to clear writing.

Sources

- Barbara Minto: The Minto Pyramid Principle – https://www.barbaraminto.com/concept
- Minto, B. (1987, revised 1996). The Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing and Thinking.
- Monash University: Business paper using the Minto approach – https://www.monash.edu/student-academic-success/excel-at-writing/how-to-write/business-paper-using-the-minto-approach

- The Minto Pyramid Principle® is a registered trademark and SCQ Framework℠ a service mark of Barbara Minto (Minto Books International).

This document is a property of Asaseeyat Academy - © Copy Right Protected.