



The Minto Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing, Thinking and Problem Solving

Barbara Minto

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This work has been designed as an aid to the logical presentation of business communications. Topics covered range from the difference between deductive and inductive reasoning, to a discussion of how to highlight the structure of information.

The Minto Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing, Thinking and Problem Solving Details

Date : Published May 28th 1996 by Minto Int. (first published June 28th 1987)

ISBN : 9780960191048

Author : Barbara Minto

Format : Paperback 254 pages

Genre : Business, Nonfiction, Language, Writing, Management, Communication



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From Reader Review The Minto Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing, Thinking and Problem Solving for online ebook

Adam Rabiner says

I finally got to this book after many years of having it sit on my shelf. I don't think it has aged very well. It's well written (as a book on logical and good thinking and writing should be) but in an age of iPhone apps and software I am not certain that a book is the best tool for practicing the Pyramid Principle. There's too much reading and not enough doing and practice. The early chapters are easier to comprehend. Some of the later chapters are particularly dense and harder to follow. While there's knowledge to be gained here, I think Minto needs to hire a clever programmer, use new, more contemporary examples, and get with the 21st century.

Randy says

This is my all time favorite book on persuasive writing. As of this review date, I have read the book thirteen times. My goal for this abundant contact has been to super learn the concepts, which are otherwise difficult to perceive with only passing exposure.

I came upon this book in 1994 when my partner's girlfriend who was then the librarian at McKinsey and Company (NYC), the world famous management consultancy, lent the book to me, saying that it was considered the "Bible" of writing process at the firm. Barbara Minto created this masterpiece of thought leadership while employed there and then moved on to teach these concepts globally to most of the major consulting firms and to many of the Fortune 100.

The book teaches readers how to shape ideas into a disciplined order. Done correctly, this enables writers to communicate powerfully with future readers so that they can identify those communicated ideas--regardless of whether or not they ultimately agree with them--quickly and easily.

The book is targeted to the experienced and knowledgeable business reader, which makes the concepts difficult to grasp for the uninitiated. Much can be gleaned from the first couple of chapters, however, even for those with little business knowledge or vocabulary. And with perseverance and multiple read-throughs the concepts become easier and easier to assimilate. Obviously, I believe that multiple exposures to it is well rewarded in the end.

Fabio Moioli says

A superb book with many valuable recommendations and tips for writing well-structured business documents. The framework described in it is highly effective in any non-narrative writing and it is used in most top-class consultancy firms.

The book is also good for gaining some insight on hypothesis-led problem solving, both in the case of inductive and in the case of deductive reasoning. In this respect, it is full of examples that challenge unstructured and unorganized thinking and writing.

It may be useful to complement it with other books on creative thinking (e.g. Edward De Bono's), mind-maps (e.g. Tony Buzan's), and psycho-linguistic approaches (e.g. NLP, TA, etc.)

loafingcactus says

As a philosophy major, I appreciate how Minto has provided an efficient presentation of concepts of argumentation that one could spend a lifetime learning from the long history of available scholarship. As an MBA student, I see that the book is too complicated and too cumbersome to be useful to my peers. This is a book that requires focused study, and my peers have neither the bandwidth nor the necessary background to do that.

How I found out about this book was at a business writing seminar that was excellent. The instructor reported that he had interviewed various executives about what was most important in communication, and this book kept coming up. He taught the course entirely from principles contained in this book. It takes a translator like that for business people to get the most out of this book.

Therefore, I really recommend it to corporate trainers. As for business people, it would only be useful if it were part of a study circle or something like this which would force you to spend enough time with the book and to acquire the necessary additional resources in logic and rhetoric.

C. says

Very simple but powerful method of putting a little structure into your thoughts so that you can weave a compelling story for your audience. I'd recommend it for anyone who wants to broaden their skills in presentation and make their writing more succinct.

Loïc says

Un livre dont le sujet semble au premier abord "simplement" la structuration de la pensée, avec pour objectif de mieux présenter les idées lors d'une présentation (orale ou écrite), afin de rendre celles-ci plus divertissantes et plus intéressantes.

En réalité, on se rend rapidement compte qu'il ne s'agit pas "que" de cela. En fait, il s'agit du processus clé utilisé par les consultants en stratégie pour résoudre les problèmes présentés par leurs clients. En effet, Minto, en déconstruisant les processus de pensée, nous montre que c'est exactement ce processus qui permet d'arriver à la solution: en identifiant clairement la situation, la complication, et la question, puis en analysant comment ceux-ci sont structurés de manière MECE (mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive), on remonte presque "automatiquement" à la façon de résoudre le problème.

Bien que le livre aille plus loin, avec notamment des discussions sur les raisonnements inductifs et déductifs, sa valeur pour moi a surtout résidé en la répétition de concepts que je connaissais déjà (MECE-ness, description claire du problème et des objectifs...) mais "ça va mieux en le disant".

Je recommande grandement ce livre pour les consultants en premier lieu, car ce sont eux qui se retrouvent confrontés le plus souvent aux problématiques abordées dans le livre. Et quand on a la tête dans le guidon, on a tendance à oublier de pratiquer ces principes simples mais qui apportent tant d'efficacité.

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David R. says

There's a nugget of a very good technique here, but the illustrative and diagnostic material is often obscure and difficult to follow. Some executives will become excited at the goal of this book, no doubt, but in the insufficient inertia will be generated to move beyond the fad phase.

Chikai Huang says

Why isn't this a school text book?!

Cecily says

A generation ago, this was an important bestselling book about structured informational writing. It shows how to organise information clearly and persuasively. Nowadays, it is of historical interest, more than practical use.

Start with your Conclusion

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

That is the main concept of this. It's one long known and followed by any competent journalist, but equally applicable in business and technical writing.

Image: Rob Atkinson's illustration

In practice:

1. Start with the answer: the top of the pyramid summarises what's below.
2. Group and summarise supporting arguments: the same kind of idea in each group.
3. Logically order supporting ideas within each group.
 - Time: use to show cause and effect sequence.
 - Structural: break a singular thought into components.
 - Degree: rank from most to least important.

General Tips

The magic number of ideas in a group is three.

Seven plus or minus two is the max ideas one can hold in short-term memory - George A Miller

Introduction should tell a story:

1. Situation
2. Complication
3. Solution (question and answer)

Q&A dialogue:

1. Topic - what is subject/question?
2. Various answers below
3. Lead to next level questions (can also refer back up)

Deduction and Induction

There's also a whole chapter on the differences between deductive and inductive reasoning. I confess I didn't really get it:

- Deduction leads from a summary to a "therefore" conclusion. The points derive from each other.
- Induction starts with facts or ideas that are defined as similar or related in some way and then explains that sameness.

Most of us default to deductive. Inductive is more creative, but it is harder to do well.

Old-Fashioned

My edition is from 2002, which looks identical to the latest on Amazon from 2009. But it reads like a book from 1987, when it was first published.

Back then, word-processing barely existed, let alone templates and stylesheets, with multi-level headings, dozens of fonts, and myriad formatting effects. The pages here would have looked clear and innovative, with navigation cues of headings, numbers, indents, shading, and lots of diagram. Nowadays, the advice about headings, fonts, and numberings is too simple, basic, and out of date.

Being old is not an excuse for a technical book lacking an index. (Pet hate.)

What This is Not

It's about documents: analyses, reports, reviews, proposals, presentations, and memos. There is no advice about **delivering** presentations, let alone the dreaded PowerPoint, which was released the same year as this book.

If you want tips on creating and delivering presentations, try:

- Andrew Lightheart's Presentation Now
- Tim Stockil's Start With An Earthquake

Utkarsh Modi says

Book # 36 The Minto Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing Thinking and Problem Solving

I chanced upon this book (one of the early 1989 editions) from an ex-consultant friend. Cursory glances on virtual bookshelves and passing references about it in other readings aside, I had expected the book to be a bland textbook manual instructing you about what you already know - in one way it is - and in more than one ways I was wrong.

Barbara Minto - an ex McKinsey consultant, documents a well defined structure to logical thinking and more so presenting it - relevant more so in this day and age of ever so shorter attention spans amidst the information deluge. The central theme of the book talks about the 'Pyramid Principle' which advocates that "ideas in writing should always form a pyramid under a single thought." The single thought is the answer to the main question. Underneath the single thought, you are supposed to group and summarize the next level of supporting ideas and arguments. Then, for each supporting idea or argument, break that further into more ideas or arguments until you have formed a pyramid. The Pyramid Principle teaches (to quote the book) that, "Ideas at any level in the pyramid must always be summaries of the ideas grouped below them."

The structure of the ideas in pyramid include situation, complication, question and answer. Situation is the place, people group or time of the story being told, Complication is the problem being highlighted, Question will lead to the start of the question-answer dialogue and is the main question being addressed in the discussion, and Answer is the main answer/solution to the question. What I liked about the book is its presentation of how we process information - vertical and horizontal logic. Vertical logic is the question-answer dialogue and the horizontal logic is the kind of reasoning (either inductive or deductive basis your thinking pattern) you use to understand the information being presented to you.

Appears to be bland but when put in structure it makes complex situations concise, clear and more solvable. Definitely requires a re-read and practice to put in the place the ideas. Worth a read again...

Good Read.

#52BooksIn2018 #16ToGo

Brad Revell says

The Pyramid Principle is a classic book written by Barbara Minto back in the late 80s. The approach and structure of this book has survived the test of times and it is now up to its 3rd edition. I read it in the mid-2000s after it being recommended by the Manager-Tools team and recently re-read it again.

For those that struggle with business writing, Minto provides a structure on how to lay out your thoughts as well as take into consideration the reader so that you can maximise the message that gets passed to whoever consumes your work. There are a number of psychological concepts outlined in the book along with practical associations that can be leveraged when writing. Given I'm a big fan of mind-mapping I was a little dubious reading this the second time, however, it was evident how many synergies there are between the two concepts.

Three key takeaways from the book:

1. Storytelling should always revolve around the four key areas (in sequence): Situation, Complication, Question and Answer
2. Never call a heading "Findings" or "Conclusion" as they do not provide the reader with any insight
3. The problem solving process is really a simple set of 5 questions: What? Where? Why? What can we do about it? What should we do about it?

Charmin says

Highlights:

1. The structure permits you to see the flaws and omissions.
2. An idea statement raises a question in the reader's mind because you are telling him something he does not know. The writer will continue to write, raising and answering questions, until he reaches a point at which he judges the reader will have no more logical questions. The way to ensure the reader attention is to refrain from raising any question in the reader's mind before you are ready to answer them. Any point you make must raise a question in the reader's mind, you must answer it.
3. Introductory Flow – your document is of interest by directing it toward answering a question that already exists in the reader's mind, or that would exist if he thought for a minute about what is going on around him. Narrative pattern development (situation, complication, question, answer).
4. Inspire your readers to ask the question YOU wish to address.
5. Limit the introduction to what the reader will agree is true.

Kashif says

Why This Book Was Written: This is the handbook that every management or strategy consultant should keep at his/her desk.

Synthesis: Written by a McKinsey consultant, this is a legendary book that walks through how to solve problems effectively and present them using a method called Pyramid Logic pioneered by the author. This is the central framework used by the top management consultants and business analysts today. This book is probably the only guide a consultant needs to read before setting off in his journey.

Key Techniques:

- The Situation -> Complication -> Question -> Answer framework that is used at management and strategy consulting firms across the world
- How to use decision trees, PERT analysis and other diagnostic tools to break down, solve and communicate complex problems
- Inductive vs Deductive reasoning and their uses
- This is the book that introduced MECE (Mutually Exclusive and Collectively Exhaustive) thinking to the world
- Many case studies of real life consulting problems and their solutions

I would go so far as to say that this should be required reading for anyone who aspires to be a management or strategy consultant, business analyst, project manager or someone who is even remotely required to think and solve problems on a daily basis (which is most of us).

Highly, highly recommended as a handbook of effective thinking to come back to time and time again.

Richard Newton says

Oh dear. A clear example of how even the best professional books age badly.

I'm having a flurry of reading professional books right now. I can't read them all the time, so I swallow them in batches. And now it is the turn of the Pyramid Principle. For those who don't know The Pyramid Principle is one of the classic books of the consulting industry. I first came across it over 25 years ago when I was working for the consultancy A.T. Kearney. Whilst never exactly a fun read, it then seemed like good advice, well explained.

It is essentially the book that defined the way that many of the strategy firms, like McKinsey, developed presentations and documents. At least they did. They may still do so, but fortunately I don't need to know that sort of thing anymore.

The problem with the book is that reading it in 2018 it reads almost like something from the Victorian era. I exaggerate, but it just feels so old and ponderous. It was obviously written for the era of the typewriter and overhead projector. You can't help thinking Barbara Minto should hire a modern author to give it a zippy overhaul and create a book about a third the length with more punch. Another problem is it is so self certain. It does not explain this as *a way to write* - but *the one and only way to write*, which I am little doubtful of.

Reading the references is interesting, as Minto certainly picked some serious influences, including Wittgenstein, Chomsky, Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn. The influence of Popper is evident. I was less clear about how the others had influenced her book. What is noticeable is there is no reference published after 1972, and many are much older. I know this book was first published in 1978 - but I have just read the "2009 revised edition". The existence of any 21st century revisions is not evident.

The reason I still give it 3 stars rather than less, is below the long winded style and outdated examples, is some seriously good advice about how to structure your thinking and your writing. Good advice, that many modern pithy writers could heed, to make their writing clearer and have more impact. If you have the patience and stamina its worth the effort, but don't expect hours of fun.
