



SOLVE PROBLEMS

Story structure: **Minto's Pyramid Principle**

Barbara Minto's Pyramid Principle became legendary inside McKinsey & Company for one simple reason: busy leaders do not have time to untangle messy thinking. When a business story needs to **SOLVE PROBLEMS**, clarity matters more than theatrics. The Pyramid Principle forces communicators to lead with the answer first, then support it with logically grouped arguments and evidence. It is structured, efficient, and deeply respectful of executive attention spans. Its famous MECE approach (mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive) helps leaders organise complex information without overlap or confusion. The framework's "1, 3, 9" logic also mirrors how humans naturally process information: one core idea, supported by a small number of major themes, each reinforced with clear evidence. In many ways, it is back-to-front storytelling. Instead of building slowly to a conclusion, it starts with direction and then proves why that direction is correct. For leaders navigating complexity, uncertainty, and high-stakes decisions, the Pyramid Principle remains one of the most practical storytelling frameworks ever created.

SOLVE PROBLEMS STORIES THAT WORK

Minto's Pyramid Principle

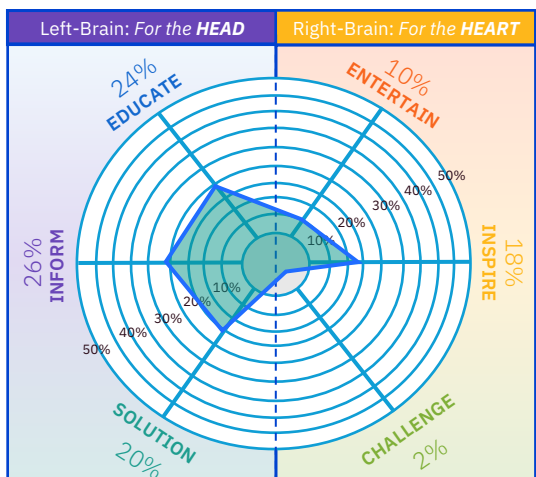
Context:
The Pyramid Principle is a storytelling tool that quickly and clearly communicates complex issues to busy business executives. It was developed by **Barbara Minto**, a McKinsey consultant in the 1970's. Her pyramid literally flipped presentations on their head and over 50 years later, it is still widely recognised as the standard for communicating concepts and arguments in a logical, well-structured way.

Business Application:
Unlike other storytelling structures, **Minto's Pyramid** was designed for business. Instead of focusing on a narrative arc or a transformational hero's journey, it starts at the end (with the proposed solution) and systematically works backwards to carefully explain why the ending (the solution) works. It is ideal for presentations to busy executives when complex topics need to be communicated quickly.

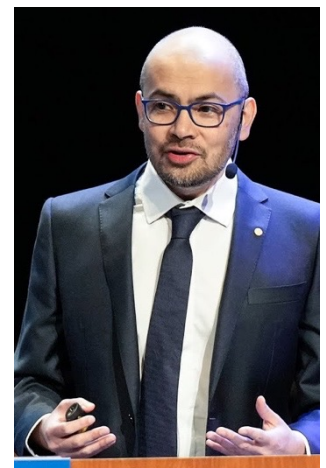
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THE PYRAMID PRINCIPLE
Logic in Writing and Thinking
BARBARA MINTO

Jeremy Cornell-Waite (July 2024)

Example: **Nobel Lecture in Chemistry by Sir Demis Hassabis (2024)**



If you want to understand how great innovators communicate, study Demis Hassabis. He explains impossibly complex ideas with calm clarity, childlike curiosity, and scientific precision. What makes him special is that he does not just describe problems, he frames them as humanity's next great adventure, making breakthrough science feel understandable, urgent, and deeply inspiring.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtPaZsas mNAdemis>

**SOLVE PROBLEMS****Neuroscience Notes:**

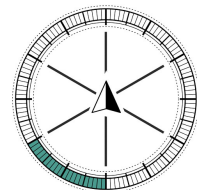
When a storyteller helps us solve an important problem, the brain experiences a powerful combination of relief, reward, trust, and future-oriented motivation. Human beings are constantly carrying unresolved cognitive and emotional tension, uncertainty about risks, decisions, threats, performance, status, or survival. A meaningful problem creates mental friction. The brain keeps returning to it because unresolved uncertainty consumes energy and attention. When someone credible offers a clear, believable solution, that tension begins to resolve. Neurologically, this can trigger reward circuitry associated with dopamine, particularly because the brain perceives movement from threat toward opportunity. The prefrontal cortex, involved in planning, reasoning, and decision-making, becomes highly engaged as the audience starts mentally simulating a better future. Instead of feeling stuck, the brain begins constructing pathways forward.

At the same time, trust mechanisms become important. If the audience believes the storyteller genuinely understands their problem, the relationship changes psychologically. The speaker is no longer perceived as merely delivering information; they become cognitively associated with safety, competence, and progress. In social neuroscience, humans are highly attuned to identifying people who can help them navigate uncertainty. Throughout evolution, those individuals often became trusted leaders, guides, advisers, or allies. This is why problem-solving stories are so powerful in business. Solving a meaningful problem creates emotional momentum. It reduces anxiety, increases confidence, and gives people a sense of agency and control over the future. And because the solution is associated with the person delivering it, the audience often forms a deeper bond with the storyteller themselves. In many ways, trust is not built merely through charisma or empathy — it is built when people consistently help us make progress on problems that matter.

Examples: *Sir Demis Hassabis Nobel lecture & The Thinking Game documentary, Dario Gils IBM Quantum keynotes, Satya Nadella's keynotes & earnings calls, Arvind Krishna's office hours and THINK keynotes, Sundar Pichai Google I/O presentations, Marc Benioff's Dreamforce keynotes.*

Does your audience need help SOLVING PROBLEMS?

- Are they overwhelmed by complexity?
- Do they need simplification?
- Are they stuck between competing options?
- Is uncertainty preventing action?
- Do they need a decision pathway?



References: **Scientific Studies Relevant to the Neuroscience of Storytelling**

SOLVE PROBLEMS:

“Progress Principle” research, Teresa Amabile
“Reward Prediction Error” studies, Wolfram Schultz