

**THE MINTO PYRAMID PRINCIPLE  
APPROACH TO WRITING**

# Purpose of today's presentation is to introduce you to the Minto approach to writing

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- Objective is to tell you what it is and why we should use it.
- Not meant to teach you how to do it - need to attend the Minto course for this.

# The Minto approach was developed by Barbara Minto

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- Harvard Business School graduate who joined McKinsey in 1963 as their first female consultant.
- Her ability to write was noted - transferred to London in 1966 to develop writing skills of the European staff.
- Quickly became apparent to her that writing difficulties was not so much a problem of getting the **language** right as getting the **thinking** clear. In other words, it is the order in which you present your thinking that makes your writing clear or unclear.
- This insight led her to discover the principles that underlie clear writing and to develop her Minto Pyramid Principle.
- Runs her own firm now teaching the Pyramid Principle to consulting firms, corporations, business schools.

# Objective of the Minto approach is to produce clear business writing

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- Focus is on **business** as opposed to other types of writing such as detective novels, autobiographies, travelogues, news reports, academic writing, etc.
- Main characteristics of business writing/presentations:
  - There is an **overall message** to a business document
  - Its readers are **busy people**, so they want to be able to grasp the message in the document quickly and upfront without having to wade through the whole document
  - The writing is supposed to produce appropriate decisions/actions, so message must be **easily understood**

# Approach based on thesis that the mind automatically sorts information received into a pyramidal structure

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## Assumptions / Observations

- The mind automatically tries to impose an **order** on everything around it.
- Specifically, in our context, the mind will tend to sort information it receives into **groups** with common characteristics.
- To comprehend the information received, it will then try to link the information groups into some **logical pattern**.
- The pattern will always be a pyramid because it is the only form that meets the mind's need to :
  - **stop at the magical number seven(George A. Miller)**
  - **state the logic of the relationship**

# Suggests that every written document should be structured as a pyramid of ideas for easy comprehension

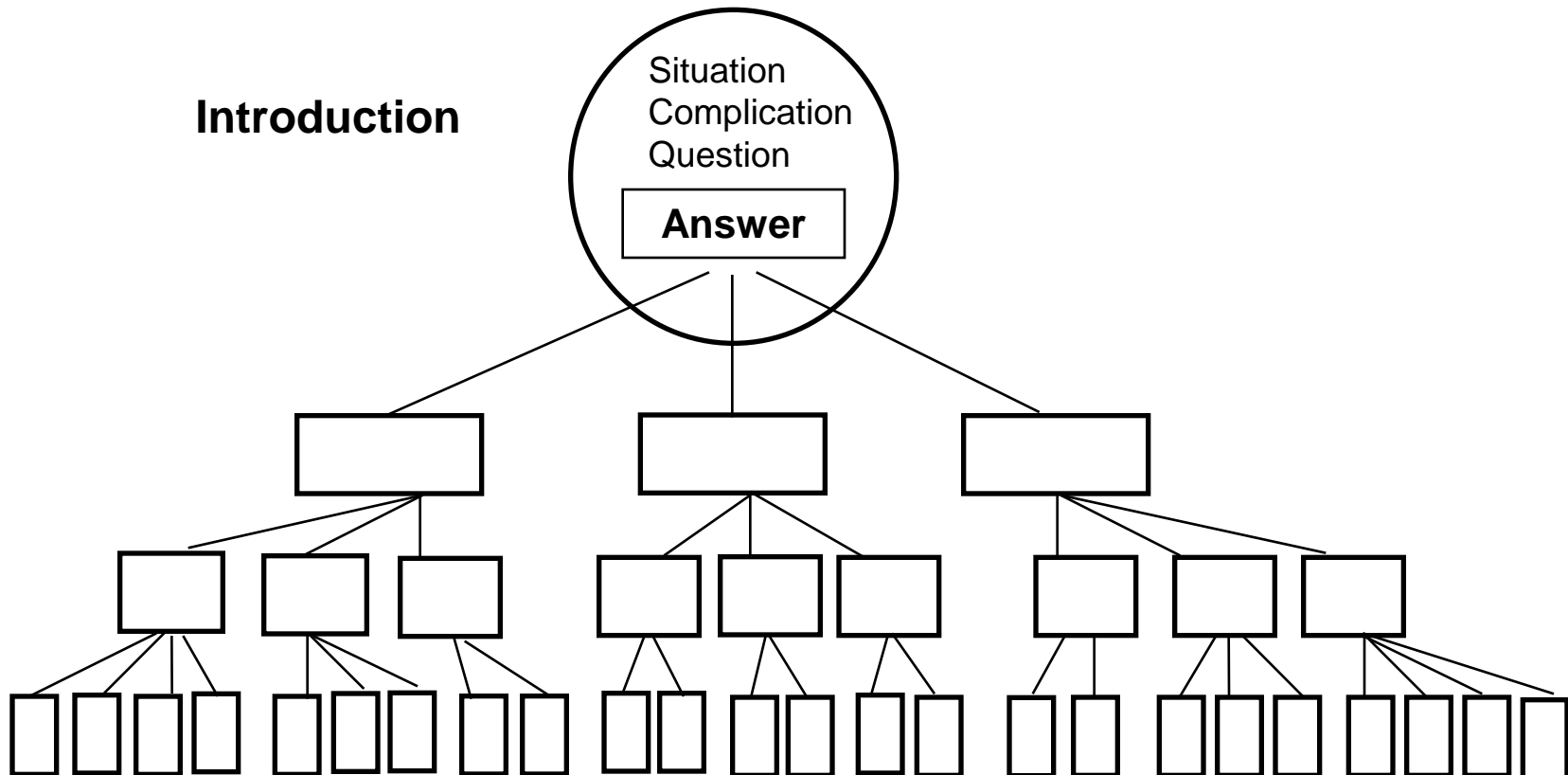
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- Since the mind automatically sorts information into distinctive pyramidal groupings in order to comprehend it, any grouping of ideas is therefore easier to comprehend if it arrives presorted into a pyramid.
- In other words, a clear piece of business writing is one where you structure the pyramid of ideas for the reader.
- **Bad writing** is where you leave it to the reader to sort through the ideas presented to pull out the message for himself.

# Minto approach provides the methodology for proper structuring of the pyramid

## MINTO PYRAMID STRUCTURE

“Ideas in writing should always form a pyramid under a single thought”



# At the top of the pyramid structure is the Introduction, which has four components

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- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| Situation    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recognised, stable situation. Background story.</li><li>• <b>Uncontroversial</b>, tells the reader what he already knows or could reasonably be expected to know.</li></ul>   |
| Complication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Complication to the story</b>, not a complication in the everyday sense of the word</li><li>• Describes an alteration to a stable situation, rather than a problem per se, although sometimes the alteration is a problem</li><li>• Should be able to start a Complication with the word “However”</li></ul> |
| Question     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• If properly done, the Situation and Complication will raise a question in <b>the reader’s mind which will require an answer</b></li></ul>   |
| Answer       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Answer to the Question will then be the <b>overall message</b> of the document. <b>The rest of the pyramid then supports this answer</b></li></ul>  |



## Example of an Introduction:


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**Situation** : ABC Company has undertaken a strategic planning exercise and has decided to diversify into the food business. It has also decided to implement this diversification by acquiring an existing food company in Country X.

**Complication** : However, there are 10 potential acquisition candidates in the country.

**Question** : So which company should it acquire?

ABC Company has therefore hired Arthur Andersen to recommend an acquisition candidate.

**Answer** : We have analyzed all 10 companies in relation to ABC's plan and its existing position, and recommend that the company acquire Company XYZ because  **KEY LINE POINTS**

# The Introduction is important because it enables you to capture your reader's interest from the outset

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- A reader will be interested in your document only if it answers a question that is relevant to him
- The S-C-Q-A sequence is designed to inform (remind) the reader, early on, of the question being addressed and the reasons why the question is relevant to him
- If done properly, the Introduction will produce an interested reader from the start so you can achieve much more with your document

# Other examples of Introductions

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## Proposals

S: You have a problem

C: However, you cannot solve it yourself and have decided to bring in a consultant

Q: Are we the right consultant?

A: Yes, because...

## “How to”

S: Your present system is X.

## Documents

C: However, it doesn't work properly

Q: How can we make it work properly?

A: By taking the following steps.....

# Other examples of Introductions

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- Competition Policy Study
- S: The government wants to introduce more competition into the ABC industry
- C: However, there are a variety of structural options for introducing competition
- Q: Which structural option should we choose?
- A: You should choose Option C because.....

# Having captured reader's interest at beginning, Answer and Key Line summarizes thinking of the entire document

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Question

*Which company should we acquire?*

Answer

You should acquire  
Company XYZ

because....

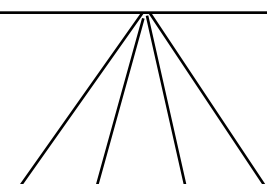
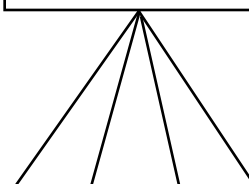
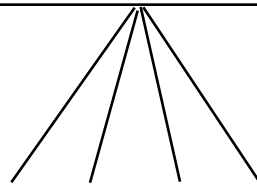
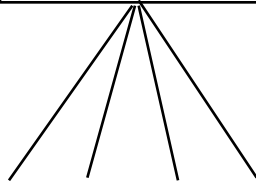
Key  
Line

Strong  
competitive  
position

Excellent  
management  
.

Strong  
financial  
position

Currently  
undervalued by  
stock market



# A written document should summarize the Answer and Key Line points upfront

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- This enables the reader to get your entire thinking in the first few minutes of reading.
- Since anything that follows will serve only to **explain or defend** the Key Line points, the reader can then decide whether he needs to go on or is ready to accept your conclusions as they stand.
- In any case, he now knows what to expect and can read with a greater sense of ease.

## Key Line points should be expressed as ideas

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Not sufficient to write an introduction like the following:

This memorandum describes the project team approach to identifying and achieving profit improvements. It is organised into six sections as follows:

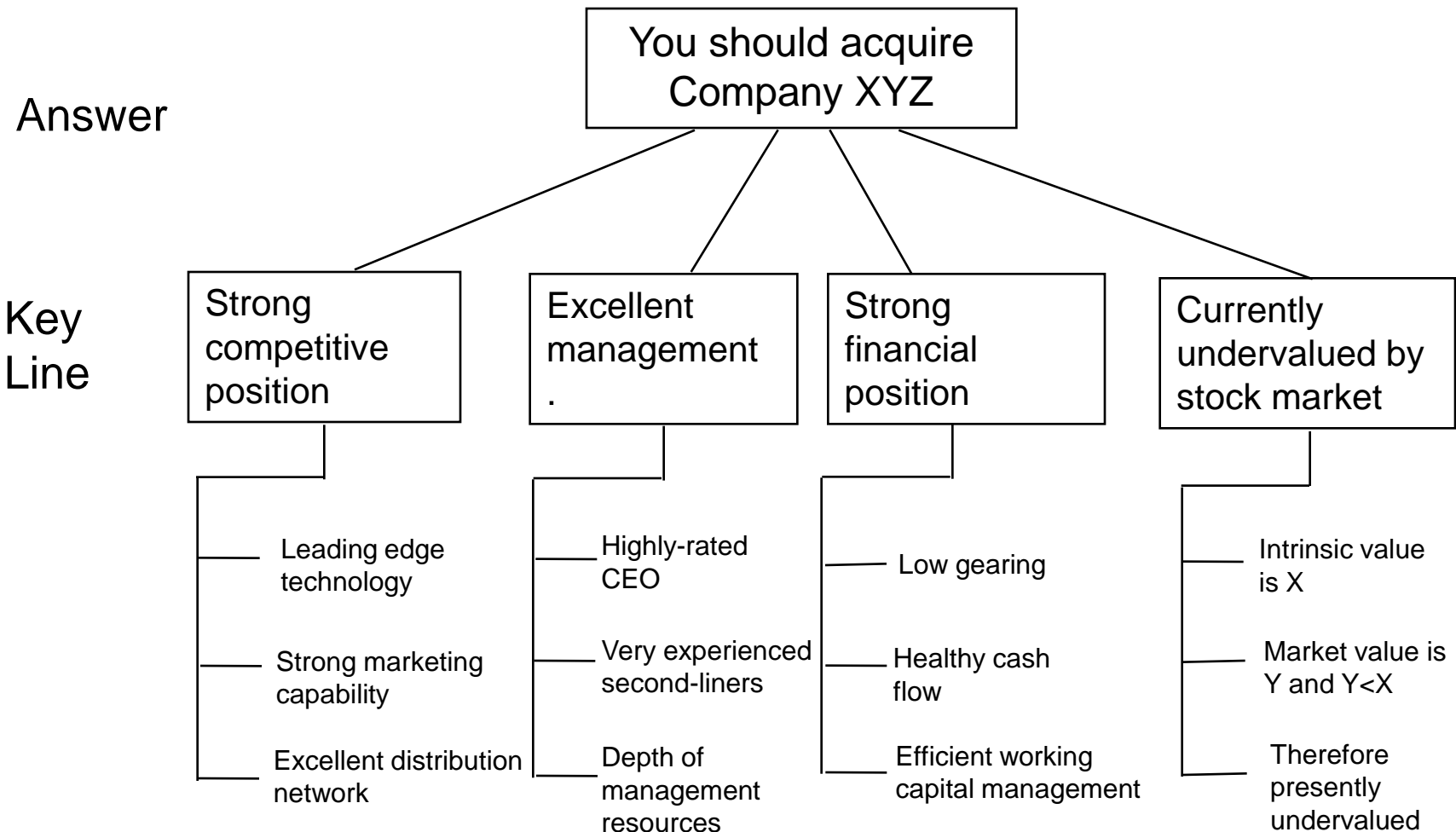
- Background
- Principles of project team approach
- What project work is
- How the program is organized
- Unique benefits and specific results
- Pre-requisites for success



Useless in conveying the message of document to the reader

# The rest of the pyramid then supports the Key Line ideas in increasing levels of detail

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# To structure the pyramid of ideas properly, you must follow three rules very strictly

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- Rule 1** Ideas at any level in the pyramid must always be summaries of the ideas grouped below them.
- Rule 2** Ideas in each grouping must always be the same kind of idea e.g. reasons, steps, recommendations, changes to be made, etc., (otherwise cannot summarize them one level up)
- Rule 3** Ideas in each grouping must be logically ordered. There are only four possible logical ways in which to order a set of ideas:
- deductively (major premise, minor premise, conclusion)
  - chronologically (first, second, third)
  - comparatively (first most important, second most important, etc.)
  - structurally (Boston, New York, Washington)

## In summary, the Minto approach sets out four principles to help you write a clear document

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1. Limit the ideas presented in your document to those that together form a logical pyramid
2. Direct the structure to answering a question that already exists in the reader's mind
3. Satisfy yourself that the groupings are analytically sound
4. Present the ideas from the top down

# Some observations from an experienced user

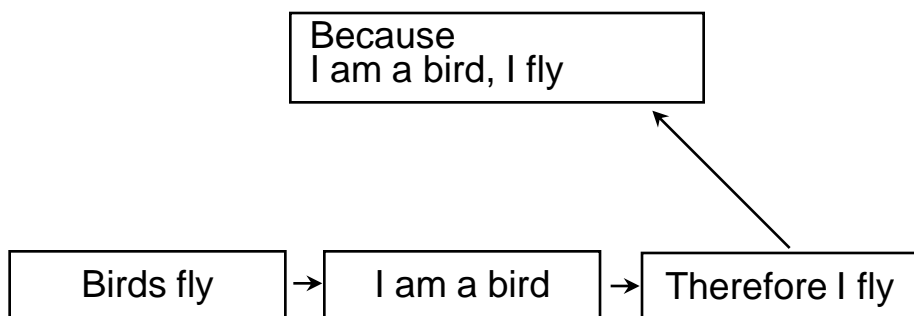
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- It works !!!
- Using the Minto structure can be quite painful at first but it is well worth the trouble - don't give up
- Take time to think carefully through the Situation-Complication-Question-Answer sequence. It is very instructive as you will often find that the actual Question and Answer (overall message) is not what you originally thought them to be

# Deductive and Inductive Reasoning

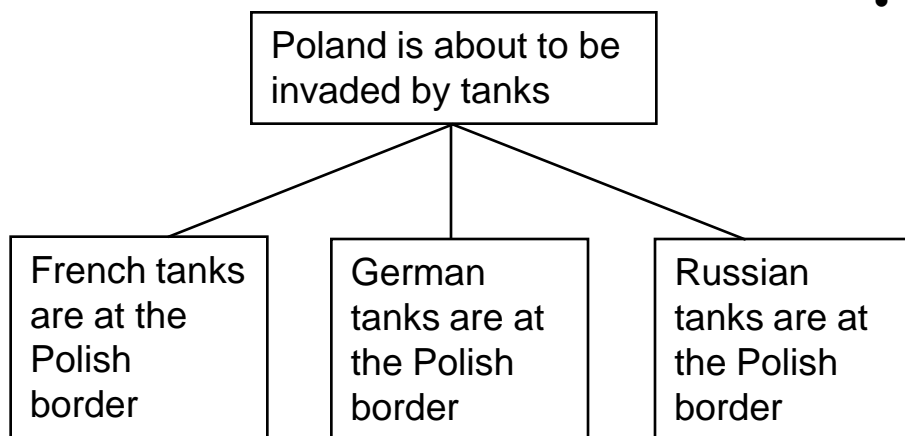
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## *Deductive reasoning*



- These are the only two patterns for establishing a logical relationship between ideas
- If argument is deductive, second point comments on first, third point states implications of first two points

## *Inductive reasoning*



- If argument is inductive, ideas will be of the same kind, and can be described by the same plural noun, e.g. reasons, recommendations, steps, etc.