



MODULE 3: ORGANIZING YOUR REPORT: THE PYRAMID OUTLINE

Duration: 4 - 6 hours

How can you organize
your report so that
it is logical and
understandable for
your readers?

Page 1



Introduction

QUOTE



*"A writer must have the discipline of formulating his/her thinking.
Use a process. Think through the meanings and implications."
—Sector Manager*

In the last module, you had practice working with different examples of the [Dialogue with the Reader](#) to anticipate and answer reader questions as you planned your writing. You now know that it is critical to have a clear purpose and a well thought-out main message as you start planning your report.

In this module, you will expand upon the concept of the Dialogue with the Reader, and use that dialogue concept as a technique for developing an outline for your report.

A well-planned outline helps you to draft efficiently and to produce a document that will be clear and well-organized enough to help decision-makers. As you will recall, the overarching purpose of all WB reports is to help decision-makers take appropriate action.

This module will show you how to structure your report using a specific organizing technique called **the pyramid outline**, which uses a question-and-answer approach of increasing levels of detail. You will learn to create this question-and-answer, reader-driven outline based on the main message that you already created.

For this module's assignment, you will continue planning your report by creating the pyramid outline.

Page 2



Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you should be able to

- Explain the importance of organizing a text according to an outline.
- Assess prepared outlines using standard guidelines for the pyramid technique.
- Create a pyramid outline to organize the content of your report.

Page 3



The Importance of Organization

Look around you now. You're surrounded by words. Some of them are easy to process. You can most likely identify the brand names on your computer or your shirt. That's because the words are set in a specific context and have a very narrow meaning. The sign on the hallway door that says "ID badges must be displayed" is a message that is easy to understand. But suppose you were to see the same sign on the front door of a friend's house. You would immediately be confronted with a problem: how do I make sense of this information?

When presented with information, and specifically information in the form of words, our minds naturally try to reduce the complexity and understand the context. Organizing, in its simplest form, helps a reader to remember information by providing useful categories and contexts.

Page 4



Recognizing Patterns

Let's look at a simple example to illustrate the value of order and context. Here is a picture of the night sky of the Southern Hemisphere showing 15 stars. For most people, it is just a random placement of stars. If you were asked to put the stars in the correct locations on a blank page, you would probably find the task quite difficult.

Roll your mouse over the image to hide the stars.



However, if you knew that many of these stars form constellations in the sky, you would probably be able to remember where some of the stars belonged and how they were positioned relative to each other. That's because you've conceptualized a way of grouping the stars so that they have more meaning than just random placements in the sky. You would also have a better chance of remembering how many stars there are because the groupings serve to establish a more manageable limit to the number of stars you need to remember. Roll your mouse over this next image to see a constellation map.



Page 5



Using Different Patterns

Here is another example. Try to memorize the following 13-digit number:

3156189211224

Click to Continue

Page 6



Scenario: The Run to the Café

Let's look at another example that illustrates how these two things—order and context—become important.

You and a colleague are talking when your conversation is interrupted by your colleague's telephone ringing. She picks it up and begins talking to the person on the phone. You tell her that you're going to step out to get a snack from the café and you ask if she would like anything.

"Yes," she says. "I'm feeling a bit hungry. How about a pastry, strawberry flavored?"

"Sure," you say, and you begin to leave.

"Sorry, do you mind waiting just a moment?" your colleague calls out before you've had a chance to leave. Then she laughs. "There's a group of people in Javier's office, and they would like you to get something for them too."

"That's fine," you reply. "What should I get for them?"

"Okay, wait a second," your colleague says into the phone. "I'm just going to list them, okay? Right, here they are. You want an herbal tea. Sarah wants a coffee with milk. Asha wants what? A bottle of grape juice and a doughnut? What else? A chocolate milk, an orange juice, an apple juice? What? Okay, no apple juice, just an apple ... Oh, and another coffee, just black, no milk or sugar. And Bill wants a couple of oranges."

"Oranges? I don't know if they sell oranges at the café," you say.

"Just a minute," your colleague says, and then talking into the phone, she says "They don't sell oranges at the café ... What? Oh, you're sure? Okay, I'll tell him." Then back to you: "Javier says he's certain they sell oranges, but if they don't, then he'd like two peaches."

"Okay," you say, "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Click below to continue this activity.

Continue

Page 7



Scenario: The Run to the Café

Now take a moment to write down everything you need to get at the café. When you are finished, click on the **Check Answers** button to see the complete list.

Write your answers here

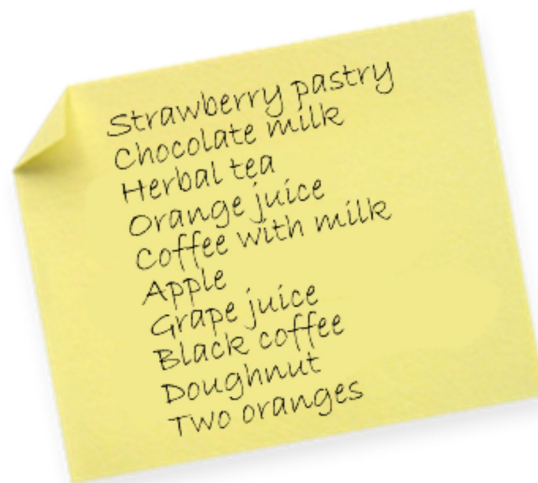
Check Answers

Page 7a



Using the Dialogue for Organization

The problem of recalling the items to buy relates to the seven-plus-or-minus-two rule. You are going to have a difficult time remembering all the items, even if they had been presented to you on a piece of paper that looked like this:



However, think about how you could categorize items by expanding on the idea of the Dialogue with the Reader that you worked with in the previous module. The Dialogue with the Reader is an organizing strategy.

- What are you getting?
Some drinks and some food items.
- What kinds of drink and food?
Hot drinks and cold drinks. Pastries and fruit.
- What kinds of hot drinks?
Coffee and tea.
- What kinds of cold drinks?
Juice and milk.

Page 8



Organizing From Dialogue to Pyramid

Now, let's visualize this dialogue in terms of the hierarchy of information. You'll see that what emerges is the list of food items presented in a pyramid form. Click on the link below to work through the pyramid activity.



[Pyramid activity:
List of food items](#)

Organizing information in this way helps in making logical associations between pieces of information, and it reduces the load on short-term memory. A person receiving information organized in a hierarchical structure has an easier time making sense of and retaining the information. This occurs with any kind of information that you receive, and it works for reports and other written documents too.

According to author Barbara Minto, our minds naturally construct pyramid groupings of information in order to make it more comprehensible. In her book, *The Pyramid Principle*, she advocates using pyramid structures to write reports and other documents. Adopting the pyramid technique of outlining reflects the thought processes that the mind uses to comprehend complex information. In the case of report writing, those minds belong to your readers.

Page 9



The Pyramid Principle of Organizing

Think back to the Dialogue with the Reader Worksheet that you developed as part of your second assignment.

Just as you had arrived at your main message through your Dialogue with the Reader, now you can continue the question-and-answer technique to develop the next level of categories for your report. By doing this, you are moving from preliminary planning to the outlining phase of the planning process.

Expanding your Dialogue with the Reader into a pyramid form allows you to accomplish some important tasks as a report writer:

- **Summarize your ideas before giving the details.** This gives your reader some context to work with and a rationale behind the organization of your information. This is the function of the main message: it states the most significant idea of the report.
- **Arrange your ideas to answer your reader's questions about your main message.** Arranging refers to grouping and sequencing. The pyramid principle of organizing ensures that you answer reader questions in a logical sequence and explain your main message. Because one of your readers' basic needs is to get answers to their questions, your job is to anticipate those questions and address them.
- **Demonstrate the logical relationships between your ideas.** The topics in your report will form meaningful groupings, setting up a logical story line. Integrating your ideas in this way makes the report more readily understood and accepted by your reader.

Page 10



Beginning at the Top of the Pyramid

Let's begin to develop a pyramid outline. Following is an example of a Dialogue with the Reader Worksheet. You will see how this worksheet is used in the pyramid structure.

Type of report: Policy note

Purpose	To outline benefits of suggested changes in agricultural policies for Country Y
Reader	Sector Manager, country ministry
Reader's Main Question	How would country Y benefit from the suggested changes in agricultural policy?
Main message	Land-sharing policies will accelerate technology adoption in Country Y's major crops; targeted subsidies will reduce government spending while promoting a more competitive agricultural sector.

The main message constitutes the highest category in the pyramid structure and will be placed near the beginning of the report ("bottom line on top"). The task now is to develop the next level of categories, continuing the dialogue with the reader. Look at the main message above and try to determine what questions you as a reader would want to have answered. These questions will direct you to further answers that will form the next level of categories.

Page 11



Developing a Pyramid

Click on the link below to open up the pyramid activity.



[Develop a Pyramid:
Policy Note](#)

In the activity, the questions generated for the next level of categories shouldn't be surprising. They do not introduce new information from the main message, but instead emerge from issues already raised in the way the main message has been written. Your wording of the questions and answers may be different from the ones shown in the illustration, but the ideas should be very much the same.

Also, please note that these questions closely reflect the writer's purpose. The questions deal with the benefits of the changes in agricultural policies.

Each of these questions should generate another answer, which will look very much like another main message only on a more narrowly defined scale. You can think of these subsequent levels of main messages as "miniature" main messages.

Page 12



Continuing the Dialogue Down the Pyramid

You can see from the activity on the previous screen that each of the new answers provided in the boxes serves as a mini main message; together they form the second level of the pyramid. The dialogue process helps you to continue outlining your report in the pyramid form. Just as with the original main message, you simply anticipate the questions that will arise from each message and write them down. These questions will help you to generate further mini main messages that will form the next level of the pyramid.

Click on the link below to continue the pyramid activity.



[Continuing the dialogue:
Policy Note](#)

Page 13



Seeing the Advantages of the Pyramid Outlining Technique

There are other ways of developing report outlines, most of which label information and groupings from a vertical perspective only. There is nothing wrong with this form of outlining. However, the pyramid technique offers a few important advantages that other outlines do not have. Specifically, the pyramid outline

- Requires that you place your main message right up front where readers wish to see it, and then explain that main message afterwards.
- Helps you focus on answering your reader's questions, so it helps you to ensure that your writing is reader-driven.
- Helps you to examine and confirm the logical relationships of your ideas to each other. That is, the topics that you include in your report, if planned according to the pyramid principle, will form meaningful groupings that will be obvious to your readers.
- Forms the basis for report headings, subheadings, and even topic sentences to paragraphs if you take your question and answer approach down to the lower levels of the pyramid. Also, if you include an executive summary in your report, you can write it based on the information you've included in your pyramid outline.

Page 14



Working With the Pyramid Outline

It is important to understand that generating a good pyramid is an iterative process of asking questions, answering them, and revising those questions and answers. You won't dash off a pyramid outline in one attempt. Just as you found when completing the Dialogue with the Reader worksheet, you will find that the questions you generate in the pyramid may cause you to review your original main message or mini main message statements.

In time, you will feel more confident about how you decide to present your ideas in written form, knowing that you have tried to give as much guidance to your readers as possible. As you become more experienced in thinking like a reader and translating that knowledge into a writing strategy, you will become more comfortable and quicker with the planning and outlining process.

Page 15



Guidelines for a Pyramid Outline

It will take you some time and practice to get used to developing an outline according to the pyramid technique. However, for now, you should develop your pyramid outline to include the following features:

- Your main message covers all the ideas grouped below it for the entire document.
- The first questions directly generated from the main message each lead to substantial report sections proportional in scope and complexity to the other sections.
- Every statement covers all the ideas below it at each level of the pyramid.
- Statements are phrased as full sentences, with verbs. (Do not write labels or "topics.")
- Key terms are repeated in questions and answers throughout the outline.
- Both reader's questions and the writer's answers appear at every level.
- Your statements lead to more questions on the same topic until the main message has been explained and the purpose has been fulfilled.

Page 16



Analyze a Pyramid Outline

The pyramid outline is an outline of your argument. It is the case you are building to support your main message. It takes practice, and sometimes several revisions, to create a pyramid outline that is successful.

In this activity you will analyze a pyramid outline. Before you start the activity, read the Dialogue with the Reader Worksheet below.

Type of report: Concept Note	
Purpose	To propose a series of Public Expenditure Notes for Ortland
Primary reader	Sector manager, country manager
Reader's main question	Why should we undertake these notes, and what specifically are you proposing?
Main message (Answer to Reader's main question)	The Public Expenditure Notes proposed are important at this stage in Ortland's history. Fiscal space continues to be limited, so the Public Expenditure Notes will address just four areas: public-sector pay, public expenditure, social spending, and the parastatal sector.

Click on the link below to open up the pyramid activity.



Pyramid activity:
[Analyze a pyramid outline](#)

Page 17



Use a Checklist to Analyze a Pyramid Outline

In the previous activity you analyzed a pyramid outline for a concept note by answering seven questions. These questions form the pyramid outline checklist below.

Title of Report	ORTLAND: PUBLIC EXPENDITURE NOTES	
Type of Report	Concept Note	
Purpose	To propose a series of Public Expenditure Notes for Ortland	
Reader's main question	Why should we undertake these notes, and what specifically are you proposing?	
Main message	The Public Expenditure Notes proposed are important at this stage in Ortland's history. Fiscal space continues to be limited, so the Public Expenditure Notes will address just four areas: public-sector pay, public expenditure, social spending, and the parastatal sector.	
1. Does the main message cover all the ideas grouped below it?		<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
2. Do the first questions generated from the main message identify the main sections of the report?		<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
3. At each level, does every statement cover all the ideas below it?		<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
4. Are the statements phrased as full sentences, with verbs?		<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
5. Are key terms repeated and expanded upon throughout the pyramid outline?		<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
6. Does the outline include both questions and answers at every level?		<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
7. Do the statements lead to more questions until the report's purpose has been fulfilled?		<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No

Page 18



Pyramid Outline Checklist

For this module's assignment, you will construct a pyramid outline for your report. Begin by reviewing your Dialogue with the Reader worksheet, incorporating any tutor feedback you have received. Make sure that your purpose, your reader, and your reader's main question are closely aligned. Also, make sure that your main message is consistent with the purpose and that it clearly answers the reader's main question. Then proceed to the outline.

Click on the link below to open a checklist for your pyramid outline. You can use it to review your pyramid once you've created it for your report.

REFLECTION



Reflection 7:
[Pyramid Outline Checklist](#)

Page 19



Assignment 3: Develop a Pyramid Outline for Your Report

For this assignment, you will be developing a pyramid outline for your report, beginning with the elements of your Dialogue with the Reader.

Before you [submit your assignment in Moodle](#), review it using the [pyramid outline checklist](#).

What to Include

- The purpose, reader, main question, and main message from your Dialogue with the Reader
- The pyramid outline, containing at least two levels of questions and answers below the main message.

The Format of the Pyramid

You can submit your pyramid outline in whichever way is most convenient for you. You can use PowerPoint, Excel, or MS Word.

Whatever method you choose, your main focus should be on constructing a pyramid that forms the outline of your report, not on formatting or technical troubleshooting. Please consult your tutor if you are having trouble deciding on the best way to build your pyramid.

If you are not sure how to construct your pyramid, you can try one of the following templates:

- [Microsoft Word Template](#)
- [Microsoft Excel Template](#)
- [Microsoft PowerPoint Template 1](#)
- [Microsoft PowerPoint Template 2](#)

Page 20



Resources and Documents

Reflections Files

- [Pyramid Outline Checklist](#)

Pyramid samples

- [Remembering Food and Drinks for the Café](#)
- [Policy Note on Agricultural Change](#)
- [Analyze a Pyramid Outline: Ortland Concept Note](#)

Pyramid templates

- [Microsoft Word Template](#)
- [Microsoft Excel Template](#)
- [Microsoft Powerpoint Template 1](#)
- [Microsoft Powerpoint Template 2](#)

Other resources

- [Background Readings: Report Writing](#)
- [Module 3 Printable \(PDF format\)](#)

Page 21



Summary

The importance of planning and organizing your thoughts for your report cannot be overemphasized. It is critical that you begin outlining your report with a clear idea of the elements you considered in your Dialogue with the Reader Worksheet: your purpose, reader, reader's main question, and main message. This will enable you to proceed to the next step in the planning process—outlining your report.

When preparing your outline, keep the following considerations in mind:

- Using the dialogue technique helps you to stay focused on your reader's needs as you create your outline.
- Breaking information into manageable groups helps your reader to understand and remember your ideas. Make sure those groups have a logical and meaningful relationship to each other. Otherwise, your reader may become confused.
- Outlining your report in a pyramid form lets you see how your ideas are related, both horizontally and vertically. It is an iterative process, so don't be afraid to correct and revise as you proceed.

Page 22

