

BASIC PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING THE PYRAMID DIAGRAMMING TECHNIQUE

1 Brief review of the subject matter

Elsewhere in the seminar we have mentioned the five-step process for preparing to write (reader analysis, report goal setting, determining the content, preparing paragraph outlines and drafting the paragraphs). By following these steps writers are enabled to organise the report-writing process and to prepare themselves psychologically for the task of explaining their thoughts to other people.

The third step in the process, determining the contents, can be approached intuitively. However, although intuition can work quite well, it does not offer much support in logically ordering the subject matter of the report, even though the mark of a good report is that it is ordered according to an iron logic. This approach is only useful for short and simple documents where the logic is quite clear and obvious, as well as for the overall ordering of a report (the chapter and section headings). It is less suited to the detailed ordering of the items underneath the heading, i.e. the actual paragraphs or text of the report. For this we need an additional technique.

The technique which we will introduce here is known as the *pyramid technique* (sometimes referred to as the delta technique). The purpose of the pyramid technique is to offer a way of organising one's thoughts prior to actually writing the entire text. Using the pyramid technique one manipulates items of information and makes explicit the relationships between these items. In other words, the pyramid technique is used to visualise the argument or logic of a text.

Each piece of the pyramid is a logical element in the argument which underlies the text. At the highest level, the elements of the pyramid are the chapter headings. At the lowest level, the elements of the pyramid are topic sentences, the sentences which one uses as the starting point of the actual paragraphs. The pyramid technique thus offers a method by which a report can be designed in terms of the logic of the argument which it contains.

The pyramid technique itself is not particularly hard to understand or to apply. If it is difficult to use easily, this is because developing iron-cast arguments and ensuring logic in one's thinking are difficult skills to master. As all good skills, the pyramid technique is quite simple in concept, the difficulty comes in applying this simple technique on real-world situations.

2. The logic underlying a text

Think of a familiar text. If it is persuasive, if it convinces one of what it has to say, it does this by developing an argument. If it is in any way a "scientific" text, that argument is *logical*, that is to say all the statements, all the pieces of the argument follow certain rules of logic. A scientific text which is persuasive, convinces us because it obeys the rules of logic. All the necessary parts of the argument are present, and they do indeed lead to the conclusions which are presented.

At the highest level we can say that the text has a message to convey, and this message is supported by a number of elements of the argument. Each of the elements of the argument are in turn supported by subsidiary elements. And so the chain of argument continues right down to the actual text. If we were to represent this graphically we would see that the logic of a text has the form of a pyramid or of the delta of a river (see Figure 1).

Starting from the highest level, a chain of arguments branches out to include each section, each paragraph, each sentence (and, finally, each clause and each word). An unscientific text does not offer its readers this iron-logic. The chain of argument is broken in places or is unclear to the readers. If we are to be able to write convincing texts on a scientific basis, we must therefore be able to place each statement in our text within the logic of the pyramid.

In the *pyramid technique* we make use of this characteristic of logical, persuasive writing to help us analyse and form well-thought-through text. We use lines to connect the different elements of a text to indicate the logical relationships between one element and another. The *vertical* placement of the elements indicates that one element depends on or leads to another. Because we can see the relationships explicitly marked by lines, it is much easier to understand the logic, and to unmask faulty logic. Our understanding is not clouded by the details of the text.

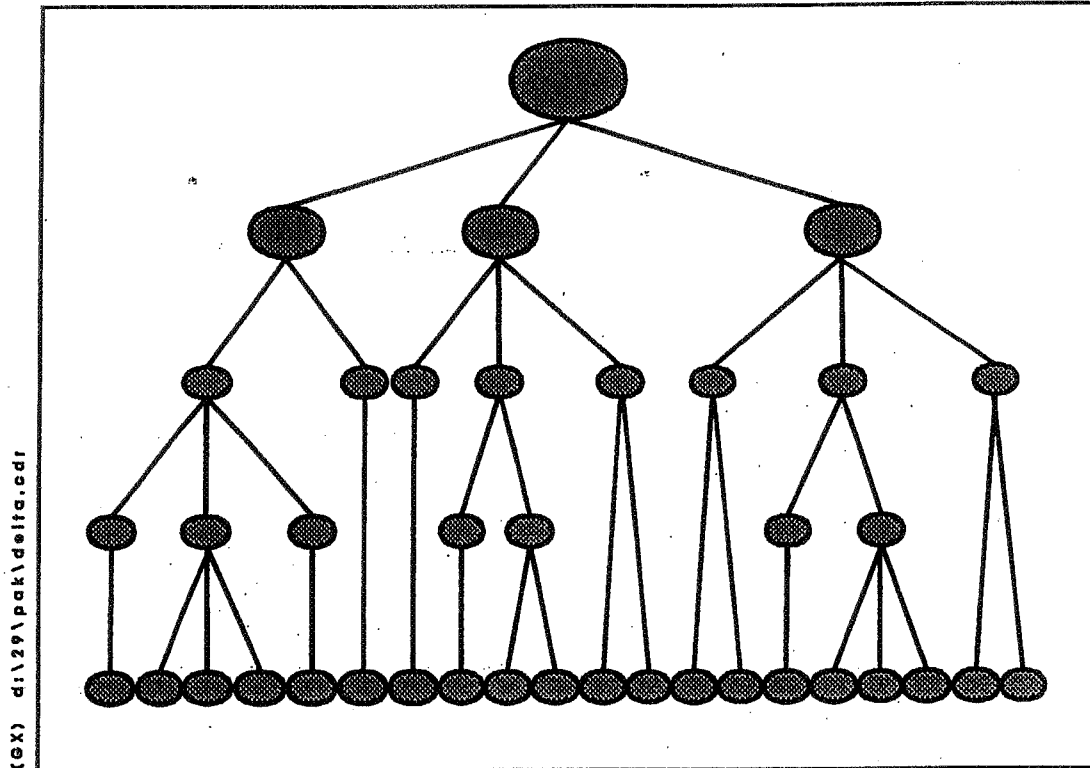


Figure 1: Logic diagram of a report as pyramid or delta

For example, Figure 2 shows part of the logic of the Price Gittinger text mentioned earlier in the seminar (*Economic Analysis of Agricultural Projects*, 2nd edition, EDI Series in Economic Development, Chapter 1, pages 21-26, "The Project Cycle"). We take the heading of this section, "*The Project Cycle*" as the highest element in this piece of the argument. The sub-headings ("*Identification*", etc.) are the elements at the next level down in the argument.

The logic diagram reveals that, according to Price Gittinger, the cycle through which a project passes has five distinct parts, namely, *Identification*, *Preparation and analysis*, *Appraisal*, *Implementation* and *Evaluation*. His text deals with each of these parts in a separate sub-section. For each subsection, we can analyse the component parts at a further level of detail, as will be described in the next part of this chapter.

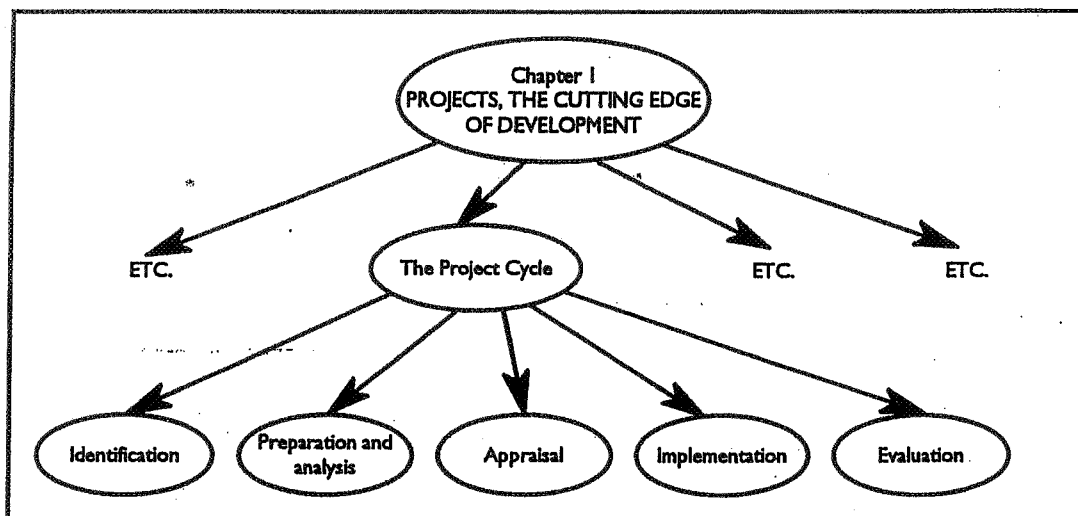


Figure 2 : Example of logic diagram (section level)

3 Use of the pyramid technique

The pyramid technique can be used for complex texts to enable the reader to analyse the structure of thinking of a writer. However, we intend to use it as a practical tool for writers themselves. To make the technique be of practical use, we need to have a method for analysing the actual text. As an example, we can take one of the sub-sections and analyse that further by using the **topic sentence** of each paragraph (topic sentence analysis was covered earlier in the seminar). Under the heading "Identification", we have five paragraphs, each of which has a topic sentence:

1. "There are many, many sources from which suggestions may come."
2. "Suggestions for new projects usually arise because some agricultural products are in short supply..."
3. The topic sentence here is 'hidden', so we need to add it, after the first sentence: "...*initiatives in agricultural development*. A more comprehensive approach which avoids overlooking such initiatives, can be based on the [*economic development plan*]s which [*most developing countries have*]. These are plans [*of some formality that identify ...*]"
4. "Frequently, a separate sector survey of the current situation in agriculture will indicate what initiatives are needed."
5. "Occasionally one hears that there is a lack of projects available for investment in developing countries."

