Producing literate memos, letters and reports requires formally separating the thinking process from the writing process. Although effective writing requires varied sentence length, proper grammar, and appropriate words, the order in which you present your thinking makes your writing either clear or unclear. You cause confusion in the reader’s mind when you do not impose the proper order. Ensuring the proper order is easier to do if you consider all three stages of producing written documents: planning, drafting and revising. By making this conscious separation of the writing process, you will be able to allocate your energies more efficiently. In the planning stage, you organize and order material. In the drafting stage, you write the document, without revising or writing. Finally, in the revision stage, you edit the document, evaluating both the order and the writing of the document. This document deals exclusively with the ordering stage, using an approach called the Pyramid Principle. The Pyramid Principle is a simple yet effective approach to ordering ideas in a way which makes most sense to the reader. It suggests a top-down order which will always be pyramidal in shape – hence the Pyramid Principle. This principle is designed to cut down the time you normally need to produce a final draft and to increase its clarity and decrease its length. The following description will provide you with a basic overview of the principle’s main elements.

WHAT IS THE PYRAMID STRUCTURE

Most documents you write will be structured to support one single thought – how your solution will solve a problem, how a policy change will affect employees, the request you’re making, etc. This thought should be the major point you want to make, and all the ideas grouped underneath – provided you have built the structure properly – will help explain or defend that point in ever greater detail. The diagram below shows the basic organization of a document using the Pyramid Principle. Each box represents an idea.
WHY A PYRAMID STRUCTURE?

The mind automatically imposes order on everything, grouping together any series of items having a “common fate.” When the number of items rises above four or five, the mind starts to group these items into logical categories so that they can be retained. Most mental processes utilize this grouping and summarizing process. Therefore, grouping your ideas logically and controlling the sequence in which you present them is the most important act necessary for clear writing. The clearest way to sequence is always to provide the summarizing idea before the individual ideas being summarized. Readers remember and comprehend more readily if ideas are presented in this way, from the top down. Because readers can only absorb one sentence at a time, they’ll assume that ideas which appear together logically belong together. If you don’t indicate the relationship in advance, but simply give the ideas one at a time, your reader will automatically look for similarities. Readers rarely, however, put exactly the same interpretation on your groupings that you do. They frequently find they can’t see any relationship among the ideas in a set. But they’re going to look for a structure connecting the ideas and develop their own if they can’t find one.

BASIC RULES

To ensure you meet readers’ needs for structure the Pyramid Principle can help you, before you begin writing, determine whether or not you have built the structure properly. You check whether your ideas relate to each other in a way that would permit them to form pyramidal groups. The groupings must obey three rules:

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. If the first idea in a grouping is a reason for doing something, the other ideas in the same grouping must also be reasons for doing the same thing. There is no limitation on the kinds of ideas that may be grouped, but the idea in each grouping must be of the same kind.

3. Ideas in each grouping must always be logically ordered. They must explain or defend the point in ever greater detail. There must be a specific reason why the second idea comes second, and cannot come first or third, e.g.: it answers a question about the first idea, provides clarification of the first idea, or follows a chronology initiated by the first idea.
THE SUBSTRUCTURES OF THE PYRAMID

The Pyramid Principle relies on three basic substructures to achieve clear writing: the vertical relationship, the horizontal relationship and the narrative introductory flow. The following will explain each of them.

The Vertical Relationship

The vertical relationship is simply the overall ordering of ideas. It serves to help capture the reader’s attention by setting up a question/answer dialogue that will pull the reader through your reasoning. You put each idea into a box in the pyramid structure (Diagram 2). An idea is defined as a statement that raises a question because you are telling readers something they don’t know. Making a statement that tells readers something they don’t know will automatically raise a logical question – for example: Why? How? The writer is now obliged to answer the question in the following sentence. Writers will continue to write, raising and answering questions, until they reach a point at which they judge the reader will have no more logical questions. (The reader will not necessarily agree with the writer’s reasoning when he’s reached this point, but will have followed it clearly, which is the best any writer can hope for.) The way to ensure total reader attention, therefore, is to refrain from raising any questions in the reader’s mind before you are ready to answer them. A great value of the pyramid structure is that it forces visual recognition of this vertical relationship on writers as they work out their thinking, before they begin writing.

The Horizontal Relationship

The horizontal relationship relates to the kinds of ideas you decide to group together and their logical relationship to each other. In deciding what to say in explaining your point, not only must your sentences answer the question, they must also answer it logically. That is, they must present a clear inductive or deductive argument. These are the only two types of logical relationships possible in a grouping. A deductive grouping presents an argument in successive steps. That is, the first idea makes a statement about a situation that exists in the world today. The second idea comments on the subject of that statement, and the third idea states the implication of those two situations existing in the world at the same time. Thus, the grouping would have the following form:
1. An effective MIS department produces useful management reports.
2. Everyone considers our MIS reports to be useful.
3. Our MIS department is effective.

To move up a level of abstraction from a deductive grouping like the one above, you summarize the argument relying heavily on the final point. In the simple example above, the summary would be: “Because our executives consider our reports to be useful, our MIS is effective.” An inductive grouping, by contrast, will take a set of ideas that are related simply by the fact that you can describe them all by the same plural noun (reasons for, reasons against, steps, problems, activities, etc.).

An example of this form of argument is:
1. The Accounting Department isn’t getting straight answers from the MIS Department.
2. The Finance Department complains of late MIS reports.
3. The Marketing Department doesn’t like the MIS report format.

To move upward here, you draw an inference based on your assessment of what is the same about the points – i.e.: they are all complaints about the MIS Department. Thus, your inference would be something like “Our Department isn’t meeting the organization’s MIS requirements.”

**The Vertical Relationship (example)**

- **Purchase a Starbucks Franchise**
  - Will grow faster than the market
  - Will have positive financial impact
  - Will be easier to implement
  - Large Market Share
  - Little Retail Competition
  - Low Cost
  - Growing Sales
  - Rising Profits
  - Separate Business
  - Manager Training
  - Simple Control Process

**The Question/Answer Dialogue**

In most business writing, your inference about your ideas should appear as the first sentence in the paragraph. This **topic sentence** provides perspective for the reader, who will now expect to read about your inference in the rest of the paragraph. For maximum reader comprehension, it is crucial that these following sentences relate in some way to the topic sentence. They may be illustrations of the main idea, additions to it, explanations or even contrasts. But they comment in some way on the topic sentence.

**The Introductory Flow**

The question/answer dialogue established through the pyramid structure will only capture the reader’s interest if it is relevant to the reader. You establish this relevance by answering a question that will exist in the reader’s mind. The introduction provides the necessary background information to raise that question for the reader through a **Situation-Complication-Solution** structure. In a memo format, the subject line normally provides a description of what the reader can expect to see. In other documents, such as letters and reports, the introduction serves a similar purpose. In the simple example below, the reader already knows that the organization’s overall objective is to implement Electronic Banking Services (Situation). But the writer now informs the reader that a particular action or analysis will need to be followed (Complication) to make decisions about the implementation. This combination of Situation-Complication might raise a logical question like “How” or “What”? The **Solution** in this example refers to what the report will do, raising more questions in the reader’s mind; the solution might also have stated a specific procedure and a dollar amount to answer the “How” and “What” questions. In either case, the report would continue with its subsequent sections developing answers through the
pyramid structure. The two main sections of this document would deal with assessing training needs and implementing a training strategy.

**Situation**

The Bank is committed to promoting and developing the Electronic Banking Services (EBS) to their fullest potential.

**Complication**

To meet this objective appropriate bank personnel must be trained in the marketing operation of EBS.

**Solution**

This report will identify specific methods of assessing training needs and recommend a training strategy to support the implementation of EBS.

**Summary**

How do these three substructures – the vertical relationship, the horizontal relationship and the narrative introductory flow help you write more effectively? Knowing the vertical relationship, you can determine the kind of ideas you need in each grouping (i.e.: those that will answer the question.) Knowing the horizontal relationship, you can judge that the ideas you bring together are of a similar kind (i.e. proper parts of an inductive or deductive argument). But most importantly, by clearly stating your main point, the solution which flows from the introduction’s situation/complication structure, you can ensure that all ideas brought together are relevant (i.e. exist only because they help to answer that question). With this sound structure, you will be able to write more quickly and your reader will be able to understand more easily.